

EDITORIAL

Survival Strategies of Irregular Immigrants

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Abstract

While there are numerous research efforts, supported by substantial budgets, to study the process of irregular border crossing, there is very little sustained research on how irregular migrants live for remarkable spells of time in social contexts where they lack any certified public identity. This leads to a paradoxical situation. We know that sizeable irregular migration flows cross the borders of all developed countries (as well as some developing ones). But we know very little of how, once entered, these migrants become immigrants, how they achieve the minimal goals of making an income, finding a place to sleep, avoiding being caught by the police and, not infrequently, attaining some degree of security and self-respect.

Keywords: remittances, global financial crisis, international migration.

Introduction

The papers in this special issue have their origins in a panel held at the 2010 World Congress of the International Sociological Association in Goteborg, Sweden. As session organizers, we had decided to promote the session on the basis of a very simple consideration. While there are numerous research efforts, supported by substantial budgets, to study the process of irregular border crossing, there is very little sustained research on how irregular migrants live for remarkable spells of time in social contexts where they lack any certified public identity. This leads to a paradoxical situation. We know that sizeable irregular migration flows cross the borders of all developed countries (as well as some developing ones). But we know very little of how, once entered, these migrants become immigrants, how they achieve the minimal goals of making an income, finding a place to sleep, avoiding being caught by the police and, not infrequently, attaining some degree of security and self-respect (Cvajner and Sciortino 2010b; Bommès and Sciortino 2011).

We believe that such a situation is a pity on at least two counts. First, there is no way we can understand irregular migration flows without an adequate understanding of the ways in which irregular migrants live and work in their receiving contexts. Migrants do not cross borders in a vacuum, nor may their flows be treated as a set of atomized movements. Indeed, the whole process of irregular migration is based on expectations about the existence of a certain set of possibilities and opportunities in the receiving

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country. A significant number of border-crossings are financed by relatives already settled, sometimes irregularly, in the receiving country. Many others require financial arrangements backed by the expectation of future earnings. Without a significant proportion of previously arrived migrants able to get by in the receiving context as irregular *immigrants*, it is doubtful that significant processes of irregular migration would develop at all. Studying irregular migration, we must not forget that to understand ongoing flows, we must take into account also existing stocks.

2 More generally, the presence of a sizeable number of irregular migrants raises important questions, both scientific and humanitarian. As far as the former are concerned, the existence of a large irregular population – able to live and work in the country for years, or even decades, without an ‘official’ identity – triggers several important questions about the very nature of contemporary states and societies. Contemporary nation states have a right – sanctioned by international law – to determine if, and under which conditions, foreigners may live on their territory (Plender 1998). The regulation of the labour supply through migration restriction is part and parcel of the regulation of their economies (Zolberg 1999). The capacity to control the number of individuals eligible for welfare provisions has been a key precondition for the operation of welfare programmes ever since they were established (Bommes 2003). The self-understanding of modern states, as tied to specific nations, implies a political concern for cultural and ethnic heterogeneity (Castles 2004). Being able to control the composition of the population is also considered crucial for both internal and external state security. Given these states’ interests, the existence of a sizeable population of irregular foreign residents presents a puzzling challenge to existing notions of political statehood and societal membership (Cvajner and Sciortino 2010a). There is room to argue that a deeper understanding of the ways in which irregular migrants – albeit excluded by access to politics and law – obtain (or fail to obtain) a minimal degree of incorporation would help the development of a more adequate theory of contemporary society.

Consequently, when we organized the panel, we wanted to create a space of debate for all those who were interested in doing research on the structural preconditions for mass-scale irregular migration systems and the social consequences of the variety of irregular statuses created and legislated by and in receiving countries. We wanted to promote research on the actual impact of irregularity on a variety of social interactions and to explore the various consequences of inclusion and exclusion. We wanted to elucidate how hundreds of thousands of migrants have been able to live and manage their irregular status for years, usually, but not always, thanks to the systematic self-restraint exercised by democratic liberal states. The fact that the World Congress was taking place in Sweden allowed us to focus on the fact that sizeable numbers of immigrants in Western Europe treat their living conditions as a practical problem to be managed according to the logics

of expediency, a reality difficult to grasp within the logic of the ever-popular concept of 'Fortress Europe'. What kinds of survival strategies enable migrants to avoid detection, to establish uncertified identities and to find – albeit often at high human cost – alternatives to the provisions of political power and legal protection? These are the types of questions left unanswered when irregular migration is defined as a mere consequence of weak borders or lax visa policies, as a social pathology to be 'cured' rather than as a social phenomenon to be *understood*.

