Imperceptibility

The concept of becoming seeks to articulate a political practice in which social actors escape their normalized representations and reconstitute themselves in the course of participating in, and changing, the conditions of their material existence. Becoming is not only a force against something (against, primarily, the ubiquitous model of individualism and the sovereign regimes of population control), but is also a force which enables desire. Every becoming is a transformation of one multiplicity into another; every becoming radicalizes desire and creates new individuations and new affections. Becoming is a drift. But these continuous becomings – these ceaseless processes of diversification and transformation – do not fabricate an infinite series of differences. Deleuze is not a difference engineer: differences, individuations, modalities are only a starting point; they are the building materials of the world. Interestingly enough, the end of all becomings is not the proliferation of diversity and difference, but its disappearance. Becoming imperceptible is the immanent end of all becomings, it is a process of becoming everybody/everything; of eliminating the use of names to articulate and affirm that which exceeds the moment. Becoming indiscernible, impersonal, imperceptible is Deleuze and Guattari’s universal political project because in order to become imperceptible one must dismantle in oneself everything that prevents one from slipping between things and growing in the midst of things.¹

This chapter² will trace the political implications of the notion of imperceptibility in relation to migration, and its role in the emergence
of new modes of cooperation and action. Starting from a discussion of the notion of nomadism, we will argue that the practices of contemporary transnational migration force us to revise Deleuze and Guattari’s split between nomadism and migration. Nomadism’s dictum – ‘you never arrive somewhere’ – constitutes the matrix of today’s migrational movements. The following section attempts to delineate various modes of nomadic becoming which govern migrants’ embodied experiences: becoming animal, becoming women, becoming amphibious, becoming imperceptible. Finally, in the last section, we discuss how these volatile transformations escape the pervasive politics of representation, rights and visibility. This exodus confronts today’s configurations of political sovereignty with an imperceptible force which renders the ‘walls around the world’ irreversibly porous. This is the autonomy of migration.

Documents

The arrival of Sir Alfred Mehran has been registered in many European police departments of immigration affairs, yet his figure remains an enigma. Mehran’s biography seems to be emblematic of the figure of the nomad. His desire was to come to Britain on a refugee passport with his original name, Mehran Karimi Nasseri. In 1988 he flew from Brussels via Paris to London. In London he was refused entry into the country and sent back to Paris. But France also denied him entry and Brussels would not accept him back. Since then he has lived in the transit area of Terminal 1 in the Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris. When he finally got a UNHCR passport and was able to travel again and to leave the transit space, he declined to acknowledge and sign the necessary documents, arguing that the person ‘Mehran Karimi Nasseri’ did not exist any more. This person existed in 1988; today he is Sir Alfred Mehran.

This course of events is a perfect example of nomadic life. Nomadic motion is not about movement but is about the appropriation and remaking of space. What characterizes the nomad is not his/her passage through enclosures, borders, obstacles, doors, barriers. The nomad does not have a target, does not pass through a territory, leaves nothing behind, goes nowhere. The nomad embodies the desire to link two points together, and therefore s/he always occupies the space between these two points. The enigma of Sir Alfred Mehran’s arrival does not result from his multiple displacements and final capture in Paris, rather it refers to the fact that this very moment of arrival lasts 17 years. Arrival has a longue durée, it covers almost the whole life of the nomad. One is
always there and always leaving, always leaving and always manifesting in the materiality of the place where one is.

You never arrive somewhere. Sir Alfred Mehran's spectacular story breaks with a classic conception of migration as a unidirectional, purposeful and intentional process. In this version of migration – typical of Fordist societies – the migrant is the signifier of a particular conceptualization of mobility: the individualized subject laboriously calculating the cost-benefit ratio of his/her trip and then starting an itinerary with fixed points of departure and arrival. But migration is not an individual strategy, nor does it designate the option 'exit.' Rather it characterizes the continuous shifts and radical re-articulations of individual trajectories. Migration is not the evacuation of a place and the occupation of a different one, it is the making and remaking of one's own life on the scenery of the world. World-making. You cannot measure migration in changes of position or location, but only in the increase in its inclusiveness and the amplitude of its intensities. Even if migration starts sometimes as a form of dislocation (forced by poverty, patriarchal exploitation, war, famine), its target is not relocation but the active transformation of social space. By being embedded in broader networks of intensive social change, migration challenges and reconstitutes the sovereign population control which functions solely through the identification and control of individual subjects' movements. Sir Alfred Mehran represents, in the most radical way, a non-representable migrant: the person who starts the journey is not the same at the end; the space which one inhabits is not the one intended; your documents do not refer to who you are or who you were, but to who you become in the journey. Travel becomes the law; becoming becomes the code.

