

Autonomy within entanglements: Illegalised migrants, the EU border regime, and the political economy of Nouadhibou, Mauritania

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journals.sagepub.com/home/epd**Hassan Ould Moctar** 

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Abstract

This article contributes to debates about the autonomy of migration (AoM) by ethnographically detailing the EU border regime's external operations in Nouadhibou, Mauritania. In showing how the EU border regime is entangled within the political economy and social relations of the city, it offers three contributions to AoM discussion. Firstly, it nuances and reframes the interplay between illegalised migrants and the border regime by showing that it can take multiple forms, some less antagonistic than others. Secondly, it contextualises this interplay by situating it within the historical trajectory and social relations of the political economy in which it unfolds. Thirdly, it highlights the relevance of the Global South context of this analysis to AoM debate, much of which has been concerned with European contexts and Europe-bound movement.

Keywords

Mauritania, Nouadhibou, political economy, EU border regime, autonomy of migration

Introduction

On 3 December 2021, four people reportedly lost their lives off the coasts of Nouadhibou, northern Mauritania, after their boat broke down offshore. The rest of the survivors were brought ashore, arrested, and deported by Mauritanian police in Nouadhibou (Al-Akhbar, 2021). Such instances have become increasingly routine off the coasts of the Mauritanian

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port city. In early October, two people were reported dead and 30 others missing following a seemingly botched interception by the Mauritanian coastguard (Sahara Media, 2021). A few days later, on 9 October, the coastguard intercepted a boat carrying 86 people of Senegalese and Gambian origin (Sahara Media, 2021). This is part of a broader recent trend off West Africa's Atlantic coasts. Despite formal border closures and travel restrictions ushered in during the COVID-19 pandemic – not to mention the less formal but far more lethal bordering practices it has also facilitated (Stierl and Dadusc, 2021) – the number of people arriving on Spanish shores from African coasts reached unprecedented levels over the course of 2020 and 2021. By the end of 2021, the UNHCR had registered 41,979 sea arrivals, 1653 more than the precedent set the previous year (UNHCR, 2021). As a consequence, the Atlantic Route to the Canary Islands has become the most lethal Mediterranean crossing, with the death rate climbing far higher than on Central and East Mediterranean passages (Alarm Phone, 2021). Alongside unprecedented deaths at sea and arrivals on Spanish shores, maritime interceptions have also increased, with responsibilities being increasingly outsourced to the Moroccan Royal Marine (Vives, 2021: 20) and to the Mauritanian coast guard, as illustrated in the above examples.

Mauritania has long been a strategic partner within this process of offshoring and outsourcing (Bialasiewicz, 2012) EU external border policies. As a member of the 2000 EU-ACP Cotonou Agreement, it has signed up to its article 13 readmission clause. It also signed a bilateral readmission agreement with Spain in 2003, which became a critical tool of response to an earlier increase in arrivals on the Canary Islands from the coasts of West Africa in 2006. This toolkit otherwise consisted of naval and air operations on the part of Spain and Frontex (the European border agency), with financial and technical support from the EU (Carrera, 2007). The Mauritanian state also at this time fell into the orbit of the US global war on terror and its colonial imaginaries (Jourde, 2007; McDougall, 2007), further militarising the approach to migration in the process. This militarisation has solidified as the EU's offshoring and outsourcing of migration and asylum broadens and deepens (Gabrielli, 2016). Over 2016 and 2017, Mauritania availed of €33 million worth of project financing from the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, whose “pseudo-causal” understanding of the root causes of irregular migration (Zaun and Nantermoz, 2022) results, in this case, in funds going toward projects for countering violent extremism, and G5 Sahel security cooperation (Coopération: Union européenne – Mauritanie, 2018: 24). As we will see here, this process of illegalising migration and securing borders has taken place at the same time as Mauritania's deeper integration into ever more diverse elements of the global economy.

Despite this trend of illegalising migration, human mobility on the Atlantic Route has persisted, reaching unprecedented levels at a very moment of equally unprecedented restrictions on movement. This apparent paradox has long been addressed within debates about the autonomy of migration (AoM). The AoM perspective emerged in part as a corrective to fatalistic depictions of migration and border controls as vast behemoths, in which migrants appear as little more than hapless victims (Casas Cortes et al., 2015; Karakayali, 2018; Mezzadra, 2011a; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013). Within the AoM perspective, on the contrary, migrants are a constituent and at times transformative force in shaping the direction and content of migration and border control policies (Ataç et al., 2016; Bojadžijev and Karakayali, 2010; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). This centring of the primacy of mobility is derived from autonomist Marxist readings of the labour-capital relation, according to which the working class is a constituent and driving force within the capital accumulation process (Bologna, 2014). Applied to the dialectic of migrants and borders, the concept of the border regime becomes crucial to this autonomist reading (Tsianos and Karakayali, 2010). When viewed as a regime, the assemblage of institutions, frameworks, and actors charged with

migration and border management appears less hegemonic and rationally driven. This lack of an overarching central authority within the border regime creates openings and contradictions, which can be capitalised upon by those it seeks to regulate and control (New Keywords Collective, 2015: 70). On the other hand, a singular focus on such moments of “escape” (Papadopoulos et al., 2008) can result in a rose tinted view of human mobility, removed from the harsh and brutal conditions in which it is often undertaken (Scheel, 2013).

