

Chapter 1

Introduction



*Palomar s'è **distratto**, non strappa più le erbacce,
non pensa più al prato: pensa all'**universo**.
Sta provando ad applicare all'**universo**
tutto quello che ha pensato del prato.
L'**universo** come **cosmo regolare** e ordinato
o come proliferazione caotica.
L'**universo** forse finito ma innumerabile,
instabile nei suoi confini,
che apre entro di sé altri universi.
L'**universo**, insieme di **corpi celesti**, **nebulose**,
pulviscolo, **campi** di forze, intersezioni di **campi**,
insiemi di insiemi... (Mr. Palomar's mind has wandered, he has
stopped pulling up weeds. He no longer thinks of the lawn: he
thinks of the universe. He is trying to apply to the universe
everything he has thought about the lawn. The universe as
regular and ordered cosmos or as chaotic proliferation. The
universe perhaps finite but countless, unstable within its
borders, which discloses other universes within itself. The
universe, collection of celestial bodies, nebulas, fine dust, force
fields, intersections of fields, collections of collections...)*

Italo Calvino

Irregularity is a juridical status that describes the relation between a migrant and one or more states. As a social phenomenon, it does not derive from the migrations themselves, rather, it is the result “of the existence of a structural tension between the social preconditions and the political preconditions” that support them (Sciortino, 2007). The social space, following this interpretation, is the scenario where two different and opposed logics interact. On the one hand, there is the logic of free movement of people and goods that is favoured by socio-economic forces like the market-economy, globalization or transnationalism. On the other hand, there is the logic of the states, political-juridical constructions, historically and ideologically differentiated, that claim the power to delimit the space and to regulate the movement of factors across it. Irregularity would then be the result of the clash between these two logics that determine a numerical difference between the migrants that

move across the geographical space, established by the first logic, and the migrants who are allowed to do that, established by the second logic.

The divergence between these two logics has become particularly relevant in the present age of globalization. In the previous historical phase, the “social space”, understood as the space within which the majority of social transactions take place, tended to better overlap with the “political space”, understood as the space where those transactions are regulated by a sovereign power. In that context, the main social interactions occurred within the boundaries of the states and those that crossed frontiers were rather limited and then more easily controllable. Human mobility, which is, of course, not a novelty of the current historical moment, took place massively before globalization, but it largely occurred through channels established by the states and often under their own auspice.

The growing liberalization in the exchange of goods, capital and information, as well as the drastic reduction in the costs of, and time needed for, the exchanges, in other words globalization, have determined a dramatic change in the previous patterns of mobility. Indeed, the fast and worldwide development of interconnections between individuals and societies has led to an inversion in that overlapping tendency between the “social space” and the “political space”. This process has uncovered, once more, the possible conflict between the inner logic of the each space. In a certain sense, it could be said that globalization is determining a spill-over of the “social space” beyond the boundaries of the “political space” as was prefigured by the modern national state. Faced by these phenomena, states have reacted in a differentiated way. On the one hand, they seem to be ceding sovereignty as regards the circulation of goods, capital and information. On the other, however, they seem to be widely opposed to the free circulation of people. The contradiction between these two tendencies has been successfully summarized by James Hollifield’s image of a clash between markets and states (Hollifield, 2000). Focusing on the effects of this conflict over migrations, Douglas Massey highlighted the existence of a “post-modern paradox” because it is possible to see at work at the same time “global forces” and “restrictive policies” (Massey, 1999).

It is within the frame of this paradox that irregularity can be better understood. Social forces seem to be pushing for a greater mobility of peoples across the globe, while political forces try to regulate or stop such movement. The mismatch between the fluxes generated by the former and those accorded and legitimated by the latter determines that a consistent number of migrants move, reside and work irregularly.

If, in an abstract manner, irregularity can be explained as the result of this conflict, reality, as always happens, provides a more complex scenario where a number of different factors have to be considered and where the role of the actors (e.g. states, migrants, capital, etc.) is more ambiguous and less decisive than it may appear at first sight.

The growing impact of irregular migration in receiving countries in the last few decades, in spite of the efforts against it taken by the states, has fostered anxieties in the public opinion of the latter and attracted the attention of the scientific community (Arango, 2013; Broeders, 2009). From the mid-seventies in the United States and the early nineties in Europe, the study of irregularity and control policies by the

states has produced a great variety of interpretations and analyses. These, from a diversity of perspectives, have tried to answer four fundamental questions: A. How can irregular migration be explained? B. What determines the failure or low efficacy of the control policies? C. What are the main impacts of irregular migration on the receiving societies? D. How do irregular migrants manage to live in a supposedly hostile environment? What strategies do they develop? What abuses do they suffer?

Answers, as highlighted by many authors, have been in general partial, if not inadequate, in their explicative capacity. This was often the consequence of oversimplistic analyses or mono-causal argumentations. The criticism has discovered that the reasons for this problems lie both in the lack of theoretical ambition and in the scarcity of empirical evidence (Baldwin-Edwards, 2008; Bommers, 2012; Cvajner & Sciortino, 2010; Düvell, 2006). This two different perspectives, the theoretical and the empirical, moreover, have often operated without establishing an effective dialogue with one another.

This study has started precisely from the two elements that have emerged from this brief discussion. On the one hand, irregular migration represents an extremely interesting phenomenon, one that particularly reveals the dynamics, conflicts and contradictions of our age. As pointed out by McNevin: “perhaps more than any other cross-border flow, irregular migration captures the symbolism of borders under siege in an age of globalization” (McNevin, 2009, p. 168). On the other hand, the comprehension of irregular migration still presents a number of limitations. Yet, the research on irregular migration does not aim at being simply a way to elucidate the particular aspects of a specific social phenomenon, but rather to provide a viewpoint from which to observe the structure and dynamics of contemporary society as a whole. In this sense, through the study of irregular migration, this book aspires to contribute, with the highest humility, to the greatest task for every generation of researchers, the comprehension of “the spirit of their time”.

1.1 Research Questions and Design

There have been two driving forces that have sustained and fostered the research work at the base of this study: firstly, the curiosity for a phenomenon, irregular migration, that is emblematic of the contradictions and complexities of the age of globalization and then the dissatisfaction with most of the available explanations.

The curiosity was not so much aroused by the scenes of the overcrowded boats trying to cross the Mediterranean or of the people jumping over the fences in Tijuana, in order to achieve their “American dream”. After all, a great deal of human history has been about people trying to overcome barriers, no matter whether they are geographical or political, in order to improve their living conditions. What really intrigued me was on the other side of those barriers. Why were the rich states that cried against the “invasion”, with all their armies, resources and technologies, still unable to stop these hordes of “miserable” people? Was it possible that after four centuries of adjustments and rethinking, the state, epitome of modern politics, had

not yet been able to solve the most elemental problem, that of populations coming and going? How could irregular migrants live, work and fulfil their dreams within societies that, at least in principle, refused their presence? Irregular migration appeared to me as a captivating phenomenon because it evidenced the incongruence between the idea of states as the all-embracing, all-mighty controllers of socio-political interactions, and a much more complex and thriving reality made up of conflicts, ambivalences and uncertainty. Reflecting and researching on irregular migration, from this point of view, seems to me not simply a way to elucidate the particular aspects of a specific social phenomenon, but rather to provide a viewpoint from which to observe the structure and dynamics of contemporary society as a whole in the current age of globalization.

A preliminary review of the literature on irregular migration provided me with a large number of different, often contrasting, answers. Depending on the point of view, scholars and researchers had explained the phenomenon as the results of disparate causes, such as: the weaknesses of states, the ability of migrants, the interests of capitalists, the support of criminal networks, etc. As I proceeded in the exploration, I found myself in the paradoxical situation of becoming more and more fascinated by the new approach I found, and, at the same time, more frustrated by the incongruence of the complex puzzle that was emerging. Furthermore, it appeared that each theorization effort usually emerged from the analysis of a particular national case. Thus, for instance, if in a certain place, the role of efficient smuggler networks had been crucial, irregular migration had to be explained everywhere as the result of smuggler networks. Besides, since the studied cases were rather limited, these mono-causal, undifferentiated explanations were generalized without a solid empirical control base. What seemed to be missing, then, was broader and more systematic work of comparison, in other words, one that made it possible to assess similarities and differences between different cases and therefore to offer material for the development of a more general and sophisticated understanding of irregular migration.

On the basis of these initial reflections, I decided to start this work with a very broad and general research question in mind: How can irregular migration be explained? A twofold strategy was formulated in order to add a grain of sand to the building of a better understanding of this phenomenon.

On the one hand, a theoretical study was developed. The objective of this study was to critically analyse the different theories that have been proposed to explain irregular migration and to prepare an alternative theoretical framework. The main research questions of this study were: what is known about irregular migration? What have been the main theoretical explanations of the phenomenon? What are the strengths and weaknesses of such explanations? Is it possible to find an alternative theoretical framework that is able to reconcile the strengths and overcome the weaknesses of the other theories? Building on the critiques to the principal theoretical explanations of irregular migration, the study focused on the theoretical work of Niklas Luhmann in order to search for a more effective theoretical framework. This approach helped to overcome a number of theoretical difficulties that have characterized this field of research. For instance, it was possible to go beyond a dichotomist

understanding of the relation between agency/structure and to retrieve a social perspective where a statist one had been clearly dominant. The result was the elaboration of an analytical framework that enabled the possibility of linking the social characteristics of the irregular migration phenomenon to the structural features of the considered contexts, as well as the understanding of irregular migration as a systemic and differentiated phenomenon.

On the other hand, an empirical study was developed. The objective of this study was to compare the experience of irregular migrants in two receiving contexts and to assess the differences and similarities that characterized the two cases. The aim was to offer empirical material for the theoretical reflection. The chosen case was that of Ecuadorian irregular migrants in the cities of Amsterdam and Madrid. This choice responded to two main explanations. The Ecuadorian migration phenomenon, because of its relatively time circumscribed characteristics and its economical motivations, appeared particularly appropriate for a “at destination” comparative research. Migrants in the two receiving contexts could be considered reasonably similar. In addition, the two cities, while having enough elements in common to avoid the risk of comparing “oranges and apples”, were at the same time very different. This allowed for a “most different cases” research strategy, which appeared particularly stimulating for theory testing and possible extension.

The empirical study consists of two parts. First, a context study was developed, which comparatively analysed the main structural characteristics of the two cities. Then, a fieldwork that combined ethnography and the collection of 30 in-depth interviews with irregular migrants in each context was developed. The main research questions that prompted this study were: What have been the main structural characteristics affecting migration in the two contexts (migration history, migration regime, economics, welfare state typology, public and political opinion)? What has been the experience of Ecuadorian irregular migrants within the two different contexts? What have been the most important differences and similarities? In particular: what have been the main legal trajectories developed by the migrants within the two contexts? What has been their experience regarding the work sphere (sectors, conditions, controls)? What has been their experience of state controls? Finally, what was their experience regarding basic life facets such as housing and healthcare access?

Although the theoretical and the empirical studies can be considered as separate entities and each has a certain degree of autonomy, they were actually developed together and imagined as complementary parts of a single research effort. Following Derek Layder’s “adaptive theory” methodology (Layder, 1998), a purely inductive or a purely deductive approach was avoided. Instead, an attempt was made to establish a permanent dialogue between the theoretical and empirical parts of this study. Adaptive theory focuses on the construction of novel theory by utilizing elements of prior theory (general and substantive) in conjunction with theory that emerges from data collection and analysis. It is the interchange and dialogue between prior theory (models, concepts, conceptual clustering) and emergent theory that forms the dynamic of adaptive theory (Layder, 1998, p. 27). The results that gradually emerged from the empirical work in this study influenced the theoretical reflections while, at

the same time, the concepts and ideas emerging from the theoretical work helped to orient and improve the empirical work.

In the concluding part, then, the initial and more general research questions – what is irregular migration and how is it possible to explain it? – were raised again. Combining the results of the contextual study and the fieldwork concerning Amsterdam and Madrid, an attempt was made to establish possible relations between the structural characteristics of the two contexts and the different irregular migration realities that emerged within them. As a result, a differential, systemic explanation of irregular migration was proposed, and its advantages, in comparison with more “orthodox” explanations, were discussed. Finally, combining the results of the theoretical and empirical studies, and by means of a process of abstraction, a preliminary theoretical typology of irregular migration realities in relation to the structural characteristics of the contexts was suggested.

1.2 Structure of the Book

The book is divided into three main parts. In the first part, the results of the bibliographical and theoretical study are presented. In Chap. 2 the existing literature on irregular migration is examined, identifying the main topics, lines of inquiry and scientific debates. Chapter 3 contains a critical analysis of the different theoretical approaches that have been developed towards an understanding of irregular migration. In Chap. 4 an alternative framework for the theoretical understanding of irregular migration, based on the works of Niklas Luhmann’s social systems theory, is proposed.

In the second part, the results of the empirical study are portrayed. In Chap. 5 the empirical research design and methodology are discussed. In Chap. 6, a comparative analysis of the main structural characteristics of the cities of Amsterdam and Madrid is made. Chapter 7 deals with an elaboration and discussion of the results of the fieldwork on the experience of Ecuadorian irregular migrants in Amsterdam and Madrid.

In the third and concluding part of the book, a “dialogue” between the previous two parts is attempted and some further steps towards a systemic theory of irregular migration are proposed. Chapter 8 provides a discussion regarding the results of the empirical study, comparing the explicative capacity of the “classical” theoretical approaches, analysed in Chap. 3, and of the systemic approach, developed in Chap. 4. On the basis of this discussion and its results, in the concluding part, a systemic analytical framework of irregular migration is proposed and the strengths and weaknesses of the book are discussed.

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