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Migrations on a gateway to the EU: some considerations on Istanbul as a *border city*

Migrazioni attraverso una porta d'accesso all'UE: alcune considerazioni su Istanbul come *città confine*

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Abstract. Embedded in the social morphologies of the spaces it involves, migration is a political phenomenon as it redefines public space and its use, labour market and social stratification; it multiplies political issues and requires answers to new social questions, new civil rights, or better civil rights for new people. Geopolitics of migrations is an approach to human post-modern mobility aimed at considering migration as a transcalar geopolitical process: it occurs and flows linked to political, economic and social imbalances at global, regional and local scales. This kind of geopolitics becomes more visible in the world border spaces, i.e. those places crossed by relevant flows of people, goods and assets, and where circulation and mobility need to be ruled by politics or sometimes challenge even politics itself. The present paper proposes some reflections on Istanbul as a *border city* in the Mediterranean basin.

Keywords: borders, geopolitics, Istanbul, migration.

Riassunto. Profondamente inserita nelle morfologie sociali degli spazi che coinvolge, la migrazione è un fenomeno politico, dal momento che essa ridefinisce lo spazio pubblico e il suo utilizzo, il mercato del lavoro e la stratificazione sociale, moltiplica le questioni politiche e richiede risposte a nuove istanze sociali, nuovi o migliori diritti civili per nuove persone. La geopolitica delle migrazioni è un approccio alla mobilità umana postmoderna volto a considerare la migrazione come un processo geopolitico transcalare collegato a squilibri politici, economici e sociali su scala globale, regionale e locale. Questo tipo di geopolitica diventa più visibile negli spazi di confine del mondo, cioè quei luoghi attraversati da flussi rilevanti di persone e beni, dove circolazione e mobilità devono essere governati dalla politica e talvolta pongono sfide alla politica stessa. Il presente contributo propone alcune riflessioni su Istanbul come *città confine* nel bacino del Mediterraneo.

Parole chiave: confini, geopolitica, Istanbul, migrazione.

1. Geography, geopolitics and migration: a transcalar analysis of the borderlands

Global networks and economic-political interdependence are some of the most important pivots of contemporary world contingency and human mobility is what defines the relationship between social groups and the territory they inhabit. In the twenty-first century that relation is fluid, variable and mobile, because the new global economy requires the interaction between *here* and *there*, while the forces opposing to people's movement weaken as well as the power of barriers' restrictions.

In this scenario, Geography contributes to redesign the spaces of circulation by adopting a multidisciplinary perspective as a necessary methodology to study the complexity of the interaction between environment and human groups in movement (Gentileschi 1991). Geopolitics in particular helps to better understand the political exercise of power assets on human mobility, since the continuous increase of stakeholders doesn't reduce the role of politics: the recent historical events showed that the regulation of mobility is fundamentally a geopolitical practice, involving the definition of spatial strategies and territorial arrangements to preserve the integrity of borders and contain perceived external threats (Nagel 2002).

The forces opposing migration are afraid of the social, cultural and political changes it generates. In other words, human mobility and migration in particular are powerful territorial transformation factors as they redefine public space and its use, the labour and housing markets as well as the social stratification. As a result, political issues increase, new social problems arise, and new civil rights or better civil rights for new people need to be defined.

In order to observe the most important traits of the territorial dynamics activated by contemporary trends in human mobility, this analysis focuses on the urban scale, as the city does not only represent a place of attraction for people in movement, but also an environment where new borders are generated, and others dejected.

The post-colonial social and political transformations have progressively developed a new kind of mobility, which is more complex and cannot be considered just a mere transfer of people from a place to another one, i.e. globalized: it appears to be a mobility that does not only involve people and places, but is also relevant for the geopolitical, economic, social and cultural network in which it develops.

Thus, once the city has been chosen as a worth focusing environment, the current analysis needs in any case to be *transcalar* in order to keep together global and local spaces, as well as the interstitial ones (Agnew 2002). Routes and border territories are the key places where human mobility shows its meanings and objectives, sometimes changing the original ones: regular or irregular, in transit or for settlement.