This article reframes and nuances these discussions through an analysis of the relationship between the EU border regime on the one hand, the experience of those it illegalises on the other, and the social relations of the political economy in which this interplay unfolds in Nouadhibou. In doing so, it offers a three-fold contribution to AoM debate. Firstly, it unpacks and disrupts what can be a homogenising AoM depiction of migrant experience. As gendered and racialised bearers of labour-power (Ferguson and McNally, 2015; Mezzadra, 2011b: 161), migrants are a necessarily heterogeneous group, divergent in practices and experience. In Nouadhibou, for instance, the interaction between Europe-bound migrants and the border regime can take multiple forms, some less antagonistic than others. Secondly, the article opens up this interplay by examining how the border regime’s illegalisation of migrant labour is entangled within a historically embedded capital accumulation process and its associated social relations and regional mobility patterns. It is within such entanglements that subjective experience and aspirations need to be located. Thirdly – and most importantly – by examining how this dynamic unfolds in a Global South context, the article provides a global frame of reference for AoM debate, much of which has “developed within research and political experiences based in what we might cautiously and in a provisional way call ‘European’” (Mezzadra, 2011a: 122).

This three-fold contribution is offered through fieldwork data gathered in Nouadhibou in 2018. This involved semi-structured interviews with state officials, members of the Spanish Guardia Civil deployed in Nouadhibou, and civil society organisations, as well as ethnographic investigations of the urban informal economy in which migrant workers often find themselves. I also attended meetings of migrant community associations, and the analysis is further informed by informal conversations I observed and took part in. Being a Europe-born academic of Mauritanian origin, my navigating this field site was often characterised by the disruptions to the “insider/outsider” dichotomy which typically informs discussion of field research, as has been elsewhere critically discussed (cf Ganga and Scott, 2006; Mullings, 1999). The article proceeds in two broad sections. The first details three distinct variants of the interplay between illegalised Europe-bound migrants and the border regime in Nouadhibou, which cumulatively illustrate the need to locate this dynamic within a broader context. The second section takes up this task by analysing the border regime’s entanglement within the historically endowed relations and structures of Nouadhibou’s political economy, situating the experiences of those encountered in the first section within this entanglement. The conclusion highlights the relevance of the Global South context of this analysis to AoM debate.

Autonomous migration and bordering tactics in Nouadhibou

Due to its status as both a land and sea border, Nouadhibou occupies a strategic position within the territorial purview of the EU border regime’s external efforts to prevent Europe-bound movement. Paradoxically, these efforts involve a production of the very migrant illegality that the border regime purports to prevent, as Ruben Andersson (2014) has shown. To chart how this production process unfolds in Nouadhibou, I draw from Nicholas De Genova’s (2017) application of the AoM analytic to the EU border regime

in the wake of the 2015 “migration crisis.” From this perspective, “heterogeneous tactics of bordering respond to all the unpredictable and intractable dimensions of the elementary subjectivity and autonomy of migration” (De Genova, 2017: 5). In other words, EU migration and border policies are fundamentally *responses* to autonomous human mobility, and this mobility necessarily exceeds the border regime’s efforts to contain it. In what follows, I detail three iterations of this dynamic in the city, in the process fleshing out and complicating this interplay between autonomous migration and bordering tactics.

Unstoppable forces and immovable objects

In a street in the neighbourhood of *Qairaan* in central Nouadhibou, I sat on a porch chatting and drinking coffee with a young Mauritanian man named Ba.¹ As he told me about leaving for Spain by *pirogue*² from Nouadhibou in 2014, it became clear that beneath his gentle, soft-spoken demeanour there lay a steely determination. His excursion turned out to be short-lived; after spending three months in a Red Cross camp in Spain, he was deported back to Mauritania. Despite having been foiled by various instruments of the border regime, and in particular the 2003 Mauritania – Spain readmission agreement, Ba was thinking about his next move. While these instruments of the border regime strive to ensure the external borderline remains fortified against unwanted migration flows, they have clearly not been much of a deterrent for Ba. “Immigration is my virus”, he told me, “it’s like cigarettes.” Next time, he says, he will travel overland from Mauritania to Morocco and get a boat from there.

Ba’s aspiration to travel overland to Morocco and from there to reach Europe seems to suggest the regional dynamics of the border regime to have come full circle. As mentioned, Mauritania’s role within the EU border regime was solidified in 2006, following a 2005 crackdown by security forces on migrants at the fences of Ceuta and Melilla and a subsequent increase in departures along the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands (Choplin and Lombard, 2008). Now, however, as a result of the slew of defensive and preventative measures taken to stem these West African departures (Casas-Cortes et al., 2014; Vives, 2017), Ba had come to view the overland route through Morocco to be his most viable option. This circular dynamic between the border regime and the people it illegalises lends credence to De Genova’s (2017: 11) observation that “state tactics of bordering have been abundantly shown to be convulsive reaction formations, responding always to the primacy of the sheer autonomy of migration.” Indeed, the force of will necessarily underpinning this autonomy might be seen in Ba’s likening of his desire to move with an addiction, something driving him forward in spite of himself.

Meanwhile, the border regime remains operational in Nouadhibou, striving to ensure that the Atlantic Sea route remains closed to people like Ba. Luis, for instance, is a member of the Spanish Guardia Civil stationed in the city. We met in the marble reception area of a hotel, the sea breeze wafting through the double doors to coat the interior in a thin quasi-permanent layer of sand, to which an Ivoirien member of the cleaning staff tended while we talked. In a trajectory that might be seen as a metaphor for the ever-deeper encroachment of border controls into sovereign state territory (cf Coutin, 2010; Cuttitta, 2018; Fitzgerald, 2020; Yuval-Davis et al., 2018), Luis was first stationed at sea off the coasts of Nouadhibou, but now patrols the streets of the city with Mauritanian counterparts. The deployment comprises 25 Guardia Civil officers, covering maritime and land patrols, liaison work, and technical assistance. They also work with six designated local officers. Five Spanish police officers, tasked with training their Mauritanian counterparts, also form part of the unit (Peregil, 2015). According to Luis, the Guardia Civil role in Nouadhibou also involves

gathering information about groups and associations involved in the domain of migration in the city and reporting it to headquarters in Spain.

Prior to their incorporation within the border regime's efforts to prevent irregular migration "at source", the Guardia Civil were not normally deployed overseas. While under the responsibility of the Ministry of Interior when patrolling Spanish territory, Luis explained that the remit shifts to the Ministry of Defence in the case of these overseas deployments. Within an AoM rubric, these institutional rearrangements can be seen as state bordering tactics taken in response to the unruly primacy of West African human mobility. In the process, Mauritanian national security forces become integrated into the bordering tactical repertoire. Joint patrols on the streets of Nouadhibou are regularly carried out by Spanish and Mauritanian police, while mixed brigades consisting of the Guardia Civil and Mauritanian gendarmerie sweep the shores of the city's coastline. This repertoire was further bolstered in March 2019 through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Mauritanian gendarmerie's Chief of Staff and the Guardia Civil's General Director. In committing its signatories to "reinforcing control of irregular migration" (Guardia Civil, 2019), the MoU strives to keep a lid on the spontaneous and unpredictable force that is simply the presence of migrant workers in Nouadhibou, such as the cleaning staff in the hotel lobby in which Luis and I were seated.

Just as Ba's subjective experience and aspirations are necessarily in conflict with the duties of the Guardia Civil in Nouadhibou, the professional obligations of the latter often inform the subjective positions of individual officers. Upon reflecting upon the poverty that push many to migrate through irregular channels, Luis nonetheless concluded that "you have to have limits." This realist logic can become challenged by the necessarily messy process of lived experience, however, as was demonstrated when I chanced upon another member of the Guardia Civil having a coffee with an undocumented migrant in the city (cf Ould Moctar, 2019). Over the course of our conversation, it became clear that he had a degree of empathy with regard to the situation of migrants in Nouadhibou, including his undocumented companion in the cafe. This did not, however, rise to the level of calling into question his role of policing undocumented migration.

Such contradictions between subjective position and professional obligations are mitigated by the humanitarian window dressing that accompanies state bordering tactics in the region. Indeed, the military operations off the Canary Islands in 2006 reframed the Guardia Civil in the Spanish public eye as the "Guardian Angels of the high sea" (Andersson, 2014: 139). Luis espoused such an ethos when he emphasised that ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law was a key aspect of their role. This humanitarian veneer also creates a space for certain migrants in Nouadhibou to adopt a less antagonistic social position than that which binds Ba to Guardia Civil officers such as Luis. In this iteration, the tension between autonomous migration and bordering tactics takes on a less openly hostile form. However, inclusion within this humanitarian sphere is premised upon the adoption of a particular perspective on migration, and it is subject to consistent scrutiny by those tasked with acting upon this perspective.

The professional migrant and the humanitarian border

"What's your opinion about migration?" Having thus far spent the duration of my visit immersed in his phone, Amadou chose these words to address me directly. A subtle but unmistakable challenge lay beneath the question. Eager to seize the opportunity for dialogue, I shifted position on the worn-out mattress upon which I was seated. "Freedom of movement", I said, before stating why, in my view, the unjust disparity between my ability

to come to West Africa at my leisure by virtue of being a European passport holder and the inability of people born here to travel in the opposite direction made it plain to me that freedom of movement is a universal value. To my surprise, however, he disagreed. To Amadou, freedom of movement simply meant the right to go and die in the sea. He described in vivid detail his experience in the *pirogue*: feeling the waves crashing down on top of you, reaching around to see if your companion was alive or dead, not knowing whether you are alive or dead. For Amadou, the “phenomenon” of migration stems from people’s lack of hope. But he has hope now. He has kids and a family. And he runs an NGO for migrants in the city. Now, he thinks we should devote efforts to stopping people from attempting the journey. Now, he says, he is opposed to migration.

