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The Ethics of Ethnographic Fieldwork in the Context of War against Migrants

Between Self-Censorship and Engagement

Jacinthe Mazzocchetti

Dans cet article, à partir de mes travaux d'enquête auprès des migrants catégorisés illégaux dans les îles maltaises, il s'agira de poser le cadre contextuel de la « guerre contre les migrants » et les questions éthiques qui en découlent. De fait, considérer le contexte d'enquête comme celui d'une guerre larvée ou ouverte faite aux migrants amène notamment à ouvrir les débats suivants. Premièrement, celui de la nécessité d'une analyse longitudinale, par maillons enchevêtrés, des politiques publiques en matière de migration et de leurs effets sur les migrants, mais aussi sur le chercheur et ses modalités d'enquête. Deuxièmement, celui de la manière dont l'écriture ethnographique est mise au travail par le contexte de sécurisation des frontières de plus en plus explicite et violent : notamment les questions relatives aux prises de position publiques et au soupçon de non-scientificité pour raison de militantisme ainsi que celles des formes adéquates d'écriture, soulevant la problématique de l'autocensure.

Drawing on my fieldwork with migrants who have been designated "illegal" in the Maltese islands, I will discuss the contextual framework of the "war against migrants" and ethical issues resulting from it. Framing the investigative context as a latent or open war waged against migrants most notably leads me to revisit the following debates. First, the need for a longitudinal analysis of the entangled links between public policies on migration and their effects on migrants, which would also include an analysis of the researcher and fieldwork conditions. Secondly, the question

of how this increasingly explicit and violent context of border militarization challenges ethnographic writing. I particularly address issues relative to public anthropology and accusations of being non-scientific due to militancy, as well as those surrounding adequate forms of writing and self-censorship.

Introduction

The question of the war waged against migrants has been partly framed in relation to questions on the criminalization of migrants and the security management of borders, in particular via the concepts of “crimmigration” (Guia, Woude and Van Der Leun, 2012; Stumpf, 2013; Van Der Woude and Van Berlo, 2015) and “securitization of migration” (Watson Scott, 2009; Huysmans, 2006; Léonard, 2010). Furthermore, for a few years now, NGOs and civil society organizations have used the expression “war against migrants”, especially in connection with the activities of Frontex¹, the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union. However, in Western Europe, the context of a war against migrants became much more explicit in 2015. This particular approach to migratory issues, which might have until recently still been perceived as a metaphor outside of informed circles, is now clearly stated in speeches as well as clearly demonstrated in implemented measures such as the operations in the Mediterranean which I will examine in this paper².

The empirical experience on which this article is based resulted from a fieldwork fortuity. In October 2014, I was carrying out ethnographic work on so-called “illegal migration” in Malta, and suddenly realized that the EU (European Union) operation Mos

¹ See notably the Frontexit campaign “Europe is at war against an enemy it has invented for itself” (<http://www.frontexit.org/fr/>).

² I wish to thank the reviewers for their relevant comments. I also wish to thank Thomas Patrick and Clara Mareschal for assistance with the manuscript.

Maiorum was taking place at the exact same moment. The goals of that operation were the interception of migrants and intelligence gathering, focusing on illegal migrations and smuggling. In this paper, I analyze how this operation influenced my fieldwork and writings. The paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, I describe the Mos Maiorum operation. In the second part, I examine what the expression “war against migrants” means in terms of public policies, actions and consequences. Lastly, in the third part of the article, I discuss what this context implies for researchers working on issues of migration, and asylum in particular, when investigating the situation of people categorized as “illegal”. Thus I propose carefully considering the implications of doing ethnographic fieldwork in the context of war against migrants, particularly in terms of self-censorship and engagement.

Concurrent/competitive surveys and implications : The Mos Maiorum European operation of raids and intelligence gathering

Located in the Mediterranean Sea, 80 kilometers south of Sicily and 333 kilometers north of Libya, the Republic of Malta (316 km²) comprises three main islands, Malta, Gozo and Comino, as well as small, uninhabited islands. Its population numbers 450,000 inhabitants. A former English co-lony, Malta became independent in 1964 and joined the EU in 2004. With regard to migratory questions, after being primarily a country of emigration, mainly to Canada, Australia and the United States, Malta later became a country of immigration. The Maltese government distinguishes between migration termed as legal (intra-European as well as in the context of intergovernmental agreements, such as, for example, with the Philippines), and migrations termed as illegal, being the result of arrivals on Maltese soil by boat from Libya, mainly following interceptions at sea or shipwrecks.

