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INTERTWINING THE POLITICS OF UNCERTAINTY, MOBILITY AND IMMOBILITY

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Introduction

The idea of uncertainty lingers beneath mobilities involving the search for work, better fortunes and different lives. This is regardless of whether these mobilities involve short-term circular labour migration or have no temporal limits, or whether they traverse regional or transnational spaces. But the conception of how uncertainty and mobility are linked, and with what outcome, varies.

From one perspective, the combination of uncertainty and risk in the so-called sending countries instigates mobility. People are forced to leave their home areas to counter poverty and deficiencies in opportunity – what is often spoken about as the root causes of mobility. From the perspective of the so-called host countries, the influx of (certain types of) migrants is perceived potentially to unsettle the existing state-of-affairs. Strategies to mitigate this risk attempt to deter migrants by informing potential migrants about the dangers encountered when crossing borders undocumented, and by creating an hostile environment in which migrants are unable to achieve their goals or the costs of trying to do so become too high. A third perspective is that of migrants themselves. Although they are not at all a homogenous group, and their experiences are differentiated by race, ethnicity, class, gender and age, migrants have in common that uncertainty can create barriers and be productive at the same time. At the individual level, uncertainty can be 'a social resource [that] can be used to negotiate insecurity, conduct and create relationships, and act as a source for imagining the future with the hopes and fears that entails' (Cooper and Pratten 2015: 2).

The way that risk and uncertainty are conceptualised in these three perspectives is inherently social and political, and it is important to recognise that institutions of different types are central in producing *and* resisting uncertainty. On the one hand, we have a global political economy of deep structural inequality that permits

the angst of publics and policy-makers to set the agenda for how mobilities are understood. This perspective undergirds restrictive regimes of mobility and hardened border controls. And it denies legal mobilities to an increasing proportion of populations in the global South, cutting them off from ways of achieving a better life for themselves and their families (Kleist 2016). On the other hand, we have informal institutions – such as families, marriage, social networks – that do not figure prominently in policy discussions of uncertainty, despite the fact that these informal institutions are just as central in shaping the distribution of risk, uncertainty and opportunity (Thorsen 2017). Being very diverse, and inherently socio-cultural, these institutions contribute to the contours of uncertainty in quite a different manner.

This chapter is the outcome of a roundtable discussion exploring how the politics of preventing (irregular) migration and migrants' subtle practices of contesting the power of states intersect with the fundamental sentiments of contemporary mobilities: hope, anticipation, precarity and disappointment. The contributors[1] to the roundtable discussion study mobilities, immobilities and migration in Africa to illuminate the larger issues of social change, political economy and material cultures. Reflecting long-term and deep engagements with the field, this chapter leans on phenomenological approaches to explore a lived politics of uncertainty in migrants' life-worlds.

The chapter starts by reflecting on how migration policies produce a mobility paradox for many Africans, who project their ideas about the good life onto other places, and how this paradox spills over into the capacity to hope. The following section examines the disconnect between information campaigns to prevent irregular mobilities and the persistent actions among irregular migrants to realise the hoped-for future. Then, with a focus on gender, the chapter discusses the influence of the state and informal institutions on individuals' agency.

Contours of uncertainty and hope in African mobilities

Policies and interventions surrounding mobility have become increasingly centred on management, prevention and crisis control over the past few decades. Although labour markets globally thrive on the circulation of workers, the dominant rhetoric intimates an uncontrolled over-supply of labour, often of the wrong type, which in turn nourishes discursive distinctions between wanted and unwanted migrants (Fassin 2011; Squire 2011). In this language, mobility is associated with risk and uncertainty in countries and regions perceived to be at the receiving end of migratory flows, and this discourse sanctions a technocratic approach that seeks to stem the influx of unwanted migrants.

Although the dominant rhetoric is a product of politics in the global North, it is not foreign in the African context. For decades, foreign nationals have been labelled as irregular migrants, their local mobility has been curbed and expulsions of migrants have been articulated as part of national security concerns during conflict or crisis, or as part of broader efforts to curb migration (Adepoju 2005; Bredeloup

and Zongo 2005). Migrants across Africa have experienced a hostile environment – their identity papers and residence cards are inspected at random by state authorities and others, who regularly demand levies whether the papers are incomplete or not (Bredeloup 2012; Landau and Freemantle 2010; Whitehouse 2009). 'Irregularity' and 'illegality' in these cases is a political construction that is used to criminalise and exclude certain groups of migrants (Bredeloup 2012; Inda 2011).

However, the rhetoric that has mushroomed in regional and local discourses on cross-border mobilities in sub-Saharan Africa is not about expulsion. Since 2000, strategic advocacy by Northern states and agreements such as the Cotonou Agreement and the Rabat Process, which focus on the relationships between the EU and Africa, have tied the patrol of European borders into development assistance (Mazzella and Perrin 2019; Aguillon 2018). These compacts impel African countries to formulate national migration strategies and legislate about permissible and non-permissible mobilities of their citizens (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). Through controlling its subjects, the state becomes actively implied in the distri-bution of hope, by facilitating some types of mobilities but not others and, in some countries, by regulating the costs of regular migration.

The tightening of borders has happened at a time when rising inequalities glo-bally and locally have paved the way for new uncertainties and disenchantment with the *status quo*. Yearning for a different type of life relates to aspirations to acquire purchasing power and upward social mobility, but there is also a more exist-ential side to mobility: discovering other places and other life conditions (Awedoba and Hahn 2014; Bredeloup 2014). The shrinking of legal mobility opportunities and the rising popularity of projecting ideas of what constitutes 'the good life' onto Europe, the Middle East or elsewhere amounts to a mobility paradox for many African migrants (Kleist and Thorsen 2016).

And yet, the preference in the global labour market for temporary legal mobilities to plug labour gaps offers opportunities, often to new categories of migrants with the desired skills, gender and age. As national regimes of mobility target several types of mobilities, including that of their own citizens, this shift is premised on states allowing their subjects to accept overseas opportunities. Moreover, since new mobilities generate wide and deep repercussions in regard to the social fabric of migrants' home communities, a shift also requires that the gatekeepers of informal institutions accept that normative boundaries for what hitherto has been seen as appropriate behaviour are pushed (e.g. in Ethiopia – Thorsen *et al.* forthcoming; Fernandez 2020). Additional dimensions are thus added to uncertainty and the mobility paradox, in as much as the outcome of mobility often varies between different categories of migrants.

For many people in Africa, and especially those from resource-poor backgrounds, mobility for work is an important model of realising a different and better life. It is premised on hope. According to Ernst Bloch (1972) hope is an horizon of opportunity and limitation. In other words, hope encompasses the potentiality of a future elsewhere, along with a degree of uncertainty because both the future and the qualities of elsewhere are unknown. For migrants and their families, the

potentiality of mobility is within the realm of the imaginable. Hope inspires action, but entails waiting. It requires migrants and their relatives to cope with difficulties and journeys that have high costs, in anticipation of the future. However, hope can be disappointed. The inherent uncertainty means that hope always has a grain of doubt about achieving the hoped-for future, or having the capacity to achieve it (Bachelet 2016; Kleist 2016; Mar 2005).

In the contexts of West Africa and the Horn of Africa, migratory projects are rooted in a shared expectation of mobility being a means of economic security and social mobility after some time of waiting. Hope vested in both regular and irregular mobility is individual and at the same time collective. Adding an extra layer to the idea of hope, I return to the point made above about the role of formal and informal institutions in producing and resisting uncertainty and potential. In Ghassan Hage's conceptualisation, a collective form of hope, societal hope, is produced in societies or (transnational) networks in a specific social and historical context. The core content of what constitutes societal hope is shared, but hope is not distributed equally. Institutions like the state, society or a transnational network provide a mechanism for evaluating who belongs to the distributional network, in which way and to what degree (Hage and Papadopoulos 2004; Hage 2003).

In exploring a politics of uncertainty in migrants' life-worlds, we need to bear in mind that their horizons of societal hope result from an amalgam of sources. While migrants and prospective migrants may feel the lightness of being able to access opportunities or the pressure of obstacles to mobility issued by the state, it is important to explore which state. Migrants are subjected to multiple state authorities: from their homeland, to their current and possibly to their future place of abode. Likewise, they draw on diverse informal distributors of dominant forms of societal hope: the family and social networks of different kinds, stretching transnationally and relaying different experiences. In combination, we begin to see the complex intertwining of several dominant forms of societal hope, which may generate or be a response to uncertainties.

The following sections explore how this intertwining materialises in the mobility paradox, and how it shapes the distribution among migrants and their families of potentialities and uncertainties across race, gender and age.

Politics of uncertainty in the mobility paradox

Contemporary mobilities are increasingly inscribed in restrictive regimes of mobility and much effort is spent on deterring so-called irregular migrants. The dominant idea that has lingered among policy-makers and practitioners for quite some time is that such prospective migrants are ignorant. Thus, information campaigns that highlight the risks, dangers and uncertainties in irregular mobilities are believed to dampen the interest in going. This is a fundamental misunderstanding. It is based on an assumption that many prospective migrants are unaware of the risks incurred along the overland and sea routes travelled. This way of thinking also makes implicit

links to a conceptualisation of migrants as individual actors deceived by criminal smugglers.

Evidence from West Africa and the Horn of Africa reveals that many of the migrants taking these irregular paths have migrated several times and they know that the journey can be uncertain and dangerous, even if they cannot foresee or imagine in detail what they might experience. Those who are travelling along a particular route for the first time seek information and advice from other migrants at home, at different points along the way and elsewhere (Darkwah *et al.* 2019; Kleist 2017). Many also prepare for their journeys spiritually and devote considerable sums of money to diviners and sacrifices (Tine and Thorsen 2019). However, as roundtable contributor Hans Peter Hahn stressed, prevention and information campaigns are more effective in controlling how imminent departures are handled than in deterring them. In Senegal, like elsewhere, routes have changed in response to border patrols, but a more significant change is the way that the planning of a journey has been moved out of the public realm and into the private. Secrecy now surrounds departures, in order to avoid detection and to avoid shame if the journey does not work out.

Roundtable contributor Nauja Kleist drew attention to how a video produced by the International Organization for Migration illustrates the disconnect between the way in which practitioners and migrants conceptualise uncertainty and potentiality. The video zooms in on people narrating their experiences as irregular migrants, as this is assumed to provide effective and authentic evidence of the risks incurred on irregular journeys. One individual in the video describes his adventure as playing the lotto. For IOM, the reference to a lotto is meant as a deterrent, in the belief that others will not dare or be willing to play the lotto with their life. However, in the discussion Nauja Kleist argued that for migrants the reference to lotto is read differently. For them, it is an uncertainty *and* a potentiality because it is possible to win. The potentiality, in turn, fuels notions of luck and chance. These differences in the understanding of what uncertainty means are important and they shed light on the ambivalences and arbitrariness in the distribution of hope.

In contrast to the institutions that seek to deter irregular migration through legislation or information campaigns, Sébastien Bachelet's work with young stranded migrants from Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire in Morocco teases out that for them uncertainty is not an all-consuming state of life, marked by fear or doom, but also a ground for action (Bachelet 2016). Their self-identification as adventurers – an important trope among young male migrants from West and Central Africa, and increasingly also among young female migrants – signifies that, although they are 'looking for their lives' – a common phrase used in West and Central Africa that suggests the search for better opportunities and well-being in mobility – their journeys are not just endeavours for an economic end, but are also about physical and existential mobility. The social hope they share with migrants in similar situations has a significant element of chance – of being in the hands of God. The outcome of their actions, then, is beyond them. They cannot influence how long they

have to wait because that falls under the jurisdiction of God, but they can increase the likelihood of being in the right place when their time comes (*ibid*.).

In the Moroccan context, they seek to do exactly that on the border. Time after time, they board inflatable boats to cross the Mediterranean or participate in what they call 'massive attacks' on the border fences of the Spanish enclaves Ceuta and Melilla.[2] Both types of attempted border crossing are high-risk and require what the young men describe as the essential characteristics of an adventurer: courage, and mental and physical strength. Migrants 'attacking' the sea and land borders never know if they will succeed; the only way to find out is to try. They will realise that the right time has come only when they have physically crossed the border and registered with the authorities.

The logic among adventurers of linking the unknowable – the chance – with the active and persistent pursuit of the hoped-for, but unpredictable, future is a way of coping. They navigate complex terrains, locally and transnationally. Regardless of whether they inhabit the forests, coastal cities, Rabat or Casablanca, the social terrain in Morocco is constantly in flux, with border patrols waxing and waning both temporally and spatially. Random controls of papers in the street can, in a space of months, turn into systematic screening of the neighbourhoods where many migrants live, or to military campaigns to evict the forest dwellers. Authorities may leave migrants to work in construction sites or trade in the streets and then, a few months later, carry out mass deportations to the border region of Algeria, or mass relocations to remote areas in the south of the country. Similar fluxes happen within migrants' transnational social networks, stretching across several countries. At one moment they receive assistance from a relative who is already abroad, or occasionally from home, at another moment they are requested to contribute money to solve an emergency. Young adventurers thus contend with a social environment in which uncertainties, burdens and potentialities unfold and change (Thorsen 2017).

Uncertainty and unpredictability in their everyday lives spill into the decisions they make and, as Bachelet noted, every decision, small or large, may be decisive for the outcome of their project – and yet they are acutely aware of the limitations on their agency (Bachelet 2016: 226). Their aspirations to live the good life of their social imaginaries are essential for understanding why they do not give up, as is the fact that these are not simply their individual aspirations, but those embedded in the societal hope of their families and communities. In research with a wider group of sub-Saharan migrants living in Rabat in 2012, I found that societal hope surrounding mobility has become vested in individuals' ability to endure hardship, to find ways of circumventing barriers, to maintain hope despite hardship and to wait. As long as they are seen actively to pursue a better future, their courage and resistance to restrictive regimes of mobility and structural violence in the border zones is applauded by their relatives. However, if they are perceived not to do enough or not to have the mental strength to endure, they are subject to critique (Thorsen 2017).

The self-representation of young migrant men as adventurers, as well as the expectations families have of them, is thus premised on having considerable agency to turn uncertainty into a social resource.

The question of agency and uncertainty

In order to identify where the power to embrace uncertainty comes from, it is useful to return to those ideas that underpin the mobility paradox. The assumption that African migrants engage in irregular migration due to a lack of information implicitly implies that they have made this choice from a position of relative privilege and that different choices could have been made. Drawing on her research in Ethiopia, Lebanon and Kuwait with migrant domestic workers, roundtable contributor Bina Fernandez noted that for the majority of people in Ethiopia, both men and women, the decision to migrate is based on a realistic assessment of their limited prospects. In short, there is no viable alternative to migration. The sources of uncertainty and vulnerability in Ethiopia are differentiated by class, gender and age. The demographic youth bulge puts pressure on land availability and on the possibility of land-based livelihoods in rural Ethiopia in particular. Although primary education and some degree of secondary education has expanded, most youth do not complete secondary education. As a result, there is a large group of young men and women who have enough education to produce aspirations for a better job, but not enough to secure a decent job. Thus, employment opportunities are limited and, for young women, there is almost certainty that they will be unemployed, whereas young men might find work in Ethiopia, albeit often casual in nature and low-paid (Fernandez 2020).

Young men and women are not simply individual rational actors. Their decisions to migrate are firmly embedded in family livelihood strategies and driven by the fundamental inability of families in Ethiopia to reproduce and sustain their life given economic and political instability. At the same time, the global labour market adds new dimensions to the differentiation of uncertainty and vulnerability in Ethiopia. Due to their skills in domestic work, young women have a comparative advantage over young men in the migrant labour market in the Gulf States. Hence, they mostly become regular migrants, whereas young men are more likely to become irregular migrants in a broader range of countries and experience uncertainties akin to those encountered by young West African adventurers. Labour market demands have thus facilitated an upset in the traditional gender hierarchy, in that young women working in the Gulf States earn more than their male counterparts. This has longer-term effects in that young men do not have the resource base that consolidated men's privileged social positions in the past. In families where choices have to be made due to a tight economy, parents may choose to support a daughter's mobility rather than a son's, thereby exacerbating the differential earning power of young men and women. Young female migrants anticipate that their achievements abroad have a positive effect on their statuses at home, and bestow on them a new and less subordinate position in the household (Thorsen *et al*. forthcoming).

