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# Migratory stratifications: a new analytical tool for investigating social change

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## ABSTRACT

Migrations serve as both a driving force and a reflection of profound social, cultural, economic, demographic and territorial transformations. They interact with global phenomena – of which they are an integral part – while simultaneously being shaped by them, exerting a significant impact on national and local contexts. At the same time, migrations constitute a *total social fact*, in which the entirety of human practice and experience is involved in a relationship of interdependence. This interplay unfolds within and across the social, economic, political, cultural and religious spheres, worldviews and symbolic representations. Building on these premises and adopting a diachronic perspective, it becomes possible to observe, on the one hand, how migratory phenomena actively reshape societies of origin, destination and transit. On the other hand, one can analyse the stratification of different migratory epochs – shaped by shifting global and local dynamics – through their incorporation into material artefacts and socio-cultural practices.

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## 1. The toolbox of a nascent discipline

In recent decades, a strand of research under the name of 'Migration Studies' has developed, to the point of becoming a veritable discipline. It has created a toolbox of theoretical concepts and analytical constructs capable of identifying and renewing cognitive questions, more or less critical perspectives, interpretative categories and empirical practices. Of course, as a result of the multiplicity of positions within this disciplinary field (Zapata-Barrero, Jacobs, and Kastoryano 2021), these tools are often contested, but they also contribute to the scientific debate, advancing a critique of the inequalities that

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structure the social world and both generate migrations and, on the contrary, reproduce their *doxa*.

Abdelmalek Sayad spoke of emigration-immigration in terms of *exile* and a 'temporary that lasts' (Sayad 2006) and introduced the well-known concept of *double absence* (1999). At the same time, Sayad radically critiques the pseudo-scientific concepts derived from colonial discourse and 'state thought' and 'science of the state', such as 'integration', 'adaptation', 'assimilation', 'minority' and 'insertion'. Rather than telling us anything about the phenomenon of international migrations or the problems of emigrants-immigrants, all this identitarian terminology, which conceals a multiplicity of normative positions, in fact tells us about the problems of the immigration society and its institutions in their relation with immigrants.

In the 1990s, almost in opposition to Sayad's migratory cosmology – criticized for its apparent lack of emphasis in the agency of emigrant-immigrants – the concept of *transnationalism* started to be widely used, referring to the process by which migrants construct social fields that bind together their country of origin and country of settlement (Glick-Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992; see also Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1993; Boccagni 2007, 2009). These perspectives, that overcome or, at least, fluidify the categories of 'exile' and 'emigrant-immigrant' (Ambrosini 2007), draw attention to migrants' participation in transnational activities and lead to the theorization of a new figure of the migrant defined as the 'transmigrant' (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1993; Glick-Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992): a subject that participates in the social, cultural and economic activities of both poles of migration and engages in frequent transnational commuting between the two (Boccagni 2009). Thus, a figure that is *doubly present* (Queirolo Palmas 2004; Riccio 2007).

Beginning from the 'overlap' between the transnational and intersectional approach (Yuval-Davis 2006) – the latter of which was developed in the early 1990s by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991, 1993) and taken up by many other authors (Brooks and Redlin 2009; McCall 2005) – the construct of *translocal positionality* or *translocations* (Anthias 2006, 2011) was elaborated, helping to grasp what Piore defined as a 'dual frame of reference' (Piore 1979). Thus, through the perspective of *translocal positionality*, it is possible to emphasize the tension between migratory movement and changes in social positioning relative to the two (or more) poles of migration: crossing national borders can leave the migrant's positioning within class and gender boundaries unaltered, but it can also change the ways in which it is perceived and experienced by migrants. Furthermore, migratory movement can (and often does) entail a lowering of the migrant's position in the social pyramid or (given that migrants occupy different positions in their contexts of origin and possess different sets of economic, social, symbolic and relational resources) can result in them maintaining their status in relation to their compatriots in

their own community in the destination context, but suffering a social and symbolic downgrading in their relationship with those native to the destination context. In terms of social hierarchy, Anthias (2006, 2011) points out that the same individual can occupy different positions depending on the category and context of reference and that their identity is thus not fixed and immobile, but contextual.