Thus, the Maltese islands, like nearby Italy and Greece (the “gendarme” countries of the EU), face increasingly massive and dangerous arrivals of migrants. Though their arrival by maritime

routes places them immediately in the category of “illegal migrant”, many subsequently submit an asylum request. Between 2002 and 2010, around 13,000 African migrants arrived by boat; 56% of them obtained a form of protection (usually the status of “subsidiary protection”) of whom 60% came from Somalia, 20% from Eritrea, and 4% from Sudan (Cassar, 2013). Nationals from Central and Western Africa very rarely obtain a form of protection even if most of them are eligible to receive one. The main goals of my research in Malta (since 2012) were to describe and understand how those African migrants, who have not obtained an international protection status, manage either to survive in state-tolerated illegality, or attempt to continue their journeys inside the Schengen area in ways which are – as before – considered to be illegal.

In a way, the Mos Maiorum case study was imperative for me because the operation took place during one of my fieldwork missions in Malta, in October 2014. Operation Mos Maiorum (from 13th to 26th October 2014) was part of the strategy of migration security management adopted by the EU. It was a police and military intelligence operation³, involving raids which, besides extracting information, resulted in the imprisonment and/or expulsion of some of the intercepted migrants and the arrest of the so-called “facilitators”. According to the official EU documents, the main goal of Joint Operation Mos Maiorum was:

“To monitor the irregular migrations and identify the link between irregular EU external border crossings and irregular migration within the EU and Schengen Area, as well as to focus on the ‘secondary movements’ of irregular migrants who have entered the Member States irregularly⁴”.

To some degree, their focus on the so-called “irregular migrations” was the same as mine and employed similar methods, as well as obviously different ones, for obviously different purposes.

³ Such operations take place more or less every six months, under the direction of the country presiding over the European Union.

⁴ Council of the European Union Brussels, 10 July 2014, *Joint Operation Mos Maiorum*, 11671/14, DG D 1 A.

They arrested migrants and collected information in order to better control and close the frontiers, while one of my research focuses at the time was trying to understand how migrants managed to escape from Malta. Doing fieldwork at the same time as the Mos Maiorum operation was initially a great obstacle for me. I realized that my field notes contained precious information for an anthropologist, but also dangerous information for my interlocutors, mostly about what the officials called “secondary movements” (illegal crossings of frontiers inside the Schengen area). Fearful on behalf of my interlocutors, I stopped taking notes for a few days. That chain of events, I believe, revealed the power relationships and inherent violence that characterized the context in which my ethnographic work was taking place. This experience also led me to further reflect on ethical issues, which I will discuss in the last part of the paper.

Twenty-seven countries participated in Operation Mos Maiorum including Malta. In thirteen days 19,234 people were stopped inside the Schengen zone or near its maritime or terrestrial borders, 35 of whom were on Maltese territory⁵. Most of those stopped came from Syria, Afghanistan, Serbia, Eritrea, Somalia and Albania. Following their arrest, 489 people intercepted near access points to the EU were not able to cross the border; 79 people were expelled; 11,046 people submitted an asylum request; 457 were already asylum seekers; and 7,162 people were described as “others”⁶. Though approximately half the people intercepted had the possibility of making an asylum request; due to the information obtained, controls on the frontier zones they crossed were reinforced in order to prevent further arrivals. As Jean-Pierre Alaux (2015) observes, this war against migrants, mediatized as a war against smuggling and irregular migration, is also a “war against

⁵ All the numbers cited in this paragraph come from the EU report: Council of the European Union Brussels, 22 January 2015, *Final report on Joint Operation Mos Maiorum*, 5474/15, DG D 1 A.

⁶ As stated in the document, the item labelled “others” includes other administrative measures not mentioned in the list or not specified by Member States in their reports.

asylum⁷". The majority of people crossing illegally because of a lack of alternatives are in fact entitled to receive humanitarian protection. One should also note the arrest and imprisonment of 257 so-called "facilitators" most of whom transported one or two people in their vehicle.

Considering the conditions and the goals of the *Mos Maiorum* investigations, the methods used in acquiring the information contained in the aforementioned report raise crucial questions. Based on my own fieldwork experience, I know how difficult it is to establish a relationship of trust with asylum seekers, especially if they are labelled as illegal. Words can be a powerful tool for migrants. They can sometimes save their lives in an asylum inquiry, or can harm them if thought to be lies, or if they reveal their strategies for escaping a violent system. In such a context of mistrust, information on migratory routes, networks and resources can only be obtained by intimidation. Collecting life histories under such conditions cannot help but be violent. In fact, how did the investigators of Operation *Mos Maiorum* collect testimonies, considering that, as one migrant explained to me "You can only trust someone who was with you during the journey"? This very restrictive confidence goes along with a political and social context where the absence of legal status or the possession of a precarious status is common, which means the threat of deportation is very present (Mazzocchetti, 2014). The bonds established in situations of extreme hardship and the shared knowledge of migratory reality explain the confidence granted to those who experienced their migratory journey together.