From the theoretical point of view — as Soja (2000) highlights —, the local/global relationship is a complex continuum that involves trans-scalar, multitemporal and multicentric factors. In this scale framework, each player can operate, even simultaneously, on multiple scales, as the relationships among players can unfold through many spatial levels: local, regional and global. On the one hand, this process might be described as globalization; on the other hand, however, it can also be described in terms of (neo-)regionalism or localism.

(...) in rethinking localization, for example, it is recognized that we always act (and think) locally, but our actions and thoughts are also simultaneously urban, regional, national, and global in scope, affecting and being affected by, if often only in the smallest way, the entire hierarchy of spatial scales in which our lives are embedded. Rethinking globalization leads to the recognition that it is not a process that operates exclusively at a planetary scale but is constantly being localized in various ways and with different intensities at every scale of human life, from the human body to the planet. (Soja 2000, 199-200).

The debate around the socially constructed nature of the scale (Swyngedouw 1997; Marston 2000) showed that spatial practices change their scale references depending on the stakeholders involved. Those references appear to deal with a trans-scalar dimension which embraces together different spatial levels and the corresponding players and organizations. Thus, the scale cannot be taken for granted, but has to be defined by taking into account the related — and often multiple — positions of the stakeholders involved in the spatial interaction, sometimes at several scales (Salone, 2012).

Geopolitics of migrations is an approach to the human post-modern mobility aimed at considering migration as a transcalar geopolitical process: it occurs and flows linked to political, economic and social imbalances at global, regional and local scales. This kind of geopolitics becomes more visible in the world border spaces, i.e. those places crossed by relevant flows of people, goods and assets and where circulation and mobility need to be ruled by politics or sometimes challenge even politics itself.

Moving to a smaller scale, there are some borders which more than a border and they are often located not so close to the borders themselves: we can identify them into the urban spaces that the sociologist Natalia Ribas Mateos (2005) called *border cities*.

The present paper aims at showing the complex scenario of mobility in a Mediterranean metropolis we can consider as a *border city* since its history and social geography have developed around different forms of flows and exchanges, several morphologies of an urban culture always looking forward to a bordering process capable of social discovery and innovation: Istanbul — the city always waiting to pass the border represented by itself.

2. Mobility and border cities: the Turkish megalopolis

In the world of networks, global migrations tend to generate new territorial sets, whereas new emerging spatialities in the contemporary society fight — more or less silently— for the sense of place: different usages and meanings outline complex and innovative geographies of accessibility to the space and mark material or symbolic border lines able to fragment them and generate specific areas where difference comes out and becomes space itself (Ostanel 2014). Moreover, a geopolitical aspect concerning the so-called "migration-State" also needs to be taken into account. On the one side, the "migration-State" has to engage the liberal paradox of conciliating security with commerce, finance and mobility (Samers 2012), whereas, on the other one, it has to face the increasing challenges resulting from the reconfiguration of places — districts, neighbourhoods, streets — due to the global mobility.

In particular, we can identify several space categories depending on the nature, direction and intensity of the migration flows: agricultural space, urban space, touristic space, metropolitan space and border space. Some global studies focus on this distinction such as the ones by the Dutch sociologist Saskia Sassen. Her analysis identifies the strategic sites for the globalization processes, i.e. the *borderlands*: places which host economic, political and social intersections meaningful at a global scale. Sassen considers the cities as a symbol of globalization and collocates the so-called *global cities* on the top of the world urban hierarchy: they are characterized by a network of financial activities which goes beyond the territorial borders of the city itself and exercises its influence at global scale (Sassen 2012). Moving to border spaces concerning migratory flows, the concept identifies those places — i.e. those cities — where the migratory scenario goes beyond the local geography by crossing and setting the transnational dynamics of migration. In other words, the migratory scenario of a global city is able to explain the mobility trends on a broader scale.