The overlapping of different migratory movements, therefore, seems to be better understood through the analysis of a specific socio-cultural and territorial context (Bommes and Radtke 1996). While 'translocality' appeared to be a useful analytical tool for identifying the tension between the local and national levels of analysis (Smith 2011), the study of migration in *global cities* (Sassen 1991) marked a further attempt to 'localise migration' by observing immigrants' local participation in institutional construction and capitalist hierarchies (Glick-Schiller and Çağlar 2011; King and Della Puppa 2021). In this, the concept of *superdiversity*, developed by Vertovec in 2007 as a critique of and challenge to the concept of multiculturalism, has been, and continues to be, widely accepted (Vertovec 2023). Fixing his gaze on the global city (Sassen 1991), the Author highlighted how a 'diversification of differences' has been progressively affirmed and, together with changes in migration policies, has fragmented – and, we would say, *stratified* – the immigrant component of the population, making it necessary, at least at an academic level, to construct its assumed '*diversity*' not only on the basis of different ethnic-national and linguistic-cultural backgrounds but also around the various different ways migrants enter the territory and their relative legal statuses, languages, religions, genders, ages and cultural and social capitals. The introduction of this descriptive concept, as Vertovec called it (Vertovec 2017), to the debate on international migration has stimulated both theoretical and methodological reflection on new forms of inequality, segregation, locality, hybridization and transculturation that emerge from the intersection and relationship between the different variables mentioned above. This would also include ethnic-national origins, but no longer exclusively as in the past (Vertovec 2007, 2023). That which most distinguishes the concept of superdiversity from other concepts relating to diversity is that it 'refers both to a process of simultaneous migration-driven diversification across various social and legal characteristics and to the social configurations arising from such a process' (Vertovec 2023, 201).

Thus, adopting the lens of 'superdiversity' means analysing how 'old' and 'new' forms of diversity can lead to new 'social complexities' in terms of social stratification and identity construction processes, in which an important role is played by the context, which is made up of policies and forms of power, but also of specific representations of subjectivity (Vertovec 2023). However, this construct seems to focus on a '*situated present*', thus only on the end result of migratory stratification processes. The perspective of *migratory stratification*

that we propose here, on the other hand, seeks to identify the relation between the picture of this 'situated present' and the processuality that has shaped it and continues to shape it.

## 2. Mobilities and immobilities

This threefold view of migration (transnational, translocal and local) has been both challenged by and reread through the lens of the so-called *mobility turn* (Faist 2013; Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2007), which shall be acknowledged for having disarticulated and disintegrated the image of a fundamentally sedentary society. Some works have shown how this turning point has, paradoxically, contributed to increase the paradigmatic idea of mobility and convey a rather optimistic image of it (Griffiths, Rogers, and Anderson 2013; Heil et al. 2017). However, it would seem that both approaches do not sufficiently take into account the range of options and possibilities that co-exist within each mobility experience (Bjarnesen and Vigh 2016; Steiner 2019). For this reason, Glick-Schiller and Salazar (2013) speak of 'mobility regimes', to highlight the multiple aspects that underlie the choice to move from one place to another and diversify the conditions of treatment and the multiple forms of conditioning to which those who move are exposed – the result of devices applied (or not) based on the geographical area of origin, nationality, passport and the reasons that push people to leave their countries. Mobility cannot be understood without its opposite: *immobility* (Della Puppa and Sanò 2021a, 2021b; Salazar and Smart 2011; Sanò and Della Puppa 2021). The biographical trajectories and geographical paths of migrants can be abruptly interrupted by chance or influenced by policy decisions that are adverse to their opportunities for regularization and freedom of movement (Belloni 2016; Fontanari 2019; Wyss 2019).

## 3. From individual trajectories to the contextual field

All the theoretical constructs and analytical perspectives, briefly presented here, focus on the *trajectories of subjects*, that is, on the intertwining of their mobilities – or immobilities – in a geographical and spatial, social and identitarian, legal and normative, and even temporal sense, which are shaped by specific policies of spatial and temporal control (Della Puppa, Storato, and Sanò 2024; Sanò, Storato, and Della Puppa 2024; Storato, Della Puppa, and Sanò 2023). Adopting a visual and cinematographic metaphor, we could say that the camera follows individual and/or collective actors as they move within physical-geographical and social space, shedding light both on the resulting social complexity and on their subjectivity. However, if we kept the camera fixed in a specific place, we would record a series of snapshots that would demonstrate the sedimentation and overlapping of different

migratory *moments*, capturing phases in the ongoing social transformation process triggered by migratory phenomena in a given *contextual field*, whether that is national, territorial, social, demographic, cultural, artistic, economic, institutional, etc.