In Malta, this shared knowledge includes information and strategies for crossing Africa and the Mediterranean, for surviving in Malta, and also for trying to leave the island despite European law which "wedges" migrants there without papers or permission to go farther in their journey or to return to their country safely – for those who are not in danger there and can live with the humiliation

⁷ All quotations from French books and papers were translated by the author.

of having failed in their migratory project. Co-travelers also bear witness to the others' true stories. The knowledge of each other's faults and suffering makes co-travelers interdependent. During my own fieldwork, it was mainly through progressive trust building that some secret and sorrowful narratives were shared, at least partially, with me. Those special relationships took a long time to build and were very precarious. From time to time, information shared with me was also the fruit of discussions with migrants in deep despair who to some extent shared the weight of their story with me and used me as a witness to their difficult situation. Both situations, which I discuss in the third part of the paper, require a reflection on the ethical issues regarding the use of this specific information that, if disclosed, might have repercussions for the interlocutor and for many other individuals who engage in such migrations.

The similarities, as well as the fundamental contradictions, between Operation Mos Maiorum and my fieldwork led me to understand that even when the researcher is independent, he participates in a generally unfavorable environment for non EU migrants. Public policies and their effects play an important role in the construction of fieldwork reports, and therefore in producing data, as well as in the dissemination of the research results. This fieldwork fortuity created a double need: that of studying the materiality and agency of public policies and that of making a specific ethical commitment. As Janine R. Wedel and Gregory Feldman write:

"By charting connections among actors who may not know each other but are situated among the interactive levels through which policy processes are diffused, 'studying through' can illuminate how different organizational and everyday worlds are interconnected across time and space"
(Wedel and Feldman, 2005: 2).

It is therefore paramount to study such policies and projects attentively, as constituting an integral part of the investigation's everyday life, as well as in garnering a further understanding of what may reduce the interlocutors to silence. It is also important to

raise the question of the researcher's particular responsibility when his field notes contain migrants' life stories, secrets and survival strategies, especially in the case of the ethnographer who, in spending time with people, may sometimes gain their trust. This may lead to the opportunity to overhear everyday life discussions and the researcher may consequently receive sensitive and/or inadvertently revealed information.

"Studying through"

Beyond the rhetoric, the expression "war against migrants" is rooted in the development and implementation of public policies aimed at closing and securing borders which are increasingly militarized and whose number of victims is growing. The number of drowning deaths in 2015-2016 is, of course, correlated with the raise in crossing attempts, nevertheless the increasingly large number of drowning deaths recorded over the last twenty years at the Schengen gates can be directly linked to the growing impossibility of reaching Europe through legal means⁸. A grasp of the complexity of these migratory issues requires a holistic approach that combines the study of particular situations with that of the broader transformation of societies and the global context, including discourses, the imaginary and public policies. From this point of view, examining operations like *Mos Maiorum* is extremely interesting. This type of operation mixes staff from European institutions, field agents (police and military), citizens, migrants and researchers. If my approach to this operation is primarily based on archival and secondary narratives, studying the official narratives of this type of operation and their implementation is nonetheless also important. They allow us to understand how the actors are *de facto* interconnected. In addition, a semiotic analysis of the official documents also provides us with insights into the discourse

⁸ According to Claire Rodier (2015) "nearly 5,000 people have died trying to reach European soil since January 2014, and around 30,000 for twenty years". These figures only record the bodies found and the reported missing and, therefore, are below the real numbers.

registers and thought processes guiding that type of policy and its concrete operations.

Public policies and military actions...

First, I would like to focus on the words used in the official EU reports on *Mos Maiorum*, and also on *NavForMed*, re-named *Sophia* in October 2015 – a military operation to disrupt human smuggling networks in the Mediterranean. The *NavForMed* operation is also a very interesting case study. It fits into the current narrative of the “war against migrants” while merging the fight against the so-called “smugglers” with that against the migrants. The analysis of these two operations allows us to understand how situations of illegality come to be so categorized and what ramifications such categorizations have, particularly as regards militarized action. In such a context, smugglers and ordinary migrants, asylum seekers included, are all criminalized and then treated as “criminals”.