Animals

The coyote is more than a *canis latrans* in the borderline of USA and Mexico. It also designates all the commercial 'guides' who are able to cross the national borders and organize illegal migrational movements and undocumented mobility. British sailors call the elusive helpers of stowaway passengers 'sharks'; in the Greek-Albanian borders their name is 'korakia' (ravens). In Chinese they are called 'shetou' (snakehead); a person who is as cunning as a snake and knows how to use his/her agile head to find a way through difficult situations. 'Shetou' was also the name of the Chinese network blamed in public discussion for the Dover tragedy, which involved the death of 58 illegal migrants in a container lorry at Dover, UK, in the beginning of this millennium.
Official anti-trafficking discourse is bound to a sovereign conception of border politic: it individualizes border crossings and presents migrants as victims of the smuggler mafia. In the dominant public imaginary, migration is an illegally organized scandal with only two players: lawbreaking migrants and criminal smugglers. But the criminalization of border crossing, and the reduction of the complex and polymorphic networks which sustain migrational movements to a single or double actor piece, hides how the alleged sovereign humanitarian doctrine — ‘save the people’ — is nothing but the a violent fixation on the politics of ‘save the national borders’ and on the protection of the national corpus from unchecked intrusion. (We’ll come to the importance of this preoccupation with borders for the constitution of national sovereignty later.) Migration is not a unilinear process of individual choice; it is not an effect of the push and pull mechanics of supply and demand for human capital. Migration adapts differently to each particular context; it changes its faces, links unexpected social actors together, absorbs and reshapes the sovereign dynamics targeting its control. Migration is arbitrary in its flows, de-individualized, and constitutive of new transnational spaces which exceed and neutralize sovereign politics. Migration is like big waves: migrants never appear precisely where they are expected; their arrival can never be predicted exactly, but they always come; and they have a magnitude to reorder the whole given geography of a seashore, the sandbanks, the seabed, the maritime animals and plants, the rocks, the beach.

In Turkey, trafficking with illegal migrants — ‘koyun ticareti’ (sheep trade) — is more than an affair of corrupt policemen and has little in common with the phantom of a globally active ‘smuggler’ mafia. The coastal ‘sheep trade’ is a whole regime of mobility; a whole informal network in which hundreds of different actors participate — each one with different stakes — to make borders permeable. Migration makes material and psychosocial spaces porous — a Benjaminian porosity — where public and private intermingle, deviance and norm are renegotiated, zones of exploitation and justice are rearranged, formal and informal situations are reassembled. Rendering states’ apparatuses and borders porous is the tactic migrants deploy to oppose the control of desire. Becoming animal is not simply a metaphor for transactions in the current regime of mobility, nor is it just a new academic theoretical trend; it is the cipher for the corporeal substratum of transnational migration in times of a global regime of forced illegality.

Consider for example the importance of becoming for the migrants’ border crossing of the Straits of Gibraltar. In 1991, Spain imposed a visa
requirement for migrants from the Maghreb region. Since then, migrants from Morocco, Mali, Senegal, Mauritania (etc.) gather in Tangier waiting for an appropriate moment to cross the Mediterranean. They are called 'Herraguas' (the burners); people prepared to burn their documents when they reach the Spanish Schengen border in order to avoid being returned to their country of origin. In the film Tanger, le rêve des brûleurs (Morocco/France 2002), Leila Kilani follows the paths of Rhimo, Denis, and others, and documents the de-individualized dreams and practices of these burners. But the strategy of de-identification is not primarily a question of shifting identitarian ascriptions; it is a material and an embodied way of being. The strategy of de-identification is a voluntary 'de-humanization' in the sense that it breaks the relation between your name and your body. A body without a name is a non-human human being; an animal which runs. It is non-human because it deliberately abandons the humanist regime of rights. The UNHCR convention for asylum seekers protects the rights of refugees on arrival, but not when they are on the road. And as we already know, the arrival has a longue durée: it does not concern the moment of arrival but the whole trip; perhaps a whole life. This is how migration solves the enigma of arrival. As the burners say: if you want to cross the Spanish borders, it is not sufficient to burn your papers, you have to become an animal yourself. Becoming is essential to mobility. The trope of becoming animal is only one of the options migrants employ in order to claim their freedom of movement. Becoming woman, becoming child, becoming elder, becoming soil, becoming fluid, along with becoming animal; these movements are the migrants' answer to the control of their desire.

Consider for example the 'eternal' becomings of one Interviewee – a Chinese man on his way to France who we met in a camp in Northern Greece during fieldwork for a project on transnational migration routes. This man was forced to stay in Romania for some time, married and got a residence permit there, applied for an EU visa, was rejected, reapplied and got a 3 month work permit which brought him to Paris, after overstaying his visa for more than 12 months was caught and deported back to Romania (something which means that you are not eligible to apply for an EU visa for a period of 10 years), in Romania he changed identity and gender, married again as a woman now, applied again for an EU visa, traveled to Paris, changed identity again and married in France, where finally he got a residence permit. Sometime later this person sent us an email to say that he or she – because the grammatical conventions of this sentence oblige us to choose a pronoun – had arrived in Canada.
Becoming is the inherent impetus of migration. Migrants do not connect to each other by representing and communicating their ‘true’ individual identities, nor by translating for others what they posses or what they ‘are’. Migrants do not need translation to communicate; migration does not need mediation. Migrants connect to each other through becomings; through their own gradual and careful, sometimes painful, transformation of their existing bodily constitution, they realize their desire by changing their bodies, voices, accents, patois, hair, color, height, gender, age, biographies. Deleuze and Guattari write:

Starting from the forms one has, the subject one is, the organs one has, or the functions one fulfils, becoming is to extract particles between which one establishes the relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness that are closest to what one is becoming and through which one becomes. This is the sense in which becoming is the process of desire.³

The migrant’s becoming creates the indeterminate materiality on which new connections, sociabilities, lines of flight, informal networks, and transit spaces thrive. Becoming is the way to link the enigma of arrival and the enigma of origin into a process of dis-identification. We mean dis-identification literally here, as the way to become more than one. Migrants’ material becomings do not end in new states of being, rather they constitute being as the point of departure on which new becomings can emerge. Being is similar to the transit spaces where migrants rest for a while, reconnect to their communities, call their relatives and friends, earn more money to pay the smugglers, collect powers, prepare their new becomings. Being is nothing more than becoming’s intermediate stages. If being is a passport number, the migrant’s becomings are countless. The multiplication of beings. Two, three; many passports! Dis-identification = being everyone. Because you must be everyone in order to be everywhere. Becoming imperceptible: Deleuze and Guattari call this the cosmic formula of multiplicity. The imperceptibility of migration does not mean that migration itself is imperceptible. On the contrary, the more migrational flows become powerful and effective by materializing the practices of becoming, the more they turn out to be the most privileged targets for registration, regulation and restriction by sovereign power. Becoming imperceptible is an immanent act of resistance because it makes it impossible to identify migration as a process which consists of fixed collective subjects. Becoming imperceptible is the most precise and effective tool migrants
employ to oppose the individualizing, quantifying and representational pressures of the settled, constituted geopolitical power.

The cunning of migration

What kind of political subject does imperceptibility create? How is migration woven into the emergence of a post-representational era of politics? The politics of difference of the eighties and nineties intervenes in the given conditions of representation; renegotiating and rearticulating them under the imperative that resistance is possible. Cultural studies, postcolonialism, postfeminism, queer studies, and radical democratic approaches have all revealed that the given systems of representation generate the effacement of certain differences (the migrant, the queer, the subaltern, the excluded) and have thus introduced a new subversive strategy of visibility. But these times are over. The crisis of multiculturalism, the difficulties of aligning queer politics with other radical social movements, the gradual occupation of postfeminist positions by communitarian neo-essentialisms, and the obsession of radical democratic approaches with the question of formal rights: all these mark a phase of stagnation of subversive politics and suggest the absorption of such politics into a vortex of liberal thinking.

