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Editorial: The Meaning of Migration

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Abstract

This is the editorial for the 'Meaning of Migration' issue of JOMEK Journal, June 2015. It provides a rationale for its focus upon investigating the meaning of migration in the current conjuncture, indicating how existing work on migration in relation to media coverage, political agendas and humanitarianism informs this focus. It makes a case for the inherently political nature of migration as an unfixed, contested and continually reinvented concept conditioned by multiple specific, local and transnational heterogeneous contexts. The editorial also explains the development of this special issue from the 'Meaning of Migration' conference held in Cardiff in April 2014 and suggests that the articles included represent a valuable and diverse set of current and future research trajectories for critical migration research.

Contributor Note

Kerry Moore is a founding co-editor of *JOMEK Journal*. She is a lecturer in Cardiff University School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies and her research explores media and political discourses surrounding migration, racism and cultural identity. Her recent publications examine asylum and refugee issues in journalism and government policy and 'crisis' narratives in media representations of migration and cultural difference. She co-edited the book *Migrations and the Media* with Bernhard Gross and Terry Threadgold (2012 Peter Lang) and is currently working on a monograph entitled *Racialised Crises: Asylum, Ethnicity and the Media* for Ashgate.

Citation

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The meaning of migration is at once publicly engaging and highly contested, internationally important and context specific, deeply embedded in rational policy calculations and the subject of emotive narratives and personal stories. Migration is undoubtedly publicly significant in the current conjuncture – resolutely afforded a place on media and policy agendas at election times as if this were a matter of ‘common sense’ and continuously identified as one of the most important public issues in opinion polls (Moore 2015). It is the object of entrenched political positions, and impassioned public debate and yet it remains shifting and open as a concept. The meaning of migration is inherently political.

In the present conjuncture in Europe, we see the most dissonant, contrasting media images of migration competing for prominence in public consciousness. Appeals to the public conscience, first in response to the refugee ‘crisis’ in Syria and then the migrant ‘crisis’ in the Mediterranean have writ large the human costs of conflict and perilous journeys in search of safety of tens of millions of civilians. According to the UNHCR, in the last 5 years, around 15 conflicts have displaced unprecedented numbers of people with children making up more than half of the world’s refugees. Clearly these crises and their enormous costs in human lives and suffering have been conveyed by the mainstream news media, including investigative coverage engaging with complex contextualising issues and that featuring migrant centred reportage (see for example Downey 2015; O’Brien 2015). However, the imperative voiced by UNHCR and many non-governmental organisations that we need to recognise that ‘refugees are people just like you and me’ can be seen as a shocking

indictment of how dehumanised the discourse surrounding displaced people has generally become (UNCHR 2015). Unfortunately, this is not a new story. Evidence from migration and media research literature strongly demonstrates that historically, in many of the world’s wealthier countries, news media (and especially the press) have constructed a negative, stereotyped, and dehumanised image of asylum seeking and other forms of migration. The subject is rarely absent from news headlines, but migrants are rarely afforded a voice in the news, largely featuring passively as the objects rather than subjects of reports, and habitually represented by statistics and/or as a homogenous mass. Migrants and migration are all too frequently described using stigmatising and threatening language, including animalistic, militaristic and disaster metaphors (e.g., as stampedes, invasions, floods, pollution) (see for example, Santa Ana, 1999, Santa Ana, 2012, Bleasdale, 2008, Buchanan et al., 2003, Charteris-Black, 2006, Cisneros, 2008, ICAR, 2004). Moreover, catchy neologisms as ‘bogus asylum seekers’, ‘asylum shopping’, and more recently ‘benefit tourism’ have worked to position asylum seekers and other migrants as super-calculating and unscrupulous individuals, threatening an unnecessarily vulnerable ‘soft touch’ nation, by ingeniously exploiting opportunities to help themselves (as might be expected of neoliberal subjects) in a globalised world (Moore 2013). This kind of rhetoric, reinforced by the unremittingly ‘tough stance’ of mainstream politicians, has promoted the importance of immigration as a public issue and a ‘problem’ and thereby afforded legitimacy to the anti-migrant outrage of an ontologically insecure citizenry. Today, as perilous northward journeys continue to be undertaken across the Mediterranean and beyond,

once again the problem and solution seems to be defined, first and foremost in the dominant public discourse, in terms of security. Regardless of the plethora of undeniably compelling factors currently pushing people to migrate, it is the attractiveness of migrants' destination and the means by which migrant journeys are undertaken that take centre stage (see, for example, Mason 2015; Popp and Schindler 2015).

