Interview - Nando Sigona

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Dr. Nando Sigona (@nandosigona) is a Senior Lecturer in migration and citizenship and Deputy Director of the Institute for Research into Superdiversity at the University of Birmingham. He is also a Research Associate at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) and the Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford. Nando is one of the founders of the journal *Migration Studies*. His research interests are in the area of migration, refugee and ethnic studies, including issues such as statelessness, diasporas and the state; Romani politics and anti-Gypsyism; 'illegality' and the everyday experiences of undocumented migrant children and young people; and crisis, governance and governmentality of forced migration in the EU. He has recently coedited the*Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies* and *Diasporas Reimagined*, and recently co-authored *Sans Papiers: The Social and Economic Lives of Undocumented Migrants*. Nando also maintains an academic blog titled *Postcards from…*

Where do you see the most exciting research happening in your field?

A core area of my research is the migration and citizenship nexus, that is the extent to which international migration and migration governance shape citizenship and, in turn, how our understanding of citizenship impacts upon the way society responds to human mobility, particularly of 'unwanted' populations. I do research on/with asylum seekers, Roma, refugees, minority groups, undocumented migrant children and families and on stateless people. What I try to do is to explore the spaces between citizenship and non-citizenship and to show how, in contemporary societies, in super-diverse societies, it is no longer possible to address issues in terms of binaries between legal and illegal, citizen and non-citizen. We need a new way of looking at society which focuses not on these binaries, but on the various steps in between. The way that people relate to the state has changed and is no longer just the relationship between the state and the person, but there is also the human rights framework and the human rights obligation that intervenes. I think that work around superdiversity carried out at IRiS is really important because, through an interdisciplinary approach, we can build links and develop new perspectives on these issues which transcend disciplinary boundaries.

The EU's current struggle to find a sustainable and humane response to the refugee crisis at its borders is, among other things, a fascinating laboratory for researchers in this area. The crisis has highlighted the fragility of the so-called 'fortress Europe' and of the EU political project more broadly. The failure to find a common strategy has exacerbated and foregrounded the tensions within the EU institutional architecture that began to surface during the financial and monetary crisis in the late 2000s. The way in which the EU and its leadership have mourned the victims of boat migration and claimed or not claimed responsibility for them highlighted the divergence of visions around the meaning of the EU citizenship.

I asked in a recent piece, 'Whose problem are boat migrants?' Some have championed an EU response to the situation which, by making it an issue of home affairs, strategically projects the boundaries of 'us', as an EU-wide community of values and solidarity, beyond individual member-states. Meanwhile, others are pursuing the opposite agenda, namely using the failure to seal EU borders as evidence of the need for renationalizing borders and claiming powers back from Brussels. This is why rather than talking of a 'migration crisis', we should talk of crises: a humanitarian one as, according to the UNHCR, in 2014 we had an unprecedented number of forcibly displaced people in the world; a governance one, where the EU and its member states have been unable to govern the flow of

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refugees at EU borders; and a political one, one of the EU project which inevitably affects the EU's ability to respond coherently to the situation.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Among the many things the current situation has helped me to understand is the fact that borders are porous, even when they are made of barbed wire, like in Hungary. Footage from different European border zones show the extent to which the sheer presence of a peaceful but determined mass of people can challenge the rigidity of borders. We first observed this at sea, in the Mediterranean. Mare Nostrum and Triton Plus have stretched the borders of the EU well into international waters and up to the Libyan coast, with this also our responsibility vis-à-vis the people travelling on unseaworthy boats. One of the major changes since the beginning of the crisis in the Mediterranean is that migrant boats no longer arrive on Europe's shores autonomously, as we used to see in the past – the isle of Lampedusa had become the icon of 'the invasion'. Nowadays, the central Mediterranean route is somehow normalized, boats make distress calls pretty soon into their journey and, in the large majority of cases, are rescued and brought to land by the boats patrolling the route. Spontaneous arrivals are still common on the routes from Turkey to the Greek islands.

Another significant change brought by the current crisis concerns the public discourse on migration, which is now largely framed within a two-fold emergency narrative: according to the position one takes in the political spectrum, it can take a more securitarian or more humanitarian twist. If one steps back for a moment, it is easy to see that migration is more than the current crisis, and that issues of integration, diversity, racism and social exclusion are still there, even if they are now at the margins of the political debate.

How representative is the situation in Calais of the wider global refugee crisis?

For a few weeks in August, Calais monopolized media attention in Britain and Europe. Media coverage and political rhetoric implied that the UK was undergoing an uncontrollable invasion. But, as I wrote in The Conversation, while Calais is one manifestation of the global refugee crisis, it is certainly not one of the acutest. One just needs to compare the size of 'the new jungle' in Calais with that of a refugee camp in Lebanon to put the Calais crisis into perspective.

How effectively do you think the EU is handling the refugee crisis?

The arrival of thousands of refugees and migrants has strained the EU and the relationship between member states. Attempts to show leadership by the EU commission have rapidly imploded. Numerous proposals have been put on the table and Jean-Claude Juncker has made the refugee crisis a priority for his mandate, but time and again member states are showing a lack of solidarity and willingness to contribute to a collective EU-wide response. Hungary just completed a four-metre high fence along its 177km border with Serbia; not long ago, Greece and Bulgaria did the same. Germany has tried to lead by example, with some success, but it can't sustain the arrivals alone for long. The situation has put the Schengen agreement itself under unprecedented pressure. How the situation will evolve is hard to predict. Politicians have repeatedly taken a very emotive and short-term approach to the crisis. It seemed that the tragic photo of Aylan Kurdi had produced a lasting change of approach in Europe, but regrettably it only lasted a few days.

In a recent article in *Citizenship Studies*, you introduced the concept of 'campzenship'. What does the concept stand for?

From the squatted buildings around Rome to the 'new jungle' in Calais, from the UK-funded refugee camps in Lebanon to the reused beer tents in Germany, a constellation of camps and camp-like places have spread across the continent and beyond. The camp on the EU mainland or as an offshore extension is fast becoming Europe's unofficial answer to the refugee crisis. What kind of membership is produced by the camps? I tried to answer this question using my ethnographic study of camps for Roma refugees in Italy. I wanted to capture the complexity and

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ambivalence of social relations in and around camps, as well as residents' everyday practices and experiences of political membership. The concept of 'campzenship' is there to capture the specific and situated form of political membership produced in and by the camp. I argue that, rather than an exception, the camp space is paradigmatic of the stratification and diversification of political membership in contemporary society, a social and political terrain where rights, entitlements and obligations are reshaped, bent, adjusted, neglected and activated by, and through, everyday interactions.

You co-authored the book *Sans Papiers: The Social and Economic Lives of Undocumented Migrants*. What struck you as the most surprising and/or important insights from those interviews?

The book is built around the voices of 75 undocumented migrants from Brazil, China, Ukraine, Zimbabwe and Kurds from Turkey. It moves between the uniqueness of individual experience and the search for commonalities, to understand migratory processes and decision-making, gendered experiences and migrant aspirations. The lack of legal status permeates every aspect of migrant lives, including friendship and intimate relations. After a few years undocumented in Britain, many young migrants come to realize that they have to put their dreams on hold, unable to make plan about the future and live in continuous fear of detection, imprisonment and deportation.

In what ways do you think academics can inform or express their research and its findings, particularly on such topical issues as migration, to a broader audience?

I see the dissemination of my work to different audiences, inside and outside academia, as an essential part of my job as an academic is a state-funded university. The University of Birmingham is a civic university and I fully subscribe the mission of the School of Social Policy where I am based: 'to understand the world – but also to change it'. Reaching different audiences requires us to think creatively at how we communicate our research. I have run an academic blog (*Postcards from…*) since 2008 and regularly share my thoughts through twitter (@nandosigona), engage with mainstream media (which at times can be stressful, like when I contributed to the BBC's Moral Maze on migration) and often write columns for online media like The Conversation and OpenDemocracy. Besides these more 'traditional' channels, I have also experimented with theater and short videos, in particular for my research on undocumented migrant children where we were keen to reach out to schools and young people. My former colleague Vanessa Hughes has developed this further, working with school children on a script based on our research. Sometimes visibility may expose one to abuses (in Twitter they are not rare), but there is also much to gain. My TEDx talk, for example, helped me to build links with academics and activists on migrants' rights in the US.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of Politics and Sociology?

As researchers in the UK, we are under immense pressure to translate our work into measurable deliverables, either in terms of REF-able outputs or impact narratives. Short-term contracts are a common experience for most young researchers, and at times it becomes difficult to stay true to one's own research interests and ideas. While research jobbing gives us useful skills in terms of flexibility, capacity to work in team, a wider network of relations and contacts, it can also force an early career researcher to move from one project to another with no time for blue-sky thinking or even just thinking outside the narrow box of particular research calls. Whenever possible, and sometimes this can happen only if one can say no to requests coming from more senior colleagues, one should ring-fence some time to develop one's own ideas and research interests.

Working in and out of disciplinary boundaries is also important, and challenging. As social scientists, we should never forget that our primary goal is to understand, investigate and engage with society, and being able to look at the world through different analytical lenses is certainly an advantage.

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This interview was conducted by Jane Kirkpatrick. Jane is an Associate Features Editor at E-IR.