Starting from Sassen's analysis, the Spanish sociologist Natalia Ribas Mateos deepened the study of migra-

tion spaces at Mediterranean scale further and used the category of border city to identify the most relevant cities in the basin for the migratory phenomenon (Ribas Mateos 2005). She has also taken into account the geopolitical shape of the Mediterranean region, its strategic balances as well as its North/South and East/West relationships. As a result, the Mediterranean region becomes a space of global significance where the migratory balances among centre, periphery and semi-periphery can display the migratory trends at global scale.

Thanks to the plurality of concentration, density and mobility scales, Mediterranean border spaces are able to connect international geopolitics directly to its local effects: they represent symbolic bridges for mobility as well as gates which can facilitate or interfer with the transit, depending on their position in the global economy.

Although they are in a lower position compared to the global cities, the border cities are linked to them and play an important role in the traditional North/South division as well as in the *triadization* of the global economy: they are relevant places for both the globalization and the transnational mobility processes (Ohmae 1995). In fact, they are territorial borders themselves[1].

Either open boundaries cities or cosmopolitan cities — often located between the global centre and periphery as own semi-peripheries —, border cities symbolize the contradiction between borders' closure and the pressure to cross them and host the continuous transformation of mobility strategies: they are symbolic places for the globalization but, at the same time, resistance territories to it (Mezzadra, Neilson 2014). This internal complexity of border cities is able to transform the region in which they are located into a screen displaying global trends, centripetal and centrifugal forces of human mobility, its social and economic routes as well as its cultural impacts on society at several scales.

There are lots of border cities in the Mediterranean which appear to be crossed by two 'fault lines': one is set by the global economy and the other one by the political geography. The former divides global North from global South, situated on the opposite sides of the two basin shores; the latter proposes the East/West division again. The crossing of these routes falls onto the European extremity of Turkey.

Thus, the Southern and Eastern sides of the basin represent the origin of migratory flows directed respec-

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[1] '(...) border cities represent an area where the north runs directly into the south. Specifically, they are also cities and spaces in the very heart of which a new system of geographies of centrality and marginalization has been created, as well as the emergence of an elite that is connected with the privatization of capital and the sprouting of peripheral neighborhoods deriving from internal migration' (Ribas Mateos 2005, 3).

tively to the North and to the West, with relevant intermediate transits. According to Ribas Mateos (2005), these flows have generated two types of border cities: the *introvert* ones and the *extrovert* ones. The former, within the European Union, represent the destinations of the migratory routes coming externally from the Schengen area: Lisbon, Barcelona, Marseille and Genoa. The latter, external to the EU, represent the origin — but lately also a transit — of the routes leading migrants to the European *Eldorado*: Ceuta, Melilla, Tangier, Tunis and Istanbul.

Among these cities, from our point of view Istanbul represents an exception as it could be considered both as an extrovert and an introvert border city: although the city lost its status as capital in 1923 when the capital was moved to Ankara, the Turkish megalopolis has continued exercising its cultural, demographic and economic leadership. Istanbul acted like a real urban magnet for macro-regional migration flows both during the Ottoman era and after the proclamation of the Turkish national State shaping a composite scenario of internal and regional mobility. Such a mobility is polarized by what we can define as a joint urban space. Lately, Istanbul has been changing the universal concept of urban hierarchy: if we consider its border and bordering role combined with its traditional urban cosmopolitanism, we can clearly recognize an ancient global city which keeps transforming itself and its urban functions in order to become part of and take advantage of the global finance and economy networks. The most visible example of the urban functions' globalization is the air traffic: nowadays, the Atatürk International Airport is the first Turkish airport for number of passengers and growth rate; it ranks among the first twenty airports worldwide: daily direct flights reach several destinations in Europe, Middle East, Central and Eastern Asia, Africa and North America. Furthermore, by 2018 a third airport[2] will be inaugurated and is aimed at overtaking London Heathrow.

Urban and demographic growth trends as well as a social geography closely related to mobility bring out various meanings — contradictions and potentialities — of international migrations in Istanbul. However, we also have to take into account the geopolitical position of this ancient urban frontier which has transformed itself in the last decades in order to 'intercede' with the European West on behalf of Turkey. Therefore, Istanbul becomes a space where migrations are mixed with the

territorial conditions of a society always waiting to cross the border it represents.