Amadou can hardly be faulted in his desire to prevent others from undergoing his traumatic experience. The logic of the border regime, however, is such that this desire can be accommodated in a way that a holistic respect of freedom of movement cannot. Indeed, one peculiar side-effect of the foreclosure of legal avenues to Europe has been the production of “professional migrants”, amongst whom knowledge of and experience in the clandestine migration circuit can serve as social capital amongst international journalists, NGO workers, activists, and researchers (Andersson, 2014: 257). Given their concern with documenting and mitigating border violence, such groups often have quite a different stake in the border regime than the Guardia Civil, but they are equally enmeshed within its paradoxical operations. This refashions the dynamic between autonomous migration and bordering tactics, reconstituting it in the form of the professional, civic-minded migrant, and what William Walters (2010) calls the humanitarian border.

The militarised measures taken off the coasts of West Africa in 2006 soon gave birth to the humanitarian border in the region. In Nouadhibou, this took the form of organised care provided by the Red Crescent within the destitute conditions of the migrant detention centre that Spanish soldiers opened in the city in April 2006. Viewed in light of the manufactured political spectacle that emerged in Spain that summer (Carrera, 2007), the enlisting of the Red Crescent to care for the needs of those detained should be seen “not simply as a gesture of care, but . . . an instance where humanitarianism was being operationalized in an attempt to manage a political crisis” (Walters: 2010: 145). Zein Abidine, a Red Crescent official who worked at the detention centre, emphasised their mandate of care to me (interview in Nouadhibou, 1 April 2018), speaking of how the Red Crescent tended to “the hygiene, food and health of immigrants during their stay.” However, “the double-side nature of humanitarian governance” (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015: 55) was also evident in his description of the centre, which was run by the state, and therefore oversaw the administration, processing, and deportation of residents.

While the detention centre closed in 2012, the interplay between the professional migrant and the humanitarian border appeared in full swing during my interactions with *l’Organisation des migrants de Nouadhibou* (OMN) in 2018. The OMN, their representative Khadija explained to me, is an association representing 24 different communities whose nationals are based in Nouadhibou. While waiting for a meeting to start, she offered a proud tour of the sizeable space that was their headquarters. The group’s humanitarian orientation was clear in the function of each of the rooms. One was a rudimentary bedroom for recently arrived migrants in Nouadhibou, or for those unable to otherwise find a place to stay. Others contained materials for the diverse skills training they offered. Another was a classroom for children of migrants who were unable to attend school. These activities have afforded a level of access to the corridors of power, as was evidenced by the illustrious array of photographs on the wall of their office. Here they were with a Ministry of Interior official, here she was with a World Bank official, this was after a training workshop held

by the IOM, and so on. Each photo further solidified the impression of OMN as a “manifestation of the involvement of civil society in the general set of organizational devices aimed at migration management” that has emerged in Mauritania in recent years (Poutignat and Streiff-Fénart, 2010: 10).

Accompanied by OMN’s evident access to the realm of officialdom, however, was the watchful eye of authority. Khadija emphasised their positive relationship to state authorities, saying that they work closely together, providing them with trimestral reports on their activities. The Guardia Civil are also invited to attend their monthly meetings, in the interest of maintaining “good relations.” This might in one sense appear a win-win situation: good relations for migrant associations on the one hand, and ample intelligence gathering opportunities for the Guardia Civil on the other. But the constraints that come with the arrangement were hinted at by Luis when he reflected upon attending the meetings: “it’s really nice, to see all of these people from different countries getting together to discuss their problems. Of course, they can’t do anything – their hands are tied – but it’s interesting.” Becoming embedded within “the general set of organizational devices aimed at migration management” thus comes with a degree of scrutiny and constraint that perhaps would not otherwise be the case for certain enterprising migrants in Nouadhibou.

Clearly, this iteration of autonomous migration and bordering tactics is not as antagonistic as the first one examined, respectively embodied in Ba and Luis. But there is little evidence of the excess of autonomous mobility over bordering tactics when it takes the form of the professional migrant and the humanitarian border. Instead, establishing oneself as a provider of humanitarian care to the destitute is conditional upon adherence to the logic of control upon which the border regime rests, as evidenced in the acquiescence of OMN to the presence of the Guardia Civil at their meetings.

While the interplay between the professional migrant and the humanitarian border has survived the closure of the detention centre in in 2012, the role of the Red Crescent in the city appears to have diminished. In the words of another former Red Crescent worker at the detention centre (interview, 12 April 2018), back in 2009, “there was a huge team, but now, there’s nothing.” In his view, the “social role” of migration management has now been lost. Instead, he said, things were in the hands of the police, “who care about their own interests.” The activities of the police in Nouadhibou in the area of migration management does indeed differ from that of the Red Crescent and the Guardia Civil. And it further complicates the interplay between the border regime and the illegalised Europe-bound migrant.

Jurisdictional grey areas and ambivalent autonomy

Yousef, of Nouadhibou police immigration services, was keen to communicate their unique role within the border regime when we met (interview, 6 April 2018). “The police”, he emphasised, “are the only body that have the right to deport, between the gendarmerie, the national army and the Guardia Civil.” The pride Yousef displays here in the unique role played by the national police within the border regime’s deportation infrastructure indicates that “third country” national security forces and state officials are far from passive victims of EU bordering prerogatives. On the contrary, domestic concerns and interests often align with, and can indeed manipulate, such prerogatives (Cassarino, 2018; Cherti and Collyer, 2015; El Qadim, 2014; Frowd, 2021). Yousef’s description of their activities at first appeared to corroborate the observations of the former Red Crescent official. “There is no social mandate”, he said, “it’s just a question of verifying whether someone’s documents are in order or not.” If the person is not “in order”, then deportation becomes the default response.

While this makes Nouadhibou police immigration services a key organising institution within the EU border regime in West Africa, its jurisdictional limitations also generate holes in its infrastructure. An overarching objective of the border regime is to diminish unwanted crossings of the EU external borderline, but the legal reach of the national police stops at the Mauritanian territorial border. For this reason, despite the fact that many transit through Nouadhibou to enter the Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara on a northward journey, there is no reason for such departures from state territory to be prevented by Mauritanian authorities. Indeed, according to Yousef, virtually all of the 1000 or so monthly departures he estimated to take place from the city are via the contested and politically generative land border with Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara (cf Drury, 2019). A similar number of people arrive in the city each month, he said, suggesting it to be a transitory space on a northward trajectory. Morocco has attempted to temper these entries by decreeing that citizens of multiple West African states who enter Morocco for the first time do so by plane rather than overland. But as far as the Mauritanian authorities are concerned, according to Yousef, individuals exiting Nouadhibou overland are “in order”, and are therefore allowed to pass. At a regional scale, then, this is an example of the legal cracks and jurisdictional grey areas within the border regime that allows collective mobility to exceed the structures that regulate it (Tsianos and Karakayalı, 2010: 376).

For those who spend any amount of time in Nouadhibou, however, there appears less scope to outmatch state bordering tactics. Camara, a young Guinean migrant worker I met in Nouadhibou, has Europe firmly in his sights, but is more patient than many other Europe-bound migrants in the city. Having already spent a year here, he has surpassed the length of time spent by many of his compatriots, most of whom had only arrived in the past few months when I spoke with them. For those like Camara who have spent more than three months in Mauritania, obtaining a residence permit is a legal requirement. But this has proven next to impossible, he says. In addition to a 30,000 UM fee³ that equates to a month’s salary for the average migrant worker, the list of requisite documentation consists of a valid form of identification, proof of address in Mauritania, a contract with an employer, and a judicial record issued by Mauritanian authorities. Moreover, Camara is sceptical about the fate of the fee once handed over to the civil registry office: “They take the money and keep it for themselves!”, he said of the residence permit fee. “They always say ‘tomorrow’, ‘tomorrow’, but you never get it.” For many, being “in order” is not as simple a matter as Yousef the police officer would appear to make out.

As a result, deportation is a real and present prospect for Camara and many other migrant workers in the city. Unlike the picture painted by Yousef, however, there appears to be little dialogue about the verification of documentation when the police van shows up. “When they come,” Camara said, “it’s better to run.” According to Yousef, the police ensure that a representative of the deportee’s country of origin is contacted, and that the individual is afforded the opportunity to pick up their belongings. When I asked Camara and other migrant workers whether this was the case, the question was met with derision. One man from Mali recounted how the police entered his friend’s home as he prayed in his bedroom. “They waited until he had said ‘salaam alaykoun, salaam alaykoun’,⁴ and then they took him.” The ever-present possibility of such a brusque removal is a feature of the condition of deportability (De Genova, 2002), and it injects a degree of uncertainty into everyday life in Nouadhibou. “When I’m walking down the street,” Camara said, “I’m always looking over my shoulder.”

If the state of being “in order” thus belongs to the realm of discursive fantasy as far as most migrant workers in Nouadhibou are concerned, their embodied experience can be equally far removed from the expectations of the AoM position. Camara, for instance, is determined to reach Europe through legal channels. He has a wife and kids at home who are depending on him, he says, and for this reason is taking his time and saving money until he can go legally. This aspiration diverges from the dramatic depictions of young men scrambling from *pirogues* on the shores of the Canary Islands or scaling the fences of Ceuta and Melilla. Such images are common currency within the aesthetic circuit of the border regime, but they also resonate with the AoM valorisation of migrant acts of contestation, defiance, and resistance (Karakayali, 2018: 315; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013: 188; Scheel, 2013: 585). Camara’s patient desire to migrate legally can hardly be considered a direct contestation of the border regime, but nor is it a passive submission to it. Rather, it is a more ambivalent space in between.

Given the irreducible complexity of human experience, this space of subjective ambivalence is, in all likelihood, a common one. Amadou can be seen to occupy a similar position, with his trajectory from a previous daring and traumatic attempt to subvert the border regime to his current preoccupation with addressing the local grievances and conditions that push people to such desperate measures. There is no contradiction in such a trajectory. As Harsha Walia (2021: 15) observes, the freedom to move and the freedom to stay are intrinsically intertwined; underlying the suppression of both are interlocking structures of violence and crisis which are not of the making of those they affect. In the following section, we’ll see how interrogating the nature and genesis of such structural entanglements aids in appreciating this more nuanced understanding of subjective experience.