Let me first examine the vocabulary in the questionnaire used by *Mos Maiorum* investigators. Besides the fact that the questionnaire seeks to ferret out details, the formulations are unambiguous as to the security-oriented character of the operation. The first rubric, “Interception details”, includes the date and time of detection and the location of interception of irregular migrants. The words “interception, detection and irregular migrants” reveal the political regime at work. The words “interception” and “detection” both belong to police and military vocabulary. They are used to talk about suspects or enemies. And of course, the expression “irregular migrants” places the accent on the pre-supposed non-legal situation while most of the people arrested were in conditions amenable to applying for asylum. The second rubric “Intercepted irregular migrants” seeks to collect biographical detail on the people intercepted. The third rubric “Routes” focuses on intra and extra EU migratory trajectories. Finally, the fourth rubric includes, among other things, “*Modus operandi*”, questions about false/falsified travel documents (including passport nationality), indications of

smuggling of irregular migrants and information about facilitators (the number of facilitators, nationality and country of residence).

The security-oriented character of on-going policies is also quite clear in the official EU documents about the naval mission launched in May 2015 to fight against migrant smuggling in the Mediterranean. The official EU documents⁹ (*Military Advice (1) and Politico-Military Group (PMG) Recommendations (2) on the Draft Crisis Management Concept for a possible Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) Operation to Disrupt Human Smuggling Networks in the Southern Central Mediterranean*) announce a conceptual framework and military strategy tasked with the disruption of “human smuggling networks” and the identification, capture and destruction of “vessels before they are used by traffickers”. In the document “Military advice”, approved by the European Union Military Committee (EUMC) on May 11th 2015, it is stated that “an indicative military End State” would be the “significantly reduced” of “the flow of migrants and smugglers’ activities”. The dual goal of significantly reducing trafficking activities and the flow of migrants is explicit. Given that most people who cross the Me-diterranean meet the conditions for obtaining international protection and have no other means of reaching Europe, the EU’s obligations towards human rights and rights to asylum are placed in jeopardy.

The “Military advice” document contains an evaluation of risks incurred by the troops:

“The EUMC emphasizes that Force Protection is paramount in all phases, but will have particular significance when confronted by hostile smugglers and for any engagement within the Libyan sove-reign area. [...] The EUMC considers that the threat to the Force should be acknowledged, especially during activities such as boar-ding and when operating on land or in proximity to an unsecured coastline,

⁹ The documents were made public via WikiLeaks (May 25th, 2015): <https://wikileaks.org/eu-military-refugees/EUMC> and <https://wikileaks.org/eu-military-refugees/PMG>

or during interactions with non-seaworthy vessels. The potential presence of hostile forces, extremists or terrorists such as Da'esh should also be taken into consideration. The threat emanating from the mere handling of large volumes of a mixed migrant flow also needs to be considered".

In this paragraph, migrants, so-called traffickers, terrorists, and Libyan authorities appear as potential sources of danger, intermingling questions (asylum, trafficking, territorial sovereignty...) and levels of intervention.

Both in these documents and in political and media discourse involving migrants, the construction and use of confusion is particularly clear through omissions and shifts in the meaning of concepts such as "passer" and "trafficker". The documents omit the role played by policies in the construction of illegality and their responsibilities in the current smuggling traffic. In addition to their effects in terms of loss of human lives, the security policies participate in creating confusion between migration, asylum, irregular arrivals in the EU, mafia affairs, trafficking in human beings, and support for undocumented persons. Through the analysis of operations such as Mos Maiorum or NavForMed, one can observe the construction of illegality and how this construction leads to abuse and dehumanization. In Malta, for instance, while African migrants are hardly likely to obtain travel visas to Europe, those arriving by sea are considered outlaws. Imprisonment is therefore the consequence of unauthorized border crossing. The migrant, an asylum seeker in 90% of cases, does not have the possibility of making a less perilous journey through regular channels, and thus becomes a "criminal". In addition, this focus on traffic is also a withdrawal of the migrants' agency, as they are being cast as victims of traffickers instead of as humans fighting for survival or a better life. Between the victims of human trafficking, the "false" liar/cheater/profiteer refugee¹⁰, the good "real" refugee – who has survived every trial and adopted a low profile – and the

¹⁰ The issue of the categorization of asylum seekers and their impact has been particularly well studied by Kobelinsky, see in particular Kobelinsky (2012).

criminal-smuggler, there is no room for the migrant as an actor who makes his own choices despite the violence of the context.

... in a broader context of war against migrants

The documents analyzed in the previous section are illustrative of what may be described as a climate of war against migrants. Although officially the war that has been declared is against the so-called traffickers, the interventions described and their media coverage rely on, as well as create, a series of confusions extremely dangerous for migrants. Moreover, the answer to various ongoing political, economic and ecological crises has mostly been to close borders, condemning millions of people to insecurity and even death, whether or not they choose to take the road to Europe. In addition, as Palidda already notes in his particularly penetrating analysis of a context which he calls the “war waged against migration”:

“In this regard it is rather revealing that the more States reinforce their prohibitions against migration, causing an increase in those crimes, the more they brandish a discourse against ‘human traffickers’” (Palidda, 1999: 45).