International and internal migrations both drive and reflect profound changes. In other words, they interact with and are influenced by the global phenomena of which they are part, and also affect national and local contexts. At the same time, taking up Mauss's famous expression, which Sayad (1999) later applied to human mobility, migrations constitute a total social fact, involving the totality of interdependent human practices and experiences that interact with the social, economic, political, cultural and religious universe, as well as with different representations of the world. Assuming a diachronic perspective, therefore, we can see, on the one hand, the way in which migratory phenomena reshape the societies of origin, destination and transit, and, on the other, the *stratification of the different migratory phases* shaped by changing global and local scenarios through their incorporation in material objects and socio-cultural practices. So, taking up the cinematographic metaphor again, keeping the camera fixed in one place, creating an *apparently* delimited frame, does not mean hypostatizing the gaze and its object, but, on the contrary, making social change and the processes of transformation underway in all spheres of society more visible. It allows us to identify the connections and feedback between the structural nature of global phenomena and the space being studied, in which the sedimentation and overlapping of migratory phenomena can be seen.

This *sedimentation of different migratory moments* can be defined in terms of *migratory stratifications*, meaning the overlapping of different migratory phenomena that, arising from different overlapping epochs, exist in the same context. *Migratory stratifications* impose signs that become sedimented in territories and societies without completely erasing the previous ones, and create continually evolving landscapes of memory through a multiplicity of elements that, despite being heterogenous, display their own semantic unity. In different historical and social phases, the same social landscape can be crossed by a succession of immigrations, emigrations and transitions of different natures and origins, implemented in different ways, in which a multiplicity of actors – of different nationalities, classes, genders, generations, etc. – can be protagonists.

The *migratory stratification* perspective finds its most immediate application in sociology and urban anthropology, in cultural studies narratives in and of cities and in territorial and spatial approaches. The overlapping of the arrivals at different times of different people in the same territorial context has long been an object of interest to urban studies, albeit without a conceptualization to that effect. For example, the *ecological succession* model developed by Robert Park (1936a, 1936b) and his analysis of the

'competition' between city-dwellers and newcomers, in which both material and symbolic resources are at stake until a new equilibrium is found in a situation of 'community order'. Focusing on physical substitution within urban areas (Massey 1983), Park's model of ecological succession has a local and contextual perspective that is attentive to the dynamics of conflict between groups. Although this model has been understandably called into question due to its biological and mechanistic reductionism and evolutionist elements, the study of the relationships between 'old residents' and 'newcomers' was soon given new life in sociological studies (Elias and Scotson 1965).

However, as relevant as it might be, it would be wrong to limit the perspective of migratory stratification to urban and spatial studies alone. The migratory stratification perspective also allows us to observe transformations in food landscapes and socio-religious geography, in labour markets and housing dynamics, in superstructural aspects such as law and policy and in cultural constructions such as food practices. The application of the construct and/or the assumption of the perspective of *migratory stratification* – which is unprecedented and that we advance here as an original theoretical-analytical proposal – is useful for demonstrating the processes of transculturation and the dynamics of social change that the various overlaps and sedimentations bring about in all spheres of social action and cultural processualities.

#### **4. Towards a sociological, anthropological and historical theory of migration**

The analytical perspective of *migratory stratification* means recognizing the need to hook up and connect with each other, as Charles Wright Mills (1959) pointed out, the socio-anthropological interpretation of the social transformations, brought about by migratory phenomena, and the reality of other historical processes, the structural and 'objective' repercussions they have on the 'local' dimension and the 'subjective' trajectories. The *migratory scape* in a given historical *moment*, as well as the biographies and trajectories of the subjects that animate it, can only be fully understood if properly placed within the processual and historically determined overlapping of 'migratory strata'. It is only by assuming this perspective that the changing nature of this migratory scape is revealed and that a deep understanding of the historical meaning of the experiences of the subjects within it becomes possible.

Taking up some of the questions that Mills poses to interrogate the work of the sociologist, the perspective of *migratory stratification* similarly interrogates the migration scholar in relation to the position of a particular migratory landscape within the framework of the progressive and contextual stratification of migratory phenomena; to the dynamics of its

transformation; to where it is located in the migratory sedimentation and to what importance it has from this standpoint; to how the particular social, cultural, territorial, economic, demographic, artistic, etc., component under consideration affects the migratory landscape of which it is a part, and how it is affected in turn; to what the essential characteristics of this migratory *moment* and stratification are; in what sense it differs from other 'strata'; and in what particular ways it contributes to the migratory, socio-cultural and semiotic marks that it leaves.

The *migratory stratification* perspective also incorporates Norbert Elias' reflections on the need, once again, for a historical sociology. According to Elias, the evolution of social reality can only be grasped in the light of long-term processes, and historical-sociological research must create major syntheses that hold together the interweaving of processes at both the micro and macro levels. Hence, following the Eliasian argument, the study of the migratory and social transformations resulting from migratory processes has to both take into account the stratification of long-term migratory processes and identify the tension between structural processes and subjective trajectories. Social reality, which for Elias, and also for us, is intrinsically conflictual – and thus also a specific 'migratory scape' – can only be grasped in its incessant becoming: not a chaotic and disordered becoming, let alone a linear one, but a dialectical one, structured by a continuous overlapping of other 'migratory strata' which in turn are shaped by structural and super-structural currents.