Autonomy, tactics, and the political economy of Nouadhibou

There is thus a general need to situate the interplay between illegalised migrants and the border regime within its broader structural context, with all of its attendant openings and constraints. Indeed, while Ba’s likening of his desire to move with an addiction in one sense highlights the incapacity of structures of control to contain subjective aspirations, it also suggests an element of compulsion to be at play within these aspirations. One particularly pertinent factor underpinning such a compulsion is the unforgiving socio-economic context in which he and many migrant workers in Nouadhibou fare. This section turns in more detail to this socio-economic context, examining how historical and contemporary features of the political economy of the city relate to the life histories and experiences of Ba, Camara, and other illegalised migrant workers in Nouadhibou. In doing so, it seeks “to attune to the complex interplay between the *desire and need* to move and *the conditions of violence and coercion*” (Stierl, 2020: 475). To do so, I draw attention to the contingent nature of this contemporary illegalisation by locating it within a deeper political and economic history.⁵ From this perspective, it becomes apparent that contemporary violent and coercive conditions are not limited to bordering tactics that are actively geared toward suppressing the desire and need to move. They also encompass the broader social and economic context in which this desire is nourished. In other words, the border regime is necessarily entangled within broader social and economic structures, and this entanglement conditions the nature and scope of subjective desires and needs.

Regional migrations and dependent development

On the porch in *Qairaan*, Ba played with an infant as I sipped from one of the small plastic cups of *café touba* that I had purchased for us at a nearby street stall. The young child was the son of a woman who ran this stall, selling the reputed Senegalese clove coffee to her many compatriots who live in this area. From the early 90s, the neighbourhood of *Qairaan* has been gradually emptied of its local Mauritanian *bidhân*⁶ inhabitants, who had begun pushing the frontiers of the city northward. Despite having physically left *Qairaan*, some of these Mauritanian *bidhân* have retained a stake in the neighbourhood, by converting properties into rental accommodation for newly arrived migrants (Choplin and Lombard, 2008: 155). In the process, Nouadhibou's new status within the border regime has been grafted onto Mauritania's existing racialised hierarchies, as wealthy *bidhân* draw rent from West African migrant workers living in what is often crowded accommodation, such as the "*cit  des S n galais*" apartment block in *Qairaan* (Choplin and Lombard, 2008: 155), and the "*foyer Malien*" from which the young Malian mentioned above had been living at the time of his alleged removal by Mauritanian police. At the same time, however, the presence of West African migrants has left its stamp upon the character of *Qairaan*, which is today host to a range of West African restaurants, fabric shops, and money wiring services, as well as all manner of informal stalls, such as the one from which I had bought the *café touba*.

The sparse details of Ba's life history that he shared with me over coffee nonetheless sufficed to illuminate the structural entanglement of migratory histories and social dynamics that has ensued from Nouadhibou's conversion into a flashpoint of the EU border regime. He was born 650 km northeast of Nouadhibou in the mining town of Zou rat, where his father worked after migrating from Senegal to Mauritania. Nouadhibou's contemporary status as "economic capital" of Mauritania is rooted in development processes initiated in this era. The discovery of iron ore deposits in Zou rat at the twilight of the French colonial era in 1952 gave birth to a slew of infrastructural development initiatives (Bonte, 2001). A railway was laid to facilitate the transport of iron ore minerals from Zou rat to Nouadhibou, from where they could be exported to Europe by means of an ambitious port project that had gotten underway. Mining operations were overseen by MIFERMA (*Mines de Fer de Mauritanie*), a conglomerate of European steel companies (Bennoune, 1978). At the moment of political independence, then, infrastructural development in Mauritania had been firmly harnessed to the interests of European capital.

The dynamics of the region at this historical moment cannot, however, be reduced to these European interests. Indeed, as a Senegalese migrant in Mauritania, Ba's father embodied the deeply embedded regional dynamics of circulation and exchange that have long been a feature of what David Robinson (2000) describes as a "Senegalo-Mauritanian" space (cf Ould Cheikh, 2004). Nouadhibou, in turn, encapsulates the role that these regional migrations played within the city's urban infrastructure and economic output in the early decades of independence. At a time when a majority of the residing population in Mauritania were either nomadic pastoralists or sedentary farmers, the industrial development of Nouadhibou generated a labour supply gap within a range of sectors, which migrant workers such as Ba's father helped to fill (Ahmed Salem, 2011; Bensa d, 2008; Choplin and Lombard, 2013). This internal social transformation was a result of the Mauritanian state's integration into the global capitalist economy by means of the MIFERMA mining operation, in which Ba's father and other industrial workers collectively formed a nascent urban working class in the country (Amin, 1973: 73). Again, however, the hegemonic role of European capital is tempered by local dynamics and struggles. In 1974, the mining sector was nationalised, in part a result of what was at times a bloody labour

dispute at MIFERMA. Moreover, the previous year Mauritania broke from the CFA, the colonial-era currency shared between fourteen West African states which solders significant aspects of their monetary systems to France (Sylla, 2021). Ba's father's trajectory thus reflects a period in which there appeared a real and tangible prospect of political independence being translated into economic independence.