Yet, clearly not all media genres promote such negative discourses about migrants and migration, as several of the contributors to this issue seek to highlight. Indeed, the extent to which humanitarian ideas (shared by many human rights campaign groups and concerned NGOs) permeate journalistic narratives on migration is a key question for current media research in this area. The notion that there is a responsibility to respond to human emergencies, and that we might expect media audiences to be shocked at the dire circumstances and needs of others clearly does, at some level, inform countless news items reporting the desperate measures undertaken by migrants to escape destitution and immediate danger. Yet appeals to a solidaristic sense of common humanity are not necessarily primary, even within these kinds of narratives. Responsibility can be easily filed as 'someone else's' and shock emotionally translated as 'outrage', processed or channelled towards feelings other than empathy. Moreover, when humanitarian narratives do appear to take centre stage in migration discourse, what this *means* may depend upon how it is encoded across a range of possible 'paradigms'. As Chouliaraki (2012) has argued, from the dehumanising politics of pity to a post-humanitarian irony, the main effects of humanitarianism can be somewhat self-

serving for the spectators of suffering. It is perhaps all too rare that we see a more productive, 'reflexive solidarity' which, 'make(s) the public values of solidarity explicit as the object of our collective deliberation and judgment, so that such values re-galvanise the moral sensibilities of Western publics towards other-oriented, rather than self-oriented expressions of solidarity' (28-9). More frequently in the fast-paced context of migration news, it seems, there is too little time and space to contemplate potential expressions of collective solidarity. Before there is opportunity for such 'other oriented' emotional or moral expressions to settle, they are complicated, mitigated or challenged – set in competition or 'balanced' against other, more 'self oriented' public anxieties surrounding migration.

In 2007, Terry Threadgold, Bernhard Gross and I published a report funded by Oxfam entitled 'Broadcast news coverage of asylum: caught between human rights and public safety' (Gross et al., 2007). This work demonstrated that broadcast news stories about asylum seekers and refugees were interwoven with a set of complex and sometimes seemingly contradictory concerns. Reports about a 'crisis' in government, particularly through chaotic mistakes and policy failures at the Home Office were met with promises to further tighten the apparatuses of immigration control, border policing and national security. Stories about the human rights of asylum seekers appealing against deportation were regularly set up as a challenge to Executive power and to public safety when Government decisions were brought into question by the courts. The power of the State to deport individuals deemed 'undesirable' and to renounce their rights to residency and citizenship were discussed in the

context of the so-called ‘war on terror’. Indeed, the very concept of universal human rights – then, as now, was explicitly brought into question by British politicians frustrated that the legal frameworks protecting rights to a family life and to freedom from persecution threatened to prevent (or expensively prolong) attempts to deport particular individuals. Very high profile cases hit the headlines (not least the cases of ‘radical clerics’ Abu Qatada and Abu Hamza), but these legal-political battles and the principles underpinning them were by no means restricted to the cases of such individuals. Debates about those allowed to reside within UK borders also invoked broader concerns about national sovereignty and about the relationship of the UK with the European Union – debates that often confused or obfuscated the particular roles and relationships between the UK Parliament and European legal institutions that mattered, and which played upon Eurosceptic sentiments to provide a more sensationalised framework of understanding to stories. As such, asylum (and, more broadly, migration) seemed captured in a web of ‘problem issues’, which overdetermined, continually influenced and shifted its meaning.

