



Ser migrante
(Being a Migrant)

Matteo Dean

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THE DISASTROUS UNDER-RECOGNITION OF MIGRANTS

The late Matteo Dean's book of op-ed articles and essays, *Ser migrante* (Being a Migrant) starts with a crack. Until recently, Dean points out, according to the Royal Spanish Academy, the word "migrant" (*migrante*) did not even officially exist in Spanish. "Inmigrado" and "emigrante" existed, but not, simply, "*migrante*." A person could, then, in the official registers of the language, be entering or leaving a country, but between, in transit, or back and forth, there was a linguistic crack, a space of non-definition the migrant fell into. And what befalls a migrant in this crack—this interstitial space outside national protection or recognition—is the material of *Ser migrante*.

But the rather recondite linguistic analogy is not just limited to Spanish. In the United States as well, not only are migrants *not* guaranteed freedom—they seem rather to be guaranteed both violence and exploitation—they are not even guaranteed a respectful definition: routinely and pejoratively referred to as "illegals," "wetbacks," "tonks," or "aliens."

Our basic freedoms—the right to speech, freedom from oppression, fair trials, the pursuit of happiness—are defined and protected by our national constitutions. But where some countries do not guarantee these freedoms, or do not abide by their own guarantees, the International Declaration of Human Rights serves to extend them to all persons, especially those, like migrants—there are an estimated 212 million worldwide—who are liable to fall, as in Dean's linguistic example, into the unprotected spaces between the limits of national protection, into *the cracks*.

Reading Matteo Dean, you start to realize that there are cracks all around us.

Ser migrante is a collection of articles (averaging 3 short pages) most of which were originally published in Mexico's daily paper *La Jornada*, describing the many ways these 212 million migrants are exploited, abused, murdered, kidnapped, hoodwinked, incarcerated, enslaved, mistreated, misinformed, and altogether stomped on by the laws or lack of laws in Europe, Mexico, and the United States. By detailing these horrors abroad—most but not all of the essays concern migration in Europe—Dean sheds light on the horrors at home. That is,

by focusing as much on migration to Italy and Europe as on Mexico and the United States, the book shocks the reader at what at first sounds like foreign callousness and brutality, but which is frighteningly reminiscent of the migration policies of both Mexico and the United States.

On January 7, 2010, Dean reports, in the tip of the boot of the Italian peninsula, thousands of migrant workers poured into the streets of the small city of Rosarno (population, 15 000) to protest the miserable conditions in which they were forced to live and work. A drive-by shooting—shots were fired into a crowd of migrants—outside an abandoned factory where many migrants live incited them to take to the streets. The shooting was only one of a “long list of attacks” against the migrant communities in the region. The ensuing police crackdown was swift and firm. Most of the protestors were apprehended and trucked to a Center of Identification and Expulsion, and 16 were injured. The following night, January 8, Italy’s Minister of the Interior Roberto Maroni declared that the scuffle was

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the “result of years of excessive tolerance of illegal migration, which is the basis for [Italy’s] criminality and social degradation.” Here we have an example of what Dean explains as the foundation-laying of “modern slavery.” Tens of thousands of migrants live in this region of Italy and nearly four million countrywide. Cracking down, as Maroni went on to suggest, and in effect what is happening now in Italy (as well as across Europe, the U.S., and Mexico) does not stem migration; rather, it forces millions of migrants, whose basic well-being and even survival is ever more precarious, to accept increasingly decrepit working and living conditions, creating, in Dean’s words, “an Army of human beings exposed to all types of blackmail.”

The blackmailing goes like this: accept the racist inhuman conditions in which you live as an “illegal” person, or...

The “or” ranges from expulsion, breaking apart families, incarceration, starvation, general mistreatment, to deportation to violent countries of origin, etc.

So, not surprisingly, the migrants acquiesce—whether in Rosarno, Italy, Phoenix, Arizona, or Mexico City—to their

frightening working and living conditions. They acquiesce to living in the shadows, to do our dirty work for a pittance, to zero job security, and to the constant fear of arrest and deportation.

This parsing of a mostly unheard-of protest in southern Italy is one of many ignored or poorly publicized migration matters that Dean touches on in the book. Here are three (of many) others:

1. The swiftly increasing number of climate refugees. Though the number is difficult to speculate, considering earthquakes, tsunamis, and other natural disasters, there have been estimations as high as 50 million.
2. Italy’s under-the-table diplomatic relationship with the late Muammar Gaddafi and his Libyan regime, in which the Italian Coast Guard would wash their hands of migrants rescued from the Mediterranean, especially refugees from Eritrea, by shipping them to Libya, where they were interned and given the choice between “freedom,” working in Libyan communes, or deportation back to the violence they were originally fleeing in Eritrea—here Dean ties the situation to the infamous aphorism, “work will make you free.”
3. The concrete ties between European and North American human trafficking rings (Mexico’s Gulf Cartel’s connection to the Italian Ndrangheta mafia).

But the central question Dean repeatedly poses, through these specific, international, and varied anecdotes is simple: What does it mean to be a migrant?

Two hundred twelve million worldwide. That’s about one in every 34 persons.

Dean himself was born in Italy. And, deported twice from Mexico before finally receiving permanent residency, he himself was a migrant. Despite Dean’s unfortunate and early death—at 36, he was hit by a truck whose brakes went out—he has left us with a book, which, even if it does not completely follow through with many of the questions it raises, does open up new and international angles with which to comprehend North American migration policies.

It is absurd—and it seems even more so considering the international context—how obdurately we have tied a person’s legal status to his or her location. Or, perhaps even more fundamentally insensitive, and a question that underlies many of Dean’s essays, is our insistence on defining human beings based on notions of legality. Dean’s diverse and often horri-

fying examples show us that the repercussions of this obsession of ours (illegalizing our fellow human beings) are real, widespread, and violent.

In his detailing of Frontex, a company based out of Poland that was allocated €2 billion between 2007 and 2013 by the European Union, which owns 116 ships, 27 helicopters, 21 planes, and 400 mobile radar system, all deployed to protect Europe from the influx of migrants, we feel the impact of how ridiculous the scare policies toward northward migration is on this continent, how wasteful the drones flying over the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, or how ludicrous the billions wasted on ineffective walls and sophisticated but useless borderwall technology are. In his report on the many Centers of Identification and Expulsion—not Dean’s satiric nickname, but the official name of the detention centers—scattered throughout Europe, which the author caustically claims call to mind Nazi concentration camