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**The political self-organisation of deportees in the shadow
of State politics**

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The political self-organisation of deportees in the shadow of State politics

I am currently going back and forth to Geneva to consult the archives at the UNHCR headquarters. I am going through hundreds of files concerning refugee camps, trying to find out the strategies, both locally and globally, for their creation, management and dismantlement, but also trying to approach the daily life of refugees inside camps, their perception, their hardships, and their self-help organisation. One of the blind spots of the UNHCR narrative about camps seems to be the political organisation inside camps. If UNHCR has advocated publicly for an increased refugee participation, it has remained mostly silent on the political aspiration that takes place in numerous camps when refugees organise through committees and commissions their own elections to run against the hegemonic humanitarian management.

While at the UNHCR, I met Peter Gatrell, an historian and a professor at the University of Manchester, who has written extensively about refugee history after WWII. We were talking about the UNHCR ambiguous access policy towards scholars, when he suddenly told me he found awkward that nobody in the archives department did mention the fact that the previous week a Kurdish refugee had set himself on fire, early in the morning, right in front of the UNHCR, to protest against the situation of the Kurdish people in Syria. Meanwhile, Ogata, the first woman to have been appointed high commissioner, had died. It happened a few hours before our discussion took place and there was no sign of her death yet in the atrium of the headquarters, but Gatrell went on: 'They will start celebrating and honouring her soon, but there won't ever be a memorial for this refugee'. This inequality of power and position, the way UNHCR writes its own institutional history while silencing refugee narratives and protests, echoed in a painful way what I had tried to do when I started my Ph.D. – approaching deportation policies from the point of view of those who were targeted, crashed and mostly rendered silent and invisible by them.

Deportees indeed represent the spectral shadow of the European project. While they are a central concern in the process of building a European migration policy focused on the return of undocumented immigrants, they cease to be a subject of concern once they have been removed. The way in which the European Union progressively set up its own legal framework for expulsion, right up to the adoption by the European Parliament in 2008 of 'a directive establishing common standards and procedures for Member States, whereby illegally staying third-country nationals may be removed from their territories,' seemed utterly oblivious of individuals. The gathering of expellees to expose their situation and articulate claims runs counter to the invisibility that is an inherent consequence of European and national deportation policies.

In 2007, I met the *Association malienne des expulsés* (AME), an association founded in Bamako in 1996 by deportees who wished to gather in order to create the conditions of solidarity among migrants and to make visible and public the hardships they had been through. The media events, demonstrations, and debates organised from 1996 onward by members of this association and its supporters made deportation a burning issue and gave expelled migrants the status of pioneers in contemporary social struggles in Mali. Their initiative became a popular cause and revitalised the actions of the left-wing political parties defending the interests of

the working-class in Mali from the year 2000 onward. The legitimacy that they won, and which they had always demanded politically, was based on this process of gathering the experiences of expulsion from individuals who were directly affected by such measures. They had to move outside the traditional frameworks of legal mediation and political representation in order to establish their political existence. This positioning and these struggles transformed political constraints and exclusions imposed by the state into a source of protest and allowed a new collective identity to emerge.

'Deportees' were given a name through their shared experience of political constraints and collective subjectification. Their name, as in numerous other social and political protests, is also the name of the harm that was done to them. Thus, expelled migrants are also figures who embody the questions posed by the demarcation of European space and the extension of its rights beyond European soil. European return policy has indeed been strongly encouraged and has gone alongside a policy of cooperation with third countries, including economic partnerships and shared migration control, norms, and legislation. The rise of the deportees was therefore a way of confronting European migration politics both inside and beyond the borders of 'Europe.' The campaigns led by AME have enabled the emergence and spread of a critique of European migration policy by deportees, in a period punctuated by the various stages of the European communalisation of a policy of 'returning' (deporting) 'illegal' migrants, and their corresponding dramas at the threshold of the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, in the Mediterranean, and in the places where deportees arrive. This political critique— in conjunction with the stand taken by the Malian left, 'illegal' migrants' associations, and networks for the defence of migrants in Europe—has given rise to a political demand on both Europe and Mali. It enables us to see how the reconfiguration of political space, provoked in particular by the European Union's desire to set up a 'global approach' to migration, influences the very nature of protests on the African continent, with the diffusion of certain slogans and the gathering of some of the expelled migrants' associations in demonstrations along state borders which they contest.