While acknowledging that mafias may sometimes take over this lucrative border crossing business, the reality is more complex. On the one hand, mafia practices and migrants’ survival tactics end up being categorized and criminalized in one fell swoop. As already mentioned in the preceding point, reports drafted after Operation Mos Maiorum mentioned that the passers arrested generally had only transported a few people in their cars. We are thus witnessing a criminalization of aid and survival tactics, as well as a confusion between aid, survival tactics, trade in contexts of war and non-rights, and human trafficking. Human trafficking, which supposes an involuntary embarkation, is far from being the reality in most cases. On the other hand, there is no doubt that some people are doing business with little or no consideration for the lives of the people they send out to sea. But their business is the result of the impossibility of migrating in a legal and safe way, combined with the migrants’ determination and despair. This war against migrants

provides a fertile ground for the blossoming of mafia practices that can only properly be fought by analyzing them in their broader context. EU policies therefore struggle against a problem they have themselves simultaneously contributed to create, while aware of the collateral damage to migrants who have no other option than risking their lives to try to stay alive.

In the “Military advice” document about the NavForMed operation, item 38 states:

“The EUMC identifies a risk to EU reputation linked to any perceived transgressions by the EU force through any public misinterpretation of its tasks and objectives, or the potential negative impact should loss of life be attributed, correctly or incorrectly, to action or inaction by the EU force”.

“A loss of life attributed correctly or incorrectly”... Indeed the context of war implies the possibility of loss of human lives, including the migrants’. Furthermore, in fleshing out the report, they note that the operation’s aim is not rescuing migrants at sea but disrupting the migrant smuggling business model, so as to avoid an increase in the number of crossings.

Moreover, focusing on the traffickers allows the EU Commission to include the humanitarian aspect in the public discourse without having to assume any responsibility whatsoever. These migrants at sea are presented as victims, but victims of the so-called human traffickers, and not “of non-existent asylum policies, [of] a military approach to migrations and unbalanced relationships between the North and South of the world” (Maneri, 2011: 101). On the one hand, bringing the question of “traffic” to the fore allows them to exclude “the agency of policies of control and exploitation” and their agents, and, on the other hand, allows them to propose “a narrative entirely centred on the present” (Maneri, 2011: 101). Thus military or even warlike vocabulary, double talk, ambiguities, shifts in meaning, fallacious references to history, etc., all participate in the creation and legitimization of the need for war under humanitarian pretexts and in the name of the very human rights which are refused to migrants. These rhetorical devices also allow

fear and need for self-defense to settle and grow in the public opinion.

In addition, an important part of operations like *Mos Maiorum* is the criminalization of assistance to migrants and the encouragement of denunciation, which gradually makes every citizen a gatekeeper between the included and the excluded. Citizens are persuaded to reject others and to fear invasion. As Nick Vaughan-Williams asserts, this process constitutes “a new form of generalized border work whereby ‘good’ subjects are constantly on the look-out for ‘suspicious’ or ‘risky’ subjects” (Vaughan-Williams, 2008: 64). This They/We division fed by media and political discourse participates in the creation of a climate that is at once hostile and dichotomous and wherein the researcher, as I will discuss below, has to assume his responsibilities and take a position. His work participates in clarifying, obfuscating, or reinforcing a context where borders between legitimate citizens and “others” are experienced as “walls” (Agier, 2013) and where the use of rhetorical devices such as amalgams and warlike vocabulary lead to the polarization of discourses.

Ethical Issues

In this third section, I will explore the ethical and epistemological questions arising in a context of a war waged against migrants. Under this rubric, I refer to a body of literature that concerns investigations in sensitive situations or even conflict zones (Schmidt and Schröder, 2001; Cefai and Amiraux, 2002a, 2002b and 2002c; Bouillon *et al.*, 2005...). The concept of “war” seems to have heuristic virtues similar to those of concentration camps and refugee camps, now well-established in the field of anthropology of migration (Le Cour Grandmaison *et al.*, 2007). The concept of war allows anthropologists to fully consider the implications of silence, censorship and resistance, as well as engagement during the fieldwork. I situate these implications in relation to the ethnographic texts produced, a different reflection, but complementary to that related to direct action.

Ethnography: should everything be said?

Doing ethnographic fieldwork with migrants in “extreme situations”¹¹ due “to the dangerous, sensitive or harassed nature of the object” (Cefaï and Amiraux, 2002a: 6) notably brings up questions about secrecy and censorship. One of the important points raised by Cefaï and Amiraux (2002b) in situations of violence relates to the question of silence:

“As a counterpoint to ideological uproar, silence is often a strategy of survival and resistance employed by the downtrodden. A ‘culture of fear’ may result from the routinization of terror, little by little corrupting the bonds of neighbourhood, family and friendship. Practices of intimidation, torture and disappearance create a climate of chronic insecurity, reducing everyone to silence” (Cefaï and Amiraux, 2002b: 4).

