

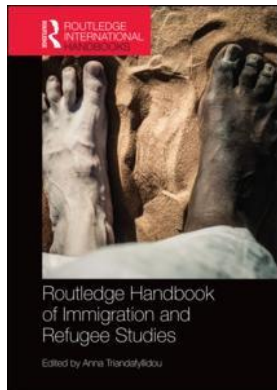
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Publisher: *Routledge*

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Routledge Handbook of Immigration and Refugee Studies

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Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315759302.ch38>

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Published online on: 05 Oct 2015

How to cite :- Angeliki Dimitriadi. 05 Oct 2015, *Transit migration from*: Routledge Handbook of Immigration and Refugee Studies Routledge

Accessed on: 10 Jan 2024

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315759302.ch38>

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Transit migration

A contested concept

Angeliki Dimitriadi

Yazr arrived in Greece for the first time in 2006. She spent 6 years attempting to cross to other EU member states, twice succeeding in reaching Norway and Sweden respectively; both times, she was returned to Greece under the Dublin II mechanism. In 2012, she undertook the third and final attempt to leave for Sweden; this time she succeeded. Her story is not unique. Migrants and asylum seekers arrive in countries such as Mexico, Turkey, Iran, Libya, Morocco, Senegal, Tunisia, Indonesia and Malaysia, to name a few, awaiting the opportunity to cross to the US, the EU and Australia respectively. They are identified as *transit migrants*, crossing through geographical sites that function as steps along the way, often stopping for unknown lengths of time due to various personal and/or structural factors.

Retracing the birth of the concept

Transit, etymologically, is defined as an act, a process or instance of passing through or over and the short stay in one place on the way towards a final destination. The concept in relation to migration incorporates three elements, which are crucial: the passing through something, in this case a geographical point, the unknown duration of the cross over (it can be an instance, it can be indefinite) and the end result, which in reality is unpredictable. In itself, transit does not refer to legal or irregular movement. In fact, one can be in transit legally, which is the case for the majority of travellers ‘waiting’ in various airports around the world for connecting flights or legal migrants who move between countries. They are the clearest example of legal transit, that is, the pause before further movement to another destination.

Yet, in the migration literature, transit has been linked with irregular migration and similarly here it will be discussed in relation to irregular migration and asylum. After all, it is the irregular arrivals that generate the politicised discourse and responses, not legal migration.

As a term, it was first used by international institutions and political bodies (Düvell 2012) to describe a particular phenomenon recorded by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in the early 1990s: the irregular movement from the former Soviet Union to neighbouring countries. The term expanded to cover other countries, such as Turkey, and eventually, transit countries and transit migration were used in reference to African countries and migrants attempting to reach the European Union (EU), Mexico and some South American

countries and migrants heading to the US and Canada. The term, however, remains more commonly used in political discourse but also in academic literature in relation to the geographical periphery of the EU (Maghreb and Mashreq, the Baltic States) and the Caucasus. The association of transit with specific countries, such as Libya, Morocco and countries of the former USSR (these are usually countries of origin of irregular migrants), displays the political bias inherent in the term. Although the term reflects existing political needs, a clear definition and understanding of the concept is still missing. The term tends to be 'adjusted' to the needs of each situation and to a degree this raises the question of whether transit is indeed a useful concept in the effort of understanding and framing of the migration journey. If anyone can be in transit, legally and/or irregularly, what is the usefulness of the notion in the migration literature?

The answer in academic literature remains divided. A number of studies and articles have been produced that deal with the concept, which try to analyse it within a broader thematic framework or in relation to specific countries or specific groups of migrants (Nyberg Sørensen 2006; Kimball 2007; Collyer 2007; İçduygu and Yüksek 2008; Papadopoulou 2008; Oelgemöller 2010; Düvell 2012). Transit migration tends to fall in the broader discussion around border control and illegality/irregularity, as well as security, foreign policy and relations with third countries.

De-constructing transit

The majority of the work produced in relation to transit, tends to describe a process, based on case studies (Düvell 2012) of specific countries and/or migrant groups, as in the case of irregular arrivals to Turkey (İçduygu 2005), Kurds in Greece (Papadopoulou 2008), South Asian migrants in Greece (Dimitriadi 2013) or sub-Saharan Africans in Libya (Hamood 2006). Broadly speaking, the literature is split between those who approach the notion critically, often challenging its usefulness and applicability, and those who consider it useful in relation to understanding contemporary migratory flows.

Transit can – and has been used to – define three separate and yet intrinsically linked elements: the process itself (transit migration), the political position of states in the migratory journey (transit states vs destinations) and the individual (transit migrant).