Seen in this way, it becomes clear that there are no irregular (or illegal) migrants, but only individuals who have – in a specific space and for a specific time – an irregular (or illegal) status. Irregularity defines neither the whole of migratory flows nor the qualities of an individual. The adjective 'irregular' does not describe the migration flow as a whole, but only with regard to its interactions with states' actions, which may deeply affect the course and structure of the migratory process. In fact, irregular migration is a case where Paul of Tarsus was absolutely correct: *where there is no law, neither is there violation* (Romans, 4, 15). Irregularity is first and foremost a legal status that defines the relationship between the individual and a state (De Genova 2007). The interaction between migrants and state policies should not, however, be thought of as a clear-cut polarity between 'lawful' and 'unlawful' residents. In legal terms, such a binary code is well defined and increasingly similar across liberal democratic countries. In its everyday workings, however, similar formal policies can produce very different outcomes when applied to different contexts and categories. And even within each country, the purity of a binary code results in a complex stratification of statuses, each having different consequences. There are many layers within the political definition of membership and entitlement, each of which has its own deviances. Regardless of legislators and lawyers' intentions, these layers never overlap perfectly. To assess the social meaning of similar norms across various contexts, it is important to bear in mind that their functioning is contingent upon several factors: the number and type of social transactions where the legal status of relevant parties can be considered significant, the capacity to detect irregular migrants (which in turn is largely contingent upon the general capacity of individual states to monitor and constrain social transactions over their territories), the degree to which states exercise self-constraint in repressing irregular migration and the effective capacity of states to implement their policies. In other words, the scope and impact of legal status cannot be derived directly from the normative description of such a relationship. The state's attempt to define the irregular migrant as such takes place within a variety of constraints, produced by both the externalities of other societal subsystems and the internal structure of the state's organisation. In modern society, there are structural limits to the process of converting an individual's specific status into a total identity. The legal status of foreigners is usually just one among many, and the legally as-

serted relevance of an irregular status for many social transactions is often challenged and, even more frequently, quietly defied.

We chose for our panel to place an emphasis on the survival strategies of irregular migrants, on the ways in which they are able to establish a presence in a public space without a certified identity and without access to politics and law. The interest in survival strategies of irregular migrants has been sometimes criticized for unduly emphasizing structure over agency and for constituting mostly a 'victim perspective' (Meeteren 2010). In our view, this criticism assumes only one possibility among many. As a matter of fact, the very same use of the word 'strategy' implies the acknowledgement of a certain degree of agency, while the emphasis on 'survival' is quite useful to remind ourselves that the feasibility of life as an irregular migrant involves nearly always a strong burden on one's life chances. The available research on the life of irregular immigrants has demonstrated great merit in documenting the ways in which irregular migration systems are able to identify job opportunities, reduce insecurity and establish a workable infrastructure for attaining a better life (Chavez 1992; Adam, Ben Mohammed et al. 2001; Alt 2003; De Genova 2007; Engbersen and Broders 2009; Bommès and Sciortino 2011). This is crucial, as any study of irregular migration requires an adequate understanding of the social conditions that enable irregular migrants to survive, earn a living and establish a certain level of adaptation in the receiving context. At the same time, as documented in the following papers, as well as in a growing body of research literature, irregular migrants very often live in a world of uncertainty, speculation and mistrust. The level of risk endured by many irregular migrants is staggering. The frequency and severity of abuse many of them suffer can be inconceivable. It also seems likely that the humanitarian risks of irregular migration are becoming more diffuse and severe with the increased tightening of immigration controls (Gryzmala-Kazłowska 2005; Broeders 2009). What we see from current studies of the survival strategies of irregular migrants is that the process of irregular migration is far from being a sequence of chaotic steps and random decisions. It is actually a very structured condition – the survival of irregular migrants demands much more social capital and entrepreneurial skills than observers may appreciate at first glance (Meeteren, Engbersen et al. 2009; Cvajner and Sciortino 2010a). The term 'survival strategies' is an appropriate way to stress at the same time the significance and creativity of irregular migrants as social actors, as well as the fact that the spaces of inclusion they are able to develop often carry a significant price tag.

We received a large number of proposals, showing significant interest in the topic and the approach. Although the large number of proposals made the selection difficult and sometimes unpleasant, we take such an outcome as evidence that the time is ripe for sustained research efforts targeted at understanding irregular immigrants as stable segments of the population and

embracing irregular migration as 'strategic research material', in Merton's sense (1987), for the study of contemporary society. Several revisions later, the selected papers are here published. They deal with different countries and apply different research questions and methods. They are all able, however, to show how irregular migrants are not an undifferentiated layer of excluded victims, but rather a diverse set of social actors able in many cases, albeit often at a high human cost, to resist exclusionary tendencies and to achieve relatively stable informal incorporation. In doing so, they demonstrate a remarkable degree of agency. But they also highlight the existence of a large set of structural and political grey zones in the receiving fabric. Although it would be too much to claim that the publication of these papers signals the emergence of a cumulative research program, it is fair to maintain that the findings published here reveal that such a research program is possible and feasible. We have no reason to resign ourselves to our current poor understanding of the issue.

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