This is the end of the politics of representation. And as such, the end of the strategy of visibility. Instead of visibility, we say: imperceptibility. Instead of being perceptible, discernible and identifiable, current migration puts on the agenda a new form of politics and a new formation of active political subjects whose aim is not to find a different way to become or to be a political subject, but to refuse to become a subject at all. Sir Alfred Mehran refused to use his original name when, in 1999, he was offered a UNHCR passport which – through the assimilationist logic of liberal-national administration – rendered him identifiable. Many of the migrants in the border camps do not wait for a decision regarding their asylum status, but instead escape the camps and dive into the informal networks of clandestine labor in the metropolises. The migrants waiting in the North shores of Africa to cross the Mediterranean in floating coffins choose to burn their documents and enter a life which de facto puts them outside of any politics of visibility. Visibility, meanwhile, in the context of illegal migration, belongs to the inventory of technologies for policing migrational flows.

Migrants become stronger when they become visible by obtaining rights, but the demands of migrants and the dynamics of migration cannot be exhausted in the quest for visibility and rights. This is because
both function as differentiation markers that establish a clear and visible link between the person and its origins; between the body and an identity. And this is precisely not what migrants want when they are clandestine on the road. What they want is to become everybody by refusing to become integrated and assimilated in the logic of border administration; what they want is to become imperceptible. Migration is the moment where you prefer to say: I prefer not to be. And this is not something which characterizes contemporary migration alone. It is only because of the dominance of communitarian, humanist, and identity oriented conceptual systems in social sciences (and associated public discourses) that we are prevented from seeing migration as one of the biggest laboratories for the subversion of liberal politics. Even the emblematic Ellis Island should not be considered the melting pot out of which the new American citizen was born, but rather the space where endless stories of virtual identities were invented in order to make one eligible to cross the 'golden door' into America. The whole vision of an America 'welcoming everyone from abroad' – an America which is 'open to difference' – is based on an infinite series of inventions and lies. Valuable lies, nice lies, vital lies. America's history and the cunning of migration. Migration is the sister of transience; it produces mixed forms, menwomen, new species. The cunning of migration breeds animals. How to register them in the clean and pedantic archives of the administration? How to respond to a sheep or a raven when it has the courage to encounter the gaze of the bureaucrat in a police department of immigration affairs and demand asylum? How to register all these liminal animals? How to record all these paperless subjects? How to codify all these continuous becomings? Impossible.

Of course migration's weapon of imperceptibility does not always succeed. It is a route without guarantees. It involves pain, suffering, hunger, desperation, torture; even the death of thousands of people in the sunken ships into the oceans of earth. But in this text we are deliberately not presenting migration once again as a humanitarian scandal, nor as a deviation from the evolutionist human rights doctrine of Western modernity. Is it a coincidence that the widespread images of migration in the media and public discourses – which depict it as a series of monstrous tragedies – supply equally the ubiquitous humanitarian discourses as well as the xenophobic and racist politics of forced repatriation? This text attempts to change the perspective and to approach migration as a constitutive moment of the current social transformation; a moment which is primarily sustained by cooperation, solidarity, the use of broad networks and
resources, shared knowledge, collective anticipation. This understanding of migration puts the issue of citizenship directly on the agenda of post-national polity (consider three different demands of migrational movements related to an enlargement of traditional conceptualizations of citizenship: cultural citizenship, flexible citizenship and universal citizenship).