The potentiality of mobility for young Ethiopian women does not lie in the move away from vulnerability and inequality in the social terrain at home but in their return. This is not the focus of the Ethiopian state, however. Given the global rhetoric focused on stemming unwanted mobilities and the intersection of

mobility regimes, the Ethiopian state has produced a whole range of regulations, which, under the guise of protecting migrants, seek to control the mobilities of its subjects. In reality, however, some of the regulations produce conditions that lead to greater precarity and greater uncertainty. However, the state is operating in a context where it has few enforcement capabilities and many other actors continuously facilitate escape from the state's control. The role of the state is similar in the Gulf States. There, migrants are regulated by the Kafala system, which is a mechanism of control whereby their work permit is attached to the employer. Inherent instabilities in this system give migrants the possibility to escape, to exit from that form of contract and live as irregular migrants. So, in both situations, mobility can be a way to escape controls imposed by states through a formal structure of certainty (Fernandez 2020).

Although states seek to control the distribution of societal hope through regulations and by communicating potential risks, they can only do so in a partial way. In a context where informal institutions have a much stronger influence on people's everyday lives, they are likely to overrule the distributional forces of distant formal institutions. Even if the state sets out the contours of what people can hope for, societal hope embedded in informal institutions is often recognised by migrants as more relevant, due to the proximity of those institutions. Thus, at the micro level in rural Ethiopia, young women's labour migration to the Middle East is in the process of generating a redistribution of societal hope in the form of changing gender relations within families.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to explore how different conceptions of the uncertainty–mobility nexus intersect in the formal politics of migration management, and how this results in contestations of the power of states and in sentiments of hope, anticipation, precarity and disappointment that are fundamental in contemporary mobilities.

Especially in formal policy debates, the production and outcomes of uncertainty are often conceived in a narrow spatial sense, focusing on either the place of origin or the place of residence. Within this focus, migrants are presented as social actors, whose life-worlds are circumscribed by the risky conditions of where they are. The state, in turn, is capable of regulating living conditions and mobilities, or at least is able to make life uncertain for those who are not seen as legitimate.

If we extend the analytical scope across multiple spaces and include a focus on informal institutions it becomes clear that migrants and their families construct uncertainty and risk very differently. From this perspective, the potentiality of mobility outweighs the inherent uncertainty, and migrants seek to mitigate risks and uncertainties through social networks, as well as through faith, courage and patience.

As the chapter has shown, migratory projects are highly gendered and the risks and uncertainties that young men and women encounter are different. At

the intersection of formal and informal distributors of societal hope, the availability of legal mobilities into domestic work in the Middle East for young women, for example, situates them in a context with little societal hope due to the Kafala system. However, a focus on informal institutions reveals that these mobilities are in the process of expanding societal hope for women in the community of origin by gradually changing gender relations within families towards greater equality.

In conclusion, therefore, a politics of uncertainty needs to grapple with the complexity of the intertwining factors that fuel hope and that make potentialities sufficiently imaginable for migrants and their families to contend with uncertainties.

Notes

1 The roundtable discussion was chaired by the author and involved Sébastien Bachelet from Manchester University, Bina Fernandez from Melbourne University, Hans Peter Hahn from Frankfurt University and Nauja Kleist from the Danish Institute of International Studies.

2 Massive attacks consist of several hundred young men 'attacking' the six-metre high border fences in the depth of the night, using makeshift ladders to get across. Their sheer numbers sufficiently diffuse the efforts of the Moroccan and Spanish border guards to let a small proportion of the migrants, usually in the region of 40–60 persons, proceed to the safety of the reception centre, where registration decreases the risk of informal expulsion to Morocco.

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