These features make Istanbul an interesting study case for a geography aimed at crossing the various scales of migration in order to identify a wider range of aspects and problems in a territorial scenario.

Since it embodies all features of a border city, Istanbul stands out at Mediterranean scale also for its urban gigantism which contributes to polarize, flex and transform the international mobility system:

> (...) por son *"gigantisme grouillant"*, en définitive peu contrôlable, et por le relatif anonymat inhérent à ce gigantisme, Istanbul autorise un déploiement aisé des filières, en reconfiguration permanente. (Pérouse 2008, 862).

Situated on the extremity of the Anatolian region, Istanbul is an exceptional condenser and switch for population movements: just as the space is never smooth, so migration flows are never free in motion: they are prisoners both of States (especially if enemies) and economic and commercial chessboards. From the European perspective, in particular, Istanbul represents the border between the desirable world and the undesirable one (Aslan, Pérouse 2003), as its position and eternally debated identity, along with its complex and problematic migratory landscape, make of it a 'suspicious' frontier.

Mobility, circulation and international migrations contribute to Istanbul's internationalization. However, at the same time, they also make of it a territorial hub for multiscalar irregular traffics; that is a new cosmopolitism, deeply different from the Ottoman one which was rather founded on the coexistence of different religious groups within a common urban space[3].

Thanks to its geographical position, to its history and its urban metabolism, Istanbul has become a magnet for migrations at a national and Mediterranean scale, and ended up to take on a *transcalar* meaning: if we look at Istanbul's migratory scenario, we are observing the geography of migrations in Turkey, whereas the study of the migratory routes crossing Istanbul reveals a very complex regional mobility framework resulting from the strong networks of entrance, exit and transit

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[2] The second terminal is Sabiha Gökçen, on the Asian side of Istanbul, with an annual capacity of three million passengers, compared with the fifty of Atatürk.

[3] During the Ottoman era, migrants moving from the countryside to Istanbul were strictly controlled by the administration, which was afraid of a permanent settlement. Therefore, check-points were instituted at the city entrance in order to register entering migrants and group them based on the quarters identified for their settlement (usually the peripheries of Galata and Eyüp on the European shore, Üsküdar on the Asiatic one). However, the objective to separate the resident population from the migrants was never achieved: the census data have always registered a sizeable presence of migrants in the residential districts of the city (Eckardt, Wildner 2008).

Table 1. Annual growth rate (‰) of Istanbul population (2007-2016). Source: author processing on data by Turkish Statistical Institute.

2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
9.8	17.0	26.0	27.4	16.8	21.8	15.2	19.3	10.0	15.1

flows in the Turkish megalopolis territory. In particular, the transit has been characterizing the migratory scenario of Istanbul lately: on the one hand it confirms Istanbul as a border city, on the other one the passage of migrants on this territory is progressively transforming the migratory project itself. More and more frequently – especially for some groups of migrants – Istanbul is no longer considered as a route transit fragment but is chosen as a final destination because its urban *milieu* seems to facilitate the migrants' informal integration (Içduygu, Yükseker 2012).

3. Transformations and metaphors of a complex migratory scenario

Over the last century, migration has been an influent factor for Istanbul's identity and its demographic asset. At the beginning of the 20th century, urban population amounted to one million, reduced to less than 700.000 after the First World War and the Turkish Independence War. The latter, in particular, aimed at building a new national identity – the Turkish-kemalist one – and non-Muslim communities were forced to migrate. This trend had also continued in the further decades because of the population exchanges between Turkey and the countries hosting Turkish minorities, i.e. the former Ottoman territories: just in the years 1923-1927 1.600.000 Turks reached Turkey from Greece, Bulgaria, former Yugoslavia and Romania. The so-called *muhacir* were usually well accepted in the country because they were associated to the building of the kemalist national State (Daniş et al. 2009).

Nevertheless, since the 1950s, the Marshall Plan and the growing urbanization have been contributing to the demographic boom of Istanbul, which reached 9.000.000 inhabitants in half a century and will be destined to grow in the coming decades.