The demise of the strategy of visibility marks a turning point in the way we understand politics. How does migration open possibilities for rethinking the end of contemporary forms of sovereignty? The politics of representation and its subversive re-articulations belong to the inventory of the historical realization of democratic social organization. Its core principle is national sovereignty, the ideal correspondence and congruence of people and territory. National sovereignty attempts to establish this correspondence in two subsequent moments: first, it separates and classifies the people of a territory into groups and social strata through the signification procedures of representation; second, it assigns rights of participation to each of these represented groups. National sovereignty is based on the national social compromise between different groups and strata for a potential egalitarian distribution of rights. Migration is part of this process, even if it has been treated differently in different countries. In most European countries, for example, migration was assimilated in the form of *Gastarbeit* (temporary employment), which performs an inclusion of the right to work at the national level without the extensive granting of equal political rights. In countries which actively encouraged immigration, migrants were incorporated in the national social compromise by accepting them as an integral part of the national project in general. In this case, migrants were granted not only full work rights but also political rights. But despite the seemingly egalitarian treatment of migration in this second case, migrants came across the racist dispositifs prevalent in these societies. Equal rights did not mean the possession of equal symbolic capital in the politics of representation. The fact that cultural studies and post-colonialism (which are, as we said earlier, concerned with the critique of the representational deficit) arose primarily in these countries, and came later to continental Europe, is the result of this particular historical experience, namely: the coexistence between equal rights and racist treatment; between formal equality and de facto ethnic segmentation. Despite all these variations in the treatment of migration, the main focus was always the assignment of rights and representational visibility to migrants.
The demand for unrestricted rights and extensive representation – the so-called ‘double R axiom’ – is an outcome of the pressure migration exerts on national sovereignty to restructure the functional relationship between people and territory. The constitutive outside of national sovereignty is not another extraterritorial national sovereignty but the border as the material manifestation of their relation. The double R principle does not only organize the national-territorial corpus, it primarily designates the relation to outer states and their people. Thus, the double R axiom simultaneously defines the matrix of positive rights and representation within the national territory and the non-existence of rights and symbolic presence beyond its borders. When we think of the double R axiom, we have to always consider that it also refers to its exact opposite: the absence of rights and representation. This is why the state of exception in modern political theory is regarded as the crucial moment of modern national sovereignty. Because always inherently given in national sovereignty is its negation. It can always deny its own foundations and withdraw from its function as the creditor of the double R axiom. The state of exception is the moment where the borders are erected within the national territory; tearing up any apparent society of equals. Despite the conceptualization of the nation as an egalitarian unity of the people, national sovereignty is organized around an inner border which traverses the whole society from its very beginning: the hierarchical organization of gender relations and the organization of the national imaginary along masculinized and homophobic ideology. National sovereignty is institutionalized gender oppression. There is no nation which guarantees equal rights and equal symbolic power to men and women, to heterosexuals and queer people. So, from the very first moment of its existence, the power of national sovereignty is that it can always erect borders in its own corpus; it can perform surgical operation on its own body, on the society of the people. While national sovereignty is the all-inclusive and all-digesting belly of Leviathan, the state of exception which results from the state’s erection of borders within its own society, is the moment when Leviathan empties its belly; throwing out of its body that which is destabilizing it. Modern national sovereignty is thus, simultaneously, both the organizing agency which grants rights and secures access to symbolic power, as well as its antithesis: a power which systematically nullifies rights and restricts representation.

We have traced how, under the pressure of migration, borders reveal the changing faces and developments of sovereignty. Now we want to illuminate this same issue from another perspective: that of the moving
masses. How do borders, as integral parts of national sovereignty, sustain specific forms of control of migrational movements? Historically, the systematic control of the mobility of workforces was a reaction to the escape of the masses from enslavement and indenture to the guild. The establishment of wage labor was an attempt to translate the freedom of the vagabond masses into a productive, utilizable, and exploitable workforce. The freedom to choose and to change your employer is not a fake or ideological liberty, as classical working class Marxism suggests, but an historical compromise designed to integrate the newly released, disorganized and wandering workforce into a new regime of productivity. In fact, from the outset, wage labor is more an ordering principle (ordering the surplus of the worker’s freedom) than a mere mechanism of oppression. Only later, and gradually with the emergence and global expansion of capitalist production, does waged labor again become an oppressive constraint on workers’ potential freedoms. Fordist waged labor transforms the worker’s liberty and mobility into a fixed and stable workforce market. Fordism transformed the promising force of the freedom of mobility into competitively organized upward social mobility. Disciplinary institutions prepare men to enter the Fordist organized labor market, and bind women into the socially effaced and symbolically devalued realm of reproduction. The incorporation of the split between productive and reproductive fields in the Fordist regime stabilized the hierarchical patriarchal order of gender relations pertinent to national sovereignty.