In the migratory stratification approach, social and human sciences such as sociology, anthropology (Parella, Piqueras, and Solé 2023), literary criticism and history converge in a *Longue durée* perspective, applied to the study of migratory phenomena, as it gives priority to long-term historical and social structures, rather than the contingency of individual events.

Echoes of Elias' arguments can be found in the construct of *migratory stratification*, as this new analytical tool appears particularly useful for escaping the reproduction of casual essentialist and essentialising views and explanations of so-called 'ethnic groups' that often abound in studies on migration phenomena (Eve 2011). Its heuristic value lies in the possibility of avoiding the objectivism and reductionism of considering migratory phenomena as entities, instead inviting us to focus on the interdependencies between groups and the relational nature of representations of communities' and territories' migratory pasts. It is not difficult to find reflections here of Elias and Scotson (1965) observations on how the 'old outsiders' of Wintson Parva sought to distinguish themselves from, and maintain privileged social positions with respect to, the 'new outsiders', thus throwing light on one dynamic of the *stratification* of different migratory *moments* and experiences that persist in the same context, overcoming essentialising narratives about social life.

## 5. To avoid media sensationalism and political instrumentalization

At the same time, the construct of *migratory stratification* helps the social sciences and Migration Studies to avoid chasing media sensationalism, the political agenda, the contingent interests of social entrepreneurs and ideological narratives regarding migration (Bourdieu 1996). In fact, Migration Studies has all too often chased the news, letting its themes and vocabulary be dragged along, polluted and dictated by the media and politics. For example, the past emphasis on the (so-called) 'social problem of (racialized) marginal neighborhoods' in Europe, which led to socio-anthropological research reproducing essentialist and culturalising analyses. Or the overrepresentation of theoretical, analytical and empirical contributions on the theme of the '*sbarchi*' (migrant arrivals in boats). This too is a significant and dramatic phenomenon, but it is quantitatively marginal, compared, for example, to the settling of immigrant populations in Europe, the acquisition of citizenship, the rise of immigrant entrepreneurship, the social stratification of immigrant populations and the political movements led by immigrant workers.

The *migratory stratification* approach obliges the social scientist who studies migratory phenomena and the social transformations they bring about to focus on 'what remains' and becomes stratified, rather than on 'what passes by' or simply 'gives way to something else'. It obliges them to observe migrations by holding together both the lines of continuity and of discontinuity from a non-segmented perspective, not tending to isolate facts and events from the socio-historical structure in which they take form and become stratified.

Using the notion of stratification, we emphasize the sedimentation of differences, rather than limiting ourselves to exploring whether they have either been erased or multiplied. This is because it is evident that in the field of migration what came before has not simply disappeared, but if anything has been transformed, maintaining elements and characteristics that we could call structural. Thus, we might say our proposal is archaeological (Foucault 1969), in that it begins from the desire to break free of the presumed 'evolutionary' linearity of migrations, instead trying to reveal the leaps, breaks and gaps acting on various levels on both sides of the borders underlying the histories of immigrants, emigrants and migrations. And so we would like to use the concept of migratory stratification to focus on the continuities and ruptures produced by history. This brings us closer to what archaeologists call the stratigraphic method: the study of the relationships between the various layers of the same excavation. If we imagine that migration is to us what excavation is to archaeologists, our aim will be to compare and understand the relationships between the various layers (or phases) of migration.

This naturally entails recapitulating the discursive formations that have traversed and marked the history of studies of migration, beginning from those analyses that have investigated and held together the two poles of migration: departure and arrival. Influenced by the archaeological perspective, our analysis is based on the principle of the relationship between the object and the knowledge, between migrations and the production of forms of knowledge and know-how, which are themselves also stratified.

## 6. The layers of the special issue

Therefore, with this Special Issue, we want to propose a new analytical perspective to read social change and transculturation processes implemented by migrations, and test and challenge this proposal through the following empirical contributions.

The Special Issue opens with an article by Andrea Calabretta, Francesco Della Puppa and Giulia Storato that focuses on the continuous overlapping of emigration, immigration and internal migration that took and are taking place in Italy, affecting large cities, as well as small towns. The Authors analyse the case study of the small town of Alte Ceccato, in Veneto Region, that after WWII, received immigrants from the surrounding countryside, then from southern Italy, and since the 1990s from the so-called Global South. Today it receives refugees from sub-Saharan Africa. Adopting the analytical tool of migratory stratification, Calabretta, Della Puppa and Storato discuss Alte Ceccato as a peculiar example of multiple stratifications of social, cultural, demographic and urban changes driven by migration on multiple geographical scales.