Unlike the context of territories in armed conflict, in my sort of fieldwork the researcher is not in much danger (Kovats-Bernat, 2002). On the other hand, the danger is quite real for the interlocutors in the field who live in zones of Limbo citizenship, grapple with the hardships of an uncertain existence, and can never drop their guard even for a minute.

In such a climate of mistrust, exacerbated by operations like Mos Maiorum and the widespread hunting and criminalization of migrants, “the testimony granted to the investigator cannot help but be of even further significance” (Cefaï and Amiraux, 2002b: 4). In this context of raids, abuse, and extortion of information, what is to be done with the stories that are told? What part of the information collected should be transmitted, particularly in the case studied, since the Mos Maiorum investigators, and more generally the Frontex agents, are in search of similar data? These testimonies engage us, as anthropologists, in this violent environment where strategies may not only ensure survival, but also allow to continue the dream of a successful migration. Particularly in the context of

¹¹ In French, “*situations limites*” (my translation).

asylum procedures, information received may be used against the interlocutors. Moreover, since Frontex conducts research on primary and secondary routes used by migrants, anthropologists' disclosure of related data may lead to the closure of another migratory route and, hence, exacerbate the risks migrants take to reach Europe. In that scenario, it is impossible to shirk responsibility. In this violent and asymmetrical context, the act of describing is in itself a political act affecting the people we meet during fieldwork. Before publishing anything, it is essential to think about its potential repercussions and reflect on what exactly we choose to disclose and in what ways, for what purposes, and how it may affect the political and social landscape for migrants.

Thus in the Maltese context, and more broadly within the EU, how can we talk about survival tactics depending on resourcefulness and ingenuity without further betraying or stigmatizing migrants designated illegal? How can we report on survival tactics without further reducing their small margins for maneuver? In the situation described thus far, revealing the stratagems used by migrants deprived of legal means of entering and crossing Europe, at the very moment when certain raids and intelligence gathering operations like *Mos Maiorum* and certain military operations like *NavForMed* are ongoing, raises some very complex ethical dilemmas. At minimum, it engages a critical debate about the type of materials and analysis published, and the purposes of our work. This standpoint is, of course, connected to the possible use of our writings and the risks which their reception in various spheres might involve. The potential risks occur in the actors' triangulation, highlighted by Laplantine (1996): the author/the anthropologist bound by the minimal ethical rule to do "no harm"; the field and the interlocutors; and the receivers for whom the text is intended, as well as those who come into its possession without the author's intention.

Discussing the anthropologist's responsibility, Agier (1997: 14) contrasts the concepts of "knowledge" and "truth". The notion of "truth" refers to the potentially strategic use of "knowledge" depending on the protagonists, their questions and their intentions.

This discussion raises questions about misappropriated uses of knowledge and writings, but also about the responsibility incumbent on anyone who publishes. Indeed, the tension Fassin (2015) describes, in connection with freedom of expression, between an “ethics of conviction” and an “ethics of responsibility” is at work here in a singular manner. On the “ethics of conviction” side, promoting reflections based on complex and detailed empirical observation of stratagems used by migrants, allows us to propose a more complex knowledge on migrations and to counter logics of dehumanization in describing the agency of our interlocutors. On the “ethics of responsibility” side, disclosing these accounts may potentially betray the trust placed in anthropologists as European forces look for the same life histories and information through field agents and intrusive and violent practices.

In my fieldwork, publishing sensitive information about first or secondary routes that have not yet been made public could affect the margins of maneuver of the migrants. Besides, merely talking about stratagems or coping with obstacles ends up reinforcing the stereotype of the cheater/liar/profiteer. This fact elicits a discussion about the practice of censorship in a political context of freedom of expression, where concealing or revealing mainly depends on the “ethics of responsibility” as elaborated by the researcher, in tension with her/his “ethics of conviction”. On the one hand, describing the migrants’ stratagems for survival may affect them in their everyday forms of resistance and reinforces pre-established opinions and stereotypes. On the other hand, remaining silent obscures the actor’s dimension, the role of the State, and institutional violence.