By the time Ba made his ill-fated adventure to Spain in 2014, however, the economic and migratory landscape had long changed drastically. The border regime's production of migrant illegality came off the back of a period of protracted social crisis. In the 1970s, Mauritania was beset by droughts that decimated rural nomadic livelihoods, swelling the capital city's peripheral shantytowns and generating novel polarisations and livelihood strategies on the urban margins (Bennoune, 1978: 46; Choplin, 2016; Vium, 2016). The informalisation and pauperisation necessarily entailed in this process was exacerbated by the effects of successive rounds of structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s and 1990s (Ould Mey, 1996; Seddon, 1996: 210), whose privatisations and currency devaluations contributed to the emergence of a vast urban informal sector which today counts for 91.5% of non-agricultural private sector activity (Cross, 2011: 832; Islamic Republic of Mauritania, 2017). Meanwhile, the henceforth national mining company SNIM (*société nationale des mines de Mauritanie*) would become increasingly indebted to international lenders over the course of the 1980's and 90's (Ould Mey, 1996: 172).

Ba's sphere of livelihood activities mirrored the uncertainty and precarity that has grown from this condition of crisis. He counted amongst his professions barbering, football, mobile phone repairs in the market adjacent to *Qairaan*, and dance. Camara displayed an equally precarious versatility when I asked what he does for a living in Nouadhibou: "Here you do everything!", he responded with a laugh, "bricklaying, painting, tiling floors. You want a plumber? I'm a plumber!" Ba and Camara's social lives thus epitomise the "creative but highly precarious and insufficient ways" (Li, 2017: 1249) by which those cast out of the process of capitalist development get by. This perennial precarity has accompanied Camara from his home country, where he worked as a transport operator driving trucks: "every two or three months, they fire you. You're always looking for a new job." The border regime has thus entered a landscape defined by instability and precarity for those it illegalises. In doing so, it has become entangled within the social relations that have emerged from this particular juncture. It is within this entanglement that subjective experience and aspirations need to be situated.

Entangled border and accumulation regimes

On the side of the road leading up to the pier of what is today the Autonomous Port of Nouadhibou, Camara sat with a group of his compatriots. Here, he and others illegalised by the border regime gather to look for work as day labourers. Workers generally tend to cluster according to nationality here, Camara explained. This way, if someone gets a job with an employer, he'll call on some of his compatriots to accompany him. This area of the port is colloquially referred to as SIJP. The name designates a vast expanse of the southern end of the port, all of which is said to be owned by a wealthy member of the *bidhân* class. It encompasses two factories, a large scrapyards, a medley of Romanesque colonial-era buildings that have fallen into disrepair, and numerous shops and boutiques, specialising mainly in fishing catch materials. "SIJP" also highlights Nouadhibou's colonial origins; *Société Industrielle de la Grande Pêche* was a French fishing company whose launch of operations spurred the first building infrastructure on the slender peninsula in 1908 (GRDR, 2018: 8). What was then named *Port Étienne* remained a relatively small fishing village until the

1950's, when the MIFERMA mining operation in which Ba's father worked sparked the process of social and economic transformation outlined above.

While at that moment in time, capital accumulation in Nouadhibou was firmly harnessed to European interests, it is today more transnational in character. According to Camara, many of the employers who stop by the labour pickup are Chinese nationals looking for labourers, in a recruitment style mirroring that which has emerged from Chinese investment in the construction sector in Zambia (Lee, 2014: 51). In the case of Nouadhibou, labourers are usually sought to work on trawlers and in the multiple fishmeal and fish oil factories in the city. As host to thirty-nine such factories in 2019, compared with eight in Senegal and three in the Gambia, Mauritania sits at the regional helm of this destructive new export sector (Greenpeace, 2019: 10). These factories are overwhelmingly concentrated in Nouadhibou, where the number of fishmeal and fish oil factories in operation jumped from 11 in 2011 to 29 in 2015 (Greenpeace, 2019: 12). Half of these factories were in 2016 reported to be Chinese owned (Baxter and Wenjin, 2016). Moreover, China was the biggest importer of Mauritanian fishmeal in 2019, followed by Turkey and the EU. On the other hand, the EU was far and away the largest importer of fish oil from Mauritania that year (Greenpeace, 2021: 49).

While Nouadhibou has thus been witness to a significant globalisation of trade relations since the days of exclusive European capitalist dominance, the EU border regime's illegalisation of migrant labour plays a key role in facilitating these transnational flows. At SIJP, the air is thick with the possibility of deportation. Camara and his co-workers described how the police van comes here and whisks people away on a regular basis. The net social effect is an effective subsidisation of profits through the production of a vulnerable, exploitable, and – in this case – transient workforce, as has been long observed in the literature on migrant illegality (Calavita, 1998; Iskander, 2007; McNevin, 2006; Parreñas, 2001). A human rights lawyer in Nouadhibou made this clear (interview, 8 April 2018) as he described a typical labour dispute between migrant workers and employers that he encounters in the city: “they [the employer] say they'll pay someone 10,000 and then give 1,000. They say they'll give 30,000 and they pay 10,000.” In his experience, there is little recourse for migrants in such situations, due to the fears of going to the police that undocumented status generates. The era of exclusive European economic dominance has long passed, but the border regime's production of illegality in Nouadhibou ensures a favourable position for transnational capital remains.