Neoliberalism and the biopolitical turn brought the collapse of national sovereignty and the Fordist regime. On the one hand, global capital practices its own exodus from national regulation. On the other hand, the current border-crossing mobility of work intensifies the existing pressure on national borders. Neoliberalism introduced the virtual order of global markets and irrevocably undermined the national sovereign state’s monopoly of power. In parallel, biopolitics infused a deregulated and fluid governance of the population in the heart of the established Fordist regime of immobility. Together, neoliberalism and biopolitics pushed national sovereignty to its end. The dual dynamics of transnationalism and migration accelerated the previously mentioned internal ambivalence of national sovereignty. By increasingly erecting borders in the heart of its own society, national sovereignty is more and more tempted to execute its right for exception in its own body: the proliferation of camps, Guantanamo; gated communities; banlieues; the prison-industrial complex; favelas. But all this only represents the naked body of the new emerging sovereign. We enter a phase
were neoliberalism and biopolitics have accomplished their task to decentralize national sovereignty, and enter a period where they are starting to annul themselves. There is a new grand transformation of the present taking place, one which leaves behind the post-war national sovereignty, and the neoliberalism and biopolitics of the eighties and nineties, and brings us to a postnational and postliberal formation of sovereignty.

In the emerging postliberal conditions, labor becomes mobile and migrants become animals enunciating their subjective lines of flight out of the current rigid and exploitative regimes of accumulation. While biopolitics has contributed to reactivating freedom of movement against the Fordist national regime of control, it has also slowly but steadily started to consolidate an oppressive global system which controls the released migrational flows and suppresses the autonomy of migration. In this chapter we have read Deleuze and Guattari’s nomadic philosophy as a starting point for overcoming the limitations of the biopolitical understanding of migration. Deleuze and Guattari provide unsettling concepts for challenging the holy duality of contemporary migration theory (e.g., the economistic thinking of new mobility studies vs. the humanitarianism of communitarian thinking and refugee studies alike). The concept of becoming can help to overcome the liberal discourse of the new migrant – as a useful and adaptable workforce – as well as the logic of ‘victimization’ prevalent in NGO paternalistic interventionism. Within a theory of the autonomy of migration inspired by the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, migration is the paradigmatic driving force of the new postliberal sovereignty. But it is simultaneously the worst nightmare of the emerging sovereign, whose new clothes are manufactured in the sweatshops of this earth. The moving packs of mobile workers traversing continents on floating coffins create uncountable new subjectivities which are unlabelled, untamed, unidentified. People act together and make worlds without giving any permanent name to their alliances and conditions of existence. Without ever intending it, this multiplicity of subjectivities is tantamount to a univocality. It is a moment where social control is exercised from below, where social change is subjectless, where the new elusive historical actors dwell in the world of imperceptibility and generate a persistent and insatiable surplus of sociality in motion. A new world in the heart of the old world: world 2. World 2 does not redeem this surplus of sociality by establishing a new totalizing and messianic version of a better democratic polis, but it constitutes the exodus out of the polis – the First Transnational?
Notes


2. We would like to thank Niamh Stephenson for her insightful comments and her three-words-present, Jim Clifford for all these ideas in this text which originate in our inspiring discussions in Santa Cruz, Efthimia Panagiotidis for sharing with us her thoughts about our common fieldwork, and Brigitta Kuster for her suggestions about documentary films on migration. Some of the empirical and theoretical research presented here was funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and by the Federal Cultural Foundation of Germany (research project ‘Transit Migration’). The ideas discussed in this text have benefited much from the debates in the theory and border activist network Frassanito.

Deleuzian Encounters
Studies in Contemporary Social Issues

Edited by
Anna Hickey-Moody and Peta Malins