This special issue of *JOMEK Journal* has been developed from a selection of excellent papers emerging from the *Meaning of Migration* conference held in Cardiff School of Journalism on April 17 2014. The conference brought together exciting and original scholarship from across a range of academic disciplines and theoretical perspectives, sharing concerns about the social, cultural and political significance of migration in a variety of national and transnational contexts. Panels included papers exploring experiences of migration and diaspora, border policing, violence and

insecurity, migration news, policy and politics, (dis)embodied migrations, and creative practices, identity and social change. Working within and across these seams of migration research, the contributors to this special issue address a range of highly salient and contemporary subjects including the positioning and representation of migrants in transit, the discriminatory policies and practices of disciplining and controlling their freedoms, rights and movement, and the means and creative resources drawn upon by migrants and activists supporting them to challenge the injustices migrants face. The loaded language and dominant frameworks of understanding surrounding mobility, border crossing and resettlement are critically examined, disturbed and potentially subverted by articles investigating migrants’ relationships with one another in the diaspora and with their homelands.

Maronitis explores the meaning of migration in relation to the detention of undocumented migrants in Greece. Drawing in part upon Giorgio Agamben, he argues that the normalised suspension of law, in the context of a Europe steeling its borders against exterior threats, serves to legitimate the violence of the detention centre, producing ‘a defensive national subject in fear of being contaminated by the arrival of anonymous, stateless people’. Yasmin Ibrahim and Anita Howarth consider the role played by civil society group CSM in constructing an alternative discourse about migrants and migration in northern France. Focusing on counter discourse to the mainstream media’s negative portrayal of migrants living in ‘The Jungle’ near Calais they argue for the importance of radical organisations such as CSM to challenging dominant negative narratives, and in particular, the

human-interest frame in re-humanising the migration debate. Marginalisation and resistance are also themes of Alida Payson's article, which considers how asylum activist groups and asylum seekers and refugees in Cardiff have represented the experiences of everyday life, systemic abuses and acts of creative resistance through a diverse variety of protest media. Payson is interested in the currency of emotions and in particular the 'uneasy affects' that might 'blur and shift how feeling attaches to different subjects' in ways that might 'shift the mood around asylum'.

Sara Marino, Idil Osman and Dafina Paca each address the role of diasporic media in their respective articles, highlighting how the meaning of migration is not just to be found in journey or settlement narratives, but in the relationship between diaspora and homeland. Marino's online ethnography considers the significance of Italian diasporic media for integration in the UK, offering a new concept, 'transnational virtual community of immigrants', through which to explore how networks are established and operate on and offline to influence and support new Italian migrants and their integration in London. Osman focuses on the role Somali diasporic media has in influencing homeland conflict, identifying, through a content analysis study of Somali diasporic media, three different political dynamics at work that potentially 'recreate' conflict: the politics of non-recognition, solidarity and mobilisation. 'Diasporated conflict', she argues entails the reproduction and representation of ideas, which potentially perpetuate the root causes of conflict and influence audiences both in the diaspora and in Somalia. Dafina Paca's article examines

the meaning of migration for Kosovan Albanians as represented by the homeland image of migrants as 'Schatzi'. Paca's case for how homelands view and think about their diaspora demonstrates the complexities of relationships mediated by socio-economic expectations, migration destinations, and social stereotypes premised upon regional origin. Through analysis of interview data, she demonstrates how 'Schatzi' signifies the heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory identities that homelands imagine of their diaspora.

Michelle Lawson's article also approaches the meaning of migration by examining the media of migrants' origin, but attends to British migrants who, in using their privilege to make 'lifestyle' choices to move to France, largely go under the radar in dominant discourses of migration. Applying a corpus linguistics and social actor analysis to the UK news media, Lawson identifies important distinctions between the social construction of current and past British migrants. 'Current migrant derogation' and 'established migrant celebration' are deployed, Lawson argues, to mark acceptability and to maintain and reproduce the social hierarchies and dominant ideologies of British lifestyle migration.

Collectively, the articles of this issue comprise a valuable and diverse set of current and future research trajectories for critical migration research, offering a wide range of compelling arguments that position the meaning of migration as a key concern of our times: a meaning that remains unfixed, contested and continually reinvented in multiple specific, local and transnational heterogeneous contexts.

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