

Savages of the New Era? Irregular Migration and the Making of Social Order, the Case of Egypt

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At the turn of the 21st century the movement of Africans into Europe was captured in various vividly represented images and tragic stories of capsized boats, dead or detained bodies of men and women who ventured through the seas of the Mediterranean in hope of a different life in Europe. Informed by research on the case of so-called irregular Egyptian migrants to southern Europe (mainly Italy and Greece), I contend that the figure of the irregular migrant and the imaginary and policies deployed about and against *HIM* [1] map onto the figure of the laboring subject that once marked the hallmark of the colonial order. Irregular migrants are produced discursively as inhabiting a space that is the mirror image of that of citizens (the latter constituted as civil individuals, regulated by law, and connected to the state as rights- and property-bearing individuals). Irregular migrants as laboring subjects on the other hand constitute an amorphous, non-individualized collective body subjected to corporeal control and regulation. This collective body is both gendered and raced at two levels: first as object of regulation, and second, on the level of everyday experience, where gender, race, age, ethnicity and religion are key domains through which lives are constituted. Additionally, irregular migrants are rendered into objects of the administration of law, whereby laboring and mobility become the two arenas through which legal relations to the state are constituted. Equally pertinent, they are culturally and morally produced as outside of and threatening to the orderly social and moral world (as the savage of the new era).

This paper is based on an analysis of the accounts of Egyptian migrants in relationship to the strategies adopted by Egypt and Italy to curb so-called illegal movement. For many migrants “crossing the sea” — where one faces not only death and detention, but also an array of violence on the passage to Europe (ranging from systematic humiliation in transit depots, the ravages of the seas, to outbreaks of violence among packed migrating bodies) — signals neither banality nor defeat, but a terrain where rights and positions defined by class, gender, race and citizenship are reclaimed. Situating irregular migration at the nexus of migration theories, transnational paradigms, and post-colonial critiques, I argue for an urgent need to go beyond the narrow judicial-legal discourse to encompass the complex meanings and effects of gendered illegality on those who cross the seas seeking alternatives lives in Europe.

[1] I purposefully use the term *HIM* in order to underscore the centrality of gendering of the figure of irregular migrant.