The governmentality of migration: Intercultural communication and the politics of (dis)placement in Southern Europe

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

The European Union and the Italian state have currently implemented a state infrastructure enabling to govern the migration flows towards Europe. This infrastructure has involved the formation of an ensemble of institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections that raise the efficiency of migrants' reception, integration or expulsion. Expertise on intercultural communication has been celebrated as a key resource of this infrastructure. In this article, I discuss the status of expertise on intercultural communication within an infrastructure managing migration in Italy. I focus on the circumstances by which expertise on intercultural communication has emerged as a crucial technology of this infrastructure and on ways this knowledge contributes to the regulation of migrants' access to the life projects migration stands for.

1. Introduction[1]

On October 3, 2013, a boat packed with more than 600 migrants, who had left Libya for the Italian coast, sank off Lampedusa. A fire on board had ignited a wave of panic that brought the ship down. The Italian coast guards saved 155 passengers. 360 individuals were confirmed dead; others were missing. The news of this tragedy went around the world in photos, video clips, and articles (re)orienting a large degree of public attention towards this small island situated 70 miles off the African continent – an island that has historically been constructed by both the migrants and the European governments as a gateway to Europe.

While the concern for the large numbers of victims initially dominated the press reports, a few days after the disaster, part of the international community started to raise questions about the insufficient European asylum policies that, in the view of many NGOs (Amnesty International, 2011; CIR, 2014; IOM, 2014), was responsible for more than twenty thousand deaths in these same waters since the late 1990ies. In addition, sections of the European population began to view the politics of push back (Andersson, 2016; Zaiotti, 2011) – which until this time had characterized the European Union's response to the volatile influx of African and Asian migrants – as an ineffective political strategy that should be replaced by a well-managed, professional policy of reception (Weber, 2013) (although a substantial part of the population continued to advocate the repressive practice of mass rejection).

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As a reaction to the increasing popular dissatisfaction with its refugee policy, in the past two years, the European Union and the Italian state have implemented an infrastructure (Chu, 2010; Xiang and Lindquist, 2014) able to successfully govern (Foucault, 1991) the migration flows to Europe. In addition to a whole set of well-known and widely contested repressive state measures – such as electric fences, border controls, military and police interventions (Côté-Boucher et al., 2014) – to continue preventing the migrant population from entering European territory, this infrastructure has involved the formation of an ensemble of institutions, procedures, analyses, and reflections as well as calculations, technologies, and tactics designed to enable a meticulous measurement, selection, and classification of migrants and to raise the efficiency and quality of receiving, integrating, or expelling these individuals (Feldman, 2012; Larkin, 2013). This infrastructure also draws on a series of methods (in Michel Foucault's terms: disciplines [1978]), i.e. tokens of expertise that specific actors and institutions invest in to regiment and exercise control over – or to discipline – both the arriving migrants and the actors, institutions, and societies receiving them.

In Italy, this infrastructure consists of the ensemble of activities and services provided by a constellation of both newly funded as well as long-standing organizational actors such as state offices, charitable organizations, NGOs, foundations, social cooperatives, and other corporate actors. Both the Italian state and the European Union pay these organizations to provide migrants with health care services and psychological assistance, to act as translators and cultural mediators, to teach Italian and provide academic or professional education, to assist refugees in applying for asylum, to facilitate access to housing, social networks, and jobs, to manage family reunification, or to organize and carry out the migrants' repatriation.

For scholars interested in the processes mediating migration, a critical discussion of this infrastructure, and more particularly a documentation of the tokens of expertise that shape this infrastructure and organize its everyday routines, is particularly interesting because it sheds light on the logics and mechanisms that condition and structure migration, and that regulate the fulfillment of the life projects that migration represents.

Expertise on intercultural communication – and more particularly tokens of knowledge on multilingual speech, translation practices, intercultural mediation, and language and communication in general – has been identified by political authorities and the community of humanitarian organizations (European Union, 2014; OECD, 2014; UNHCR, 2015) as a key component of the infrastructure. Along with academic expertise claiming that intercultural communication can prevent misunderstandings, bridge cultural conflicts, and foster the globalization of economic exchanges (Porila and Thije, forthcoming; Byram et al., 2001; LeBaron, 2003; Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009), knowledge on language and communication, and on intercultural communication in particular, has been used within this infrastructure to put in place best practices, guidelines, standards, and processes that should lead to the democratization of the selection and legal classification of these migrants, ease the states' interactions with these linguistically diverse groups, and simplify the integration of migrants into the labor market.

In line with this special issue's major concern with understanding the nature and effects of authoritative knowledge on language and diversity, this article aims to unpack the multiple ways intercultural communication supports this infrastructure. I particularly look into how, why, and with which consequences for whom knowledge on intercultural communication contributes to the everyday regulation and structuration of migration by the different actors within this infrastructure and, in doing so, draw attention to the multiple (and sometimes contradictory) projects and tactics that this semiotic resource serves.

The analysis presented in this article draws on an ongoing, multi-sited ethnographic research project[2] (Marcus, 1995) conducted within the framework of two emblematic organizations of the migration infrastructure in Italy. The first organization is a social cooperative called Legame[3] that is located in one of the main urban centers in Central Italy and that provides services to both migrants (in form of language instruction, cultural mediation, access to housing, vocational training, and legal counseling) and to the city's social workers who work for migrants (in the form of professional trainings for the young social workers of the city). The second organization is a local section of Poverty, one of the major Catholic charitable organizations in Italy, located in an urban center in northern Italy. Poverty is mandated by the local authorities to manage the reception of migrants (in reception centers) and to facilitate their integration in local society through language training and professional coaching.

By documenting the everyday work routines as well as rationalities and practices of three key actors – I will call them Laura, Jürgen, and Thomas – who occupy strategic positions in the two organizations, I present an analysis of the everyday governance of migration. Following a theoretical discussion of the interconnections between migration infrastructures, the governmentality of displacement, and intercultural communication, based on empirical findings, I document the training activities that Legame provided to a group of young social workers. In doing so, I problematize how these workers are trained to internalize and enact a set of moralized forms of conducts to facilitate their daily interaction with the linguistically diverse migrants. In the second section, I focus on the relocation of a group of refugees who were transferred by Poverty from northern Italy to a reception institution located in a major urban center in southern Italy, reflecting on the forms of knowledge on language and communication that are mobilized by the individuals organizing and conducting this relocation. Subsequently, I document the production of a script by a taskforce of experts appointed by Poverty to help volunteers communicate to the members of the local Catholic community the organization's official viewpoint on the migration crisis.

3 All individuals, places and institutions are anonymized.