The forced reintegration of deportees into the society they left raises new questions relative not only to the possible status of such migrants, their (re)registration as citizens, and the possibility and forms of protest, but also to the messages that they want to bring to public attention, relating principally to criticism of, or allegiance to, state policies. Guided by the principle of self-help, the AME aspired to give deportees an organisation for collective representation and participation, which would enable them to make their voices heard in public life and influence the political choices made by the Malian and European authorities. The AME maintained a defiant approach to all forms of institutional politics, which led it to keep its distance from parties, even when the most politicised members of its supporting collective wanted to use their close links with the association as an argument in their electoral campaign in 2010. This desire to seek representation for deportees, which was at odds with traditional politics and which questioned the representative nature of the association itself (in reality, only a very small number of migrants were involved in collective action), raised the issue of their room for action and what forms of action the expelled migrants could use.

For example, the AME led among other associations in 2008 until early 2009 a movement against the signing of readmission agreements between France and Mali. The originality of the campaign lay in the fact that the questions raised by the identification process underlying the expulsion of illegal immigrants in Europe brought new demands to the fore in relation to the migrants' countries of origin. This movement was aimed at pressurising the state to become fully involved in the protection of its nationals in relation to expulsion methods, and even in preventing them. European policy and the politics of expelled migrants thus mirrored each other. The opposition to European policy represented by the AME illustrates Jacques Rancière's view that politics cannot be reduced to the institutions that organise the distribution of activities and roles in a society, but emerges from those very fractures and tensions between the practice of governments and what they produce in terms of the formation of collectives in the struggle. These movements created a space of political confrontation and critique, which illustrated a struggle taking place not only at the national level but also at a point of tension in the unequal balance of forces between states.

Nonetheless, the limits of deportees' self-organisation should also be questioned. The close relations between the expelled migrants' associations created in Mali and the northern NGOs, as well as with international agencies in charge of migration issues, transformed them into administrators of social and medical help for expellees. Subsidies from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and various NGOs transformed autonomous self-help initiatives by expelled migrants and led to the emergence of a post-expulsion scene in which European political interests met humanitarian-style management.

This structural dependency meant that there was a hiatus between the emergence of expellees as an autonomous political force and the formatting imposed by the humanitarian framework — making these associations a hybrid product of self-help and Western humanitarian concern. In some ways, they became part of the extended reach of expulsion measures, which they supplemented with their social or humanitarian contribution. These differences of position in the face of migration policy issues reveal tension and dissension even among associations of expellees, showing that the politicisation of expellees gives rise to a variety of actions around deportation, which cover the whole spectrum, from an alliance with, to opposition to, political authorities. Statements by expelled migrants' associations could occasionally be seen to converge with European political interests. For instance, the *Cameroonian Repatriated Migrants Association for the Struggle against Clandestine Migration* (*Association des Rapatriés et de lutte contre l'Émigration Clandestine du Cameroun*, ARECC), created in 2005, chose a radical position, since these young expellees from the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla led media campaigns warning of the dangers of clandestine migration. Their action was part of a deterring campaign by public authorities and the IOM, which also took place in Mali, Senegal, and other African countries, aimed at discouraging young people from leaving. Self-help by expelled migrants could thus be used by governments as part of their injunction to respect legal forms of migration.

All struggles founded on the self-help organisations of marginalised people probably run the risk of exploitation and hybridisation. This double bind calls into question the possibility and significance of a policy for expellees,

the room for action, and also the risks of exploitation run by a protest movement that tries to establish the collective existence of people with no political status. Slipping from radical protest demanding change in the political paradigm into a more or less forced allegiance to a policy on expellees put together by governments, international agencies on migration, and NGOs exposes expelled migrants' associations to the reproach of being nothing more than a tool for perpetuating expulsion. The creation of associations by expellees in Africa has brought about a shift from the invisibility and disregard of expellees caused by the increasing importance of deportations from Europe since the 1990s, to their emergence and affirmation as public figures. The emblematic case of the movement carried out by AME in Mali illustrates the possibility, although a marginal one, for expellees to become political actors with a significant influence in national political discussions. It shows a renewed form of belonging and participation for rejected citizens, at both the national and international levels, but it also reveals all the critical issues that remain unaddressed by deportation policy and practice.