Then, Giulia Dugar contributes to delineate the *migratory stratification* concept newly-introduced by this Special Issue by disclosing the Japanese immigratory experience. Having so far received only little attention by the academic community, the long-standing immigration to Japan embodies a pivotal standpoint from where to understand the evolution of the immigratory event and thus its resulting *strata*. By drawing its argument from the thematic analysis of 61 semi-structured interviews conducted with Brazilian, Korean and Chinese-origin youths residing in Japan, she unveils the emergence of patterns of intergenerational incorporation experiences derived by narratives on self-identity negotiations and the legitimacy of one's own belonging.

After Japan, the focus moves again on Italy, already defined as a migratory crossroads, with the contribution of Roberta Altin. Her article analyses the intertwined mobility and the role of migrants' memories by comparing the different refugee flows arriving in the north-eastern border area of Trieste, in different phases: the Italian exodus after the Second World War, refugees from the former Yugoslavia (1990s), asylum seekers arriving through the

Balkans (since 2014), and the more recent Ukrainian displacement (2022). Following an ethnographic approach, the Author identifies places, objects or other forms of identity expression in which refugees' memories are deposited during the different stages of displacement: in particular, she shows how these memories are stratified and intertwined with other migratory transits in the same border area, analysing presences and absences through their migration traces.

Chiara Martini's article focuses on Greece: one of the European countries most frequently crossed by incoming and outgoing migratory movements. For decades, it has been one of the main entry points into Europe. In different periods and to different extents, people who have passed through or settled in Greece have brought about profound changes, transforming its places, dynamics and the whole social fabric. The Author analyses the reality of a specific urban space, located in the Greek capital, namely Victoria Square, which has become over the years a symbol of the migratory phenomena that have invested and is still investing the city and the whole country. The transformations and stratifications affecting this square, and the entire surrounding neighbourhood, began when numerous immigrants from the Philippines (late 1980s), from Albania Crenshaw (1991), and from Eastern Europe (after the fall of the Berlin Wall), settled in, profoundly changing its social fabric and dynamics. These processes continue today: over the last few years, Victoria Square has become a sort of hub for refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers, for their shops, their informal networks, their interactions and exchanges; it is a place of departure, arrival, meeting and conflict, a space where one can seek and give visibility to the dramatic conditions in which migrants are forced to live in Greece.

In her article, adopting both the concept of ages of emigration and the perspective of migratory stratifications, Juliana Carpinetti explores the relationship between the transformations that the advance of the Agribusiness Model prints in the Paraguayan rural universe; its incidence in the configuration of its inhabitants as potential emigrants; and the way in which they produce a certain type of emigrant and emigration.

Ester Gallo analyses how healthcare mobility is apprehended in individual and family biographies at both ends of transnational migration. She focuses on the role played by religion in the migratory stratification of Indian nurses' mobility since the early XXth century, and adopts a temporal perspective at three interrelated levels: a diachronic lens on the colonial legacy on present nurse migration, a comparison between three cohorts of female nurses, and an attention to memories of mobility. This intersection between historical, generational and personal time allows not only insights on the temporal complexity of the migration journey, but it also casts light on how the stratification of personal migratory experiences is shaped by, and in turn highlights, those of

previous generations. The author suggests how religion contributes to the layering of healthcare migratory experience alongside three interrelated lines: professionalization, precarisation and subordinate valorization.

Finally, Giuliana Sanò, on the basis of a long-term investigation of migrant farmworkers within the Sicilian agricultural districts, adopts the lens of migratory stratification to scrutinize the various changes that have occurred in the Southern Italian agricultural sector over the past decade. Drawing on ethnographic data from an empirical study conducted on the working and living conditions of migrant farmworkers, she sheds light on the economic and social stratification strategies fostered by EU migration policies and analyses how migrant regulatory procedures have resulted in the deterioration of migrant farmworkers' working, living and housing conditions. Before the so-called 'refugee crisis', the stratification of migrant farmworkers was mainly based on country of origin and involved, in particular, Tunisian and Romanian labourers due to different times of arrival and legal status; with the onset of the 'refugee crisis', the mechanisms of stratification and labour substitution mainly involved asylum seekers, who now constitute the largest share of the migrant labour force.

The special issue ends with a very valuable reflective contribution by Russell King, which illuminates the innovativeness of the perspective introduced here and its useful uses in Migration Studies.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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