For year 2017, the Turkish Statistical Institute registered an urban population of 15.029.231 inhabitants, i.e. 18.6 per cent of the national total[4].

As the largest and the most cosmopolitan city of Turkey, and accessible by land, by sea and by air, Istan-
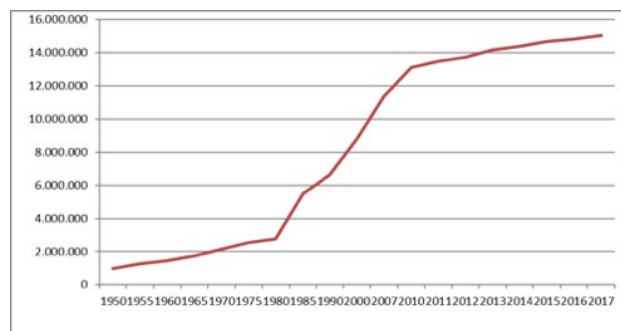
Figure 1. The population of Istanbul (1950-2017). Source: author processing on data by Turkish Statistical Institute (www.turkstat. gov.tr).
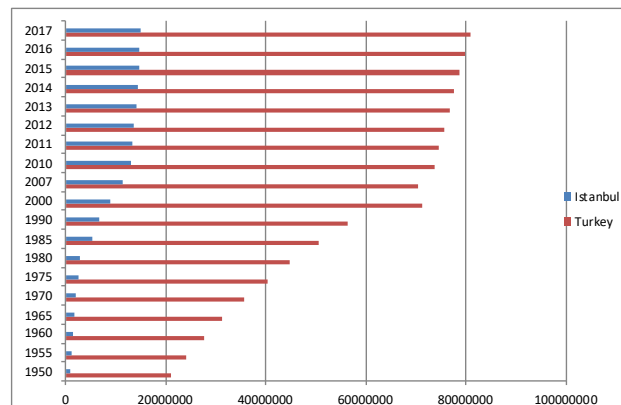
Figure 2. The population of Istanbul compared to the Turkey total one (1950-2017). Source: author processing on data by Turkish Statistical Institute.

bul represents the turntable for migratory flows directed to the West; the main pull factors are economic and social: Istanbul concentrates the 65 per cent of the national import-export, the complex ethnic scenario and the urban space extension contribute to the integration, because the migratory networks control large segments of the informal labour market and also guarantee the inclusion in the urban economy. This trend helps the migration to regenerate itself.

In this way, the weak system of social rights is balanced by the flexible labour market and housing, whose offering is prevalent in the urban centre peripheries —

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[4] To the 31th December 2017, the Turkish population amounted to 80.810.525 (Turkish Statistical Institute).

the most impressive is certainly Tarlabaşı, placed in the central Beyoğlu district[5], European side —, contrary to what happens for the ill-famed *gecekondu* ('built by night'), the self-built houses dislocated in the geographical city peripheries (Içduygu 2003).

The informal economies of Istanbul employing the highest number of migrants are fully visible in the historical peninsula, in Laleli quarter, Fatih district, and on the Eastern side of Golden Horne, in Osmanbey, Sisli district. For at least two decades, Laleli had represented the core of trade activities managed by Russian and, to a small extent, Ukrainian migrants. Due to the intensity of the so called "suitcase trade" – a typical form of commuter contraband of the 1980s and 1990s –, Laleli has been defined as the "anti-Grand Bazaar" and still today the Russian quarter of Istanbul maintains its central role in the urban economic geography[6].

The wide differentiation of flows, the urban economy informality and the lack of data make difficult to quantify the number of migrants in Istanbul, especially if we also take into account the irregular migrations. Nevertheless, we know that the foreign population of the city is composed by re-joined relatives, migrants who return back, students and workers, regular and irregular, settled and in transit. A separated reasoning concerns the problem of refugees and asylum seekers, in particular the Syrian ones[7], for which we refer to the wide connected literature[8]. Moreover, since Turkey trades for 60 per cent with European Countries, the presence of professional migrants and businessmen is also relevant: they are mainly Germans, Spaniards and Italians, but also Russians, Japanese, Americans and, since the 1990s, Israelis too.