Due to this complex situation, talking about stratagems without describing them – an ethnographic paradox – is an acceptable compromise. At one point in my fieldwork, I decided not to publish anything about “secondary movements” which was not already public. I also tried to highlight in a more explicit and precise way the link of cause and effect between public policies, and the stratagems and resistances of migrants. Nonetheless the stereotypes about the cheaters and criminals – the migrants are alleged to be – make any

description delicate and sensitive. Indeed, politicians and public agency heads interpret migrants' stratagems neither in terms of resistance to a structurally violent context, nor in terms of "weapons of the weak" (Scott, 1985) or "tactics" (de Certeau, 1990), but rather in criminal terms. Analyzing the complexity of the mobility context (including historical, economic, political influences and the role of public policies) and describing migrants as agents are both essential. The narratives of the migrants help us to understand how they "make sense of displacement and violence", how they manage to reconstruct themselves and the forms of solidarity they invent (Eastmond, 2007). Migrants' narratives are also "testimonies" to the social context, the violence and acts of resistance (Eastmond, 2007: 257-259). So I do think it is important to pay attention to the singularity of each story and narrate the creativity emerging in limbo situations, but with caution. Therefore, self-censorship is not the same as silence. It is rather a question of determining how to speak without harming already extremely vulnerable and stigmatized people who experience the nudity of life and the uncertainty of their destiny every day. It is important to show that the main and direct effects of current policies are: danger, violence, and exploitation, but also survival tactics. In a context of war against migrants, tactics are the only way to stay alive and retain a degree of human dignity. As Scott (1985) argues, when resistance is mostly invisible and expressed through survival tactics, it is a good indicator of the degree of violence the weak are facing. Having no possibility of using official and classic channels of opposition, they have no other choice in coping with life than through "everyday forms of resistance" (Scott, 1985).

Can one remain detached from every cause?

The relationship between the rigor needed in ethnography and various forms of engagement is the object of my last point. Every piece of ethnographic research is inherently situated and involves a major work of reflection on the fieldwork conditions and the author's preconceived ideas (Becker, 1967). Depending on the subject and the methodology, some fields engage us more than

others. In the context of the Shoah for instance, Yannis Thanassakos “contests the possibility of suspending value judgment in certain fields of research” (in Fleury-Vilatte and Walter, 2002: 5). He stresses the impossibility of radically separating “value judgments” and “factual judgments” (Thanassekos, 2002) under certain circumstances – here the memory of Nazi concentration camp survivors. Furthermore, I would argue that a complete disengagement from the problematics of some research topics, such as the violence endured by migrants, poses ethical issues, and even more so when the methodology of investigation is ethnography.

A dynamic and prospective mode of interpretation forces the researcher to take a stand. Besides, it makes one pay attention to power struggles and asymmetries as much as to the agency and the leeway of the “weak”. Can the researcher remain silent about a context of deep political, economic and cultural inequalities, about a context of cumulated hegemonies which have repercussions on people trapped in asylum limbo and on those who have lost any state’s protection? Violent situations invite the researcher to deconstruct the “hegemonic cartographies of reality” (Cefaï and Amiraux, 2002b: 5). Cefaï and Amiraux further assert that: “What we understand by field ethics all too often has a sense restricted to problems of interacting in situations”. In “extreme situations”, questions of engagement and ethics go beyond “the here and now of the investigator’s wanderings and amount to dramas of another dimension” (Cefaï and Amiraux, 2002a: 21). The ethical questions that Cefaï and Amiraux pose refer to societal questions, and largely exceed the fieldwork’s context. The question is not about positioning oneself on the side of minorities and omitting the complexity of social relationships, power struggles and resistance. However, the many perilous journeys migrants embark upon cannot be understood apart from the violence the West undeniably participates in. Past and present economic and political policies defended by the West participate in shaping the current poverty and insecurity many migrants are running away from and in forming their migration experience. Situating the violence against migrants

observed, and the life histories heard, in their historical, economic, and political contexts, leads to engagement in showing complexity and denouncing hypocrisies and amalgams. Yet current policies are having disastrous effects on both the migrants risking their lives to survive and being exploited due to exclusion from citizenship and human rights, and on EU citizens who may feel fear and, sometimes, hatred (as well as compassion).

Among the abundant literature related to questions of engagement, I want to highlight the distinction suggested by Abélès (2014) in his book *Penser au-delà de l'Etat (Thinking beyond the State)*. In that work, he contrasts the militant anthropologist *a priori* devoted to a cause, often in the position of spokesperson, with the public anthropologist, a committed privileged witness who does not cede rigor or freedom of analysis. The position of this public anthropologist is not the fruit of an *a priori* bias, but results from an *a posteriori* partisanship, given the elements brought to light by the ethnographic investigation. This *a posteriori* partisanship is born of ethnographic experience, as Chowra Makaremi also points out in her work of observant participation in the frontier zone of a French airport. In her report of her shattering experience, resembling my own experience, she argues that:

"The field investigated is not built from and around personal dispositions or pre-existent positions taken (such as defending the cause of investigations). But, on the contrary, it's what is experienced there and how it changes he or she who is subjected to it, and how those transformations/shifts – imperceptible or brutal – are brought together in the task of writing, which asks the question of engagement again" (Makaremi, 2008: 175).