Just how favourable a position this is can be illustrated through Ahmed's experience in Nouadhibou. Upon arrival in the city from a neighbouring West African state, he made his way to SIJP early in the morning. By that afternoon, he was packing and loading boxes into trucks in a Chinese-owned fishmeal factory. Here he spent three months, earning 2000 UM per day⁷ Upon hearing that workers were given lunch on top of their wage in other factories, some migrant workers in this particular factory decided to demand that they also be given lunch, or an additional 500 UM per day. The struggle fell flat, however, because some were reluctant to commit: “If there was unity, they would have succeeded. But there wasn't any unity. That's the problem.” Even if unity had been forged amongst this particular group of workers, however, there remains a constant presence of newly arrived migrant workers at SIJP, eager to make money before continuing onward without falling foul of the security forces' mixed brigades and joint patrols. As is the case in Turkey (Fregonese et al., 2020: 6), the illegalisation of a Europe-bound workforce cheapens and broadens the labour pool from which transnational capital can draw. This is not to say, however, that such outcomes are set in stone, as I would discover soon after meeting Malata.

Conclusion: Autonomy and the Global South

Malata and I first crossed paths outside Nouadhibou police headquarters, where he and a group of day labourers sat on the curb as a dispute unfolded between him and their Mauritanian employer. The employer was claiming to be unsatisfied with their work and refused to pay them. They had come to the police to resolve the matter. Later on, sitting by a fruit stand in the *Qairaan* neighbourhood, Malata told me with dignified triumph that they succeeded at the police station in getting remunerated. Unlike Ahmed and most of his other fellow migrant workers in Noadhibou's informal economy, he did not let his legal status deter him from taking a stand in such situations:

Yes, a lot of people are afraid, they think when you go to the police they will ask you about paper matters. But you're there to talk about job matters, not paper matters. I know my rights!
A lot of people don't know their rights

For Malata, then, the vulnerability imposed by the status of illegality upon him as a bearer of labour power is not an inevitability. This may be rooted in the fact that he has already been deported three times from Mauritania: once in 2016, and twice in the past ten months. He has the right to stay for three months without a visa, he said, and if he gets deported after that, he'll just come back again.

Furthermore, Europe was firmly in the realm of Malata's past experience. He told me of spending long periods in the 1980s and 90s working as a seasonal labourer in southern Spain. This likely means that the experience and prospect of deportation, while painful and traumatic (he described being detained in Nouakchott as "hell"), does not carry the same air of finitude for him as it might for many of his co-workers in SIJP whose sights are set on Europe. He left Spain for the last time in 2005, just before the border spectacle on the Canary Islands brought Nouadhibou into the fold of EU external border management. Collectively, these peculiarities of Malata's experience allowed him to refuse the vulnerability and tractability that flows from the illegalisation of migrant labour (De Genova, 2002: 439). While social transformation cannot emerge exclusively from such individual disputes, subjective experience and position clearly continues to have a constitutive role within the structural entanglement that is the border regime and the capital accumulation process in Nouadhibou.

The fact that Malata was not *en route* to Europe should, however, give pause for thought. The claim that illegalised Europe-bound migration is a transformative and revolutionary force carries with it a discreet corollary, namely that a Europe-bound directionality is a prerequisite to analytical and political relevance. This reflects a broader parochial tendency within critical migration and border studies, to which many have already drawn attention (Cassarino, 2018; El Qadim, 2014; Korvensyrja, 2017; Stock et al., 2019; Van Baar, 2016; Walters, 2015: 11). As far as AoM priorities are concerned, this can be addressed by adopting a global frame for the interplay between illegalised migrants and the border regime. As has been demonstrated here, this interplay can take many forms, three of which were examined.⁸ While varying in degrees of abjection and coercion, they each demonstrate the need to examine broader processes at play in shaping the nature and scope of subjective needs and actions. Doing so here has shown how the border regime facilitates the flow of transnational capital by illegalising people where they are, irrespective of where they have been or are headed. With attention turned to this entanglement of border and accumulation regimes, there is no need to project Eurocentric assumptions onto illegalised migrant workers. The transformative and revolutionary dimensions of subjective experience

may take the form of subverting the EU border, but they can equally manifest *in situ* in the Global South.

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Notes

1. All names in this article are pseudonyms.
2. The French word for the small fishing canoes that became associated with West African sea arrivals.
3. Approximately €75.
4. The ritual of the Islamic prayer concludes with a double uttering of this Arabic greeting.
5. A method of denaturalising illegality advocated by De Genova (2002: 423).
6. '*Bidhân*' is the word used in the Mauritanian *hassâniyya* dialect of Arabic to describe the dominant group within the Arabo-Berber populations of Mauritania. It is often translated in French to "Maure" (Moor). Given that "the Moors" are historically quite an ill-defined group, I use the *hassâniyya* term – *bidhân* – for reasons of analytical clarity.
7. Approximately €5.
8. Of course, many others could be discussed. While Khadija represents a certain aspect of women's migratory experience, her NGO position may mean it differs from many others in North and West Africa, where the border regime produces particular vulnerabilities for migrant women (Freedman, 2012; Tyszler, 2019).

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