This new trend has been transforming the urban landscape of some Istanbul neighbourhoods, even the historical ones, which are now able to satisfy the request for luxury hotel services.

Mustafa Aslan and Jean François Pérouse (2003) used four metaphors to explain the complexity of Istanbul and the social and migratory processes it hosts: it is a *comptoir* according to its role as an international market place, with the leadership in the Afro-Asiatic region; Istanbul is a *hub* according to its capacity of territorial
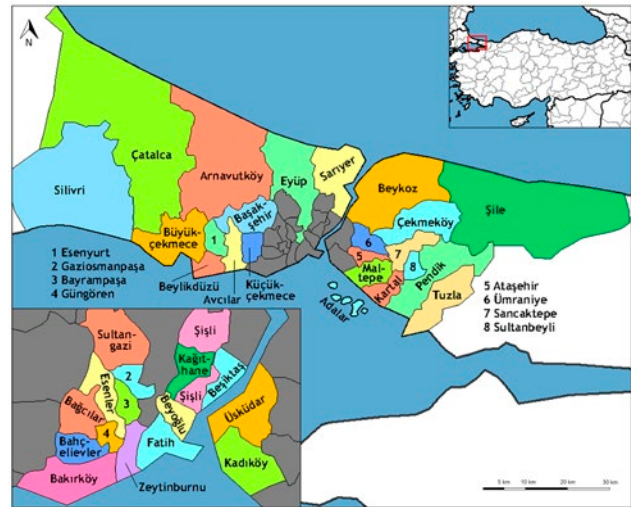
Figure 3. Istanbul administrative division. Source: author processing on data by Istanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi (Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality): www.ibb.istanbul.

networking, thanks to the high infrastructural outfit that makes it the turntable for material and immaterial resources, both of them fundamental for the international human mobility; lastly, it is a *sas* and an *impasse* because by now it represents an inescapable passage on the migratory routes to Europe, but, at the same time, it often results obstructed by the time extension of transits, partly also due to the strict policies of the EU.

The four metaphors help to better understand the complexity of a border space placed in a world frontier, i.e. a borderland crossed by economic, social, material and immaterial flows — formal and informal — relevant not only for itself but also at macro-regional scale and, for some extent, also worldwide. A world frontier is not just a frontier crossed by human crowds but also crossing human crowds; it is something that makes any classification of human mobility just a schematic abstraction or an instrument which facilitates the analysis (Bade 2001).

Bearing always in mind the particular and complex condition of Istanbul and the difficulties to thoroughly describe its urban social geography, due to its gigantism and its continuous reconfiguration as a migrations' turntable, we tried to look at its borderscape by focusing on the capacity of this megalopolis to host migrants coming from different places and cultures, and contribute to their integration into the urban informal economies, along with its position as a border city, that makes Istanbul an ideal semi-periphery for migratory flows coming from the Arabic peninsula, central Asia and Africa, milling around the South-eastern gateway of EU and waiting to cross the border to reach it. However, more

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[5] Other zones for migrants housing are Kurtuluş (Sisli), Dolapdere (Beyoğlu), Zeytinburnu and Kumkapı (Fatih), all of them on the European side of the city.
[6] Some observers identified a *lalelization* of Turkey, dealing with the extension of the informal networks of national economy (Pérouse 2001).
[7] Turkey alone hosted 52 percent of all Syrian refugees as of July 2017. Istanbul, home to more than 522,000 registered Syrian refugees, is the Turkish province with the largest number of refugees (Erdoğan 2017).
[8] Among others: Kaya 2016; Içduygu et al. 2017; Loyd et al. 2018; Woods 2016.

and more frequently it happens that these migrants finally decide to settle down in Istanbul: on the one side, because they realize the impossibility of the original migratory project, on the other one because they get to know the territory and the opportunities it can offer.

Such ongoing transformation in the social and political geography of a meaningful borderland situated between EU and non-EU might open new scenarios, especially if we look at the weak balances in the surrounding regions.

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