Finally, the situations of institutional violence Makaremi observes also leads her to raise questions about "the political scope of activities like understanding, describing and naming" (2008: 177), enjoining anthropologists to think of research and writing as acts in and of themselves. Ethnographic writings, once published, are always potentially usable in support of someone else's "true" discourse (Mazzocchi, 2015). Hence it is important to reflect on

the meaning and impacts of producing knowledge in “extreme situations”. It is not a matter of falling into the trap of speaking in someone else’s stead, or of masking the complexity. For the anthropologist, it is rather a matter of speaking in his own name, after what he has lived in the field, sharpening his critical capacity, and making the complexity of the questions related to migration and the institutionalized violence accessible.

Conclusion

Taking as a starting point my ethnographic work in Malta and the EU operation *Mos Maiorum*, I first opened a discussion about the European context of war against migrants and some ensuing ethical debates. Simultaneously, this case study allowed me to sketch an ethnography of the “global politique” (Abélès, 2014) and an analysis of the concrete interrelations between the global and the local through the study of public policies and their effects. I have conceptualized public policies and their effects on migrants as links in a chain. The researcher is also, in a way, a part of the chain, and this has repercussions on her/his fieldwork and writings.

The context of the war against migrants has led me to question the role played by words and silences, as well as the debate related to the potential for tension between neutrality, rigor and engagement. If it has been widely established in anthropology that, for any fieldwork, a neutral epistemological posture is unreachable, I would like to stress the ethical impossibility of neutrality. Living and spending time with shipwreck survivors, people exploited or abused, who have suffered the horrors of confinement, leads the researcher to take a stand. This is not an appeal to renounce complexity or further endanger the people we have met. This equation is rather complicated. It may include forms of self-censorship. Even when the researcher does not depend on funders and possesses a degree of academic freedom, the potentially destructive effects of his writings for his interlocutors require great caution. The data anonymization that would usually suffice to respect the “do no harm” ethical rule, is insufficient in this situation.

Even anonymized, the information disclosed can be dangerous in a context where the freedom of action of migrants is placed under careful scrutiny.

After engaging with the effects of migrants' criminalization and dehumanization in the field up close, the researcher can't help but describe and even denounce the violence of current migration policies. My own fieldwork experience has led me to understand the importance of "studying through" (Wedel and Feldman, 2005 : 2), to describe and analyze how public policies are made, how they are implemented and their effects, and of course the agency of all stakeholders. It has led me to think of the researcher as part of the chain by which the actors are interconnected. In this text, I have mainly related how I became particularly aware of the implications of this "war" context and the debates raised. The conclusion I reached re-oriented my work. If I am still working on life-stories, everyday lives and the coping tactics of so called "illegal migrants" in Malta, I have decided both to focus on formal and informal acts of resistance correlated to public policies, and to pay more attention to the policies themselves. I did not have the opportunity to do so in this paper, but have become convinced that public policies and their deleterious and lethal effects should be analyzed from conception to implementation. Without erasing the migrant's agency and narratives as well as the complexity of migration issues, there is an urgent need for demonstrating how public policies and agents produce violence. Analyzing how public policies and agents are fully involved in issues of illegal migrations and the trafficking they claim to be fighting against is urgent too. Describing how these policies and their media coverage gradually trivialize the military management of migration issues – legitimizing similar operations in the future – is just as essential. As Shore rightfully points out:

"Policies are technologies that powerfully influence human consciousness and behaviour; they create the bureaucratic taxonomies that define the conditions of people's existence"
(Shore, 2012: 90).

And, I would add, the conditions of "illegality" and "criminality", once created, permit numerous abuses.

In conclusion, “crimmigration” public policies in the context of a war against migrants play an important role in the latter’s agency and tactics. They also influence what migrants tell the researcher and what the researcher can say about them and their survival tactics, the how and the why. Otherwise, wilfully or not, he/she participates in this war context as a spy. Thus the war context calls for a reflection about the required engagement of the researcher against military and security policies. Yet this engaged posture must be accompanied by great humility and it must be clearly stated that the accumulation of fieldwork experiences is motivating this political stand. In trying to describe what would be rigorous, engaged and scientifically recognized writing, Bauman’s concept of “a real writer” appears both ambitious and pertinent to me:

“One is a ‘real’ writer if he does not discharge his responsibility towards the state of the world. What makes a writer ‘real’ is the impact of his words on reality or, to cite Canetti, ‘the desire to assume a responsibility towards everything that can be expressed in words and to do penance for their failure’” (Bauman, 2014: 117).

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