In relation to the process, transit migration is defined as 'the situation between emigration and settlement that is characterized by indefinite migrant stay, legal or illegal, and may or may not develop into further migration depending on a series of structural and individual factors' (Papadopoulou 2008). This approach shows a dependence on objective and subjective factors, where the end results remain unknown to the researcher and the immigrant himself until the process concludes. Transit is less of a distinct category of migration (in the sense that it does not denote a clear-cut type of migration such as labour migration, cyclical migration etc.) and more of an amalgamation of different elements and factors shaping a process, characterising a country and even the migrant. For those ambivalent on the usefulness of transit migration as a category, the main problem can be pinpointed in the term itself. It is a descriptive, general and politicised concept (de Tapia 2004) that can be used to 'define' any kind of mobility (legal/irregular). Transit is interpreted as a further categorisation of immigrants based on their attempt and potential to cross Europe (Collyer and de Haas 2012), as well as perpetuating the linkage of migration to security. In fact, the distinction between a transit migrant and a long-term migrant only appears when one introduces the element of irregularity; thereby 'establishing and institutionalizing the "migrant in transit" category [it] is a new way for experts to stigmatise migrants and launch suspicious responses' (Bredeloup and Pliez 2011: 5).

To a certain extent this is true, and by linking transit with irregular mixed migrant flows, the recipient countries of migrants often justify extreme measures to prevent entry into their borders (for example, the Mexico–US fence or detention facilities in Libya). However, beyond a categorisation tool, transit incorporates the desire of the migrant to reach a specific destination, with obstacles along the way, but also the migrant's intention as well as his/her ability to continue the journey (Dimitriadi 2013). As it entails objective and subjective elements, at times, it can be unclear when and how it takes place, who is in transit and who is not. Nonetheless, the very nature of transit migration enables researchers to re-examine the problem of categorisation in migration, a necessity and at the same time a problem because often migration categories and outcomes do not fit in one but cut across various categories (Collyer and de Haas 2012).

In the case of transit countries, the term carries political and security implications, whereby the state in question is defined tautologically and geographically, on the basis of the type of migration it receives and its geographical position. Turkey, for example, is often discussed as a transit country (along with destination) for irregular migrants considering entry to the EU (İçduygu 2005). This can be taken a step further to argue that 'the notion of "transit country" has been re-conceptualised from being a descriptive idea in geography to becoming a tool of governance' (Oelgemöller 2010: 416). This is evident in the case of the EU, where those perceived as 'transit countries' in the 1990s, were effectively pushed to improve their border controls and capacity building. Once these countries joined the Union, the focus shifted to other states in the broader Mediterranean region. Transit thus became a tool of support for what we label today as the 'externalisation' of migration control. This is not solely evident in the EU context. The US–Mexico case (Kimball 2007) is another example where transit migration and the transit state have been utilised to push for political, economic and security changes aimed at curbing irregular flows.

The transit migrant is the third, critical aspect of the concept, although the least defined. The literature has tended to follow a tautological definition to the notion of the individual in transit, understood as 'a transitory stage in the migrant's life cycle. Beyond a certain duration of stay in a country initially viewed as a stopping-off place, he/she ceases being a transit migrant and becomes an ordinary migrant (whether legal or illegal)' (Cassarino and Fargue 2006: 103). Thus, once more, the process is described and through it, the individual is also defined.

The transit migrant, however, is a more complex notion because it brings forth the individual element of the equation, i.e. the subjective element. The migrant becomes suspended in time, physically present yet beyond the protection of the law, 'illegal' often due to the absence of appropriate travel documents (or in many cases any type of identity documents) and in a temporary state of being.

How is the migrant in transit constructed? The 'in transit status' is constructed and perceived subjectively and objectively. The main objective element includes the structural obstacles that regulate the journey in the shape of (border) control policies (De Genova 2002; Geiger and Pécoud 2010), the employment opportunities, the cost of the beginning of the migratory journey as well as seeing it through to the end and the existence and/or development of social capital (Portes 1998; van Hear 2004). Inability to move forward due to difficulties constructed by external factors, maintains the individual in transit.

The dependency on structural factors is not innovative to transit. The former have been affecting and shaping the migratory journey, especially the irregular migratory journey since the advent of the nation-state. If transit migration is a process of unknown duration, taking place in the cracks of the nation-states and their borders, often via irregular means, then the same forces that perpetuate it can very often cause it.

The subjective elements are more complex because they define not only how the migrant perceives the process but also the length and duration of that process. In other words, when does the migrant stop being in transit? Objectively, an individual may appear stationary, immobile, settled. Subjectively, this may never happen or it may take place due to internal rather than objective processes. The individual's aspirations and perception is crucial in the construction and realisations of the migratory journey. Transit migration describes a non-linear journey, but it also describes a state of existence for the individual; an existence perpetuated due to lack of something or in pursuit of aspirations and desires.

Aspirations, wishes or intentions as well as their fulfilment or failure due to external mechanisms have appeared in migration literature in the past (Massey *et al.* 1998). However, it is worth turning to Carling's (2014) analysis of aspirations and mobility in international migration. Carling posits out that it is important to 'distinguish between people's aspiration to migrate and their ability to do so' (2014: 2). This is also the case of transit migration. Migrants may wish to continue forth or go backwards and one needs to distinguish between their aspiration and their ability to accomplish it. The process evolves into a state of mind; this is crucial because not only does it bring forth the issue of agency, but more importantly, how aspirations can perpetuate transit. It resembles in a way the concept of nomadism, the dictum that 'you never arrive somewhere' (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2007: 1). Arrival has physical and mental attributes. Thus, one can choose at any point to remain at a transit stop, transforming it into an arrival destination, or decide to move onwards. One can be in transit for many years, holding out hope that the necessary money will be collected, the appropriate opportunity will arise or security checks will be bypassed. Yet, one may very well succeed in transiting to another destination after residing a couple of months or even years in a country. Thus, transitory movement is simultaneously within and beyond the control of the state.

The element of time is largely subjective in its interpretation for both the individual and the state. Who defines when sufficient time has passed for a migrant to cease being in transit? The notion of time is highly problematic in the broader context of the modern nation-state, where the migrant, enters unauthorised and is not welcomed. The liberal framework prescribes that he/she cannot be turned away if it will endanger his/her life (*non-refoulement*, 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees). However, until a determination is made, the migrant cannot claim the right of a guest. In fact, as the right of residence is a sovereign act of the State, the irregular arrival can be associated, with 'the idea of passage, of the transitory, of the short period' (Laacher 1998: 148 in Dikeç 2002: 233). He/she is there temporarily. It is problematic enough that the individual has managed to enter unauthorised, however, it is assumed by the modern state that the stay will be temporary and brief. Thus, it can be surmised that for the state, transit should be short and temporary; the unwanted arrival will depart. This determination does not factor in the migrants' ability to do so. Although the migrant and the State share the same desire to transit, in reality, the interplay between the objective and subjective factors produce an impasse and immobility. In other words, transit is perpetuated in an inhospitable space that rejects (through detention and deportation) the migrant and from which the latter wishes – but is unable – to escape.

Conclusions

Transit migration is a relatively recent subject of discussion in migration literature. Although it emerged to serve a specific purpose, to categorise migrants who perform a complex journey, its usefulness should not be doubted. Transit allows us to depict the migratory journey in a globalised world where cross border movement of capital flows and goods is becoming easier,

while cross border movement of people is becoming harder all around. It is, in fact, an integral part of the immigration process, without defining the entire migratory journey. Transit rather characterises the intervals, the stops the migrant undertakes during which time he/she has to decide whether and how to move forward, alter original expectations and/or settle at the 'transit state' or pause for an indeterminate period. It brings forth the individual and structural elements and allows them to hold equal ground and significance with the sovereign state in understanding how migration evolves.

In practice, transit repositions the analysis of modern non-linear, irregular migration in a framework that enables the researcher to identify the continuous interaction between the structural components and the individual agency. Transit migration cannot, therefore, be discussed or examined outside the systemic context in which it takes place, meaning we cannot understand the journey, its length and progress, as well as the change in destinations without incorporating in our analysis the migration and asylum control policies. Staying in transit is predominantly a result of the existing management framework of irregular migration.

By prohibiting unauthorised exit and movement to another country, the State perpetuates transit, both objectively and subjectively (by imposing physical restrictions but also mentally restricting would-be transit migrants) for those who wish to move further on and are unable to do so by border controls. Transit is further reinforced, or at least the intent to transit, through the asylum system and irregular stay in the country. Absence of regularisation measures, legal entry channels and visa schemes are some of the issues that affect and shape transit migration. Asylum is another. In the EU and in the Common European Asylum System there are still significant discrepancies between member states on how asylum is approached; either as a form of protection or as an all-encompassing process of acceptance and eventually integration. For mixed migrant flows for example, detention, reception and asylum policies may contribute significantly in determining their transit or settlement. For others, it can be the labour market and absence or presence of opportunities. To this, we should include the subjective element, the individual's aspirations, perception and desires – from reaching a specific destination to pursuing a specific goal, type of life and/or protection. In that sense, transit migration enables us to examine a fluid and unpredictable process through the interplay of policies and individuals.

By framing the discussion around transit, we are able to take into account the differences of individuals, how they respond and perceive both their journey but also the societies they cross and attempt to settle or wish to reach. Thus, constructing a more effective policy response, less rooted in strict classifications of migrants (legal/illegal/economic/refugee) and countries (sending/receiving) and more likely to correspond to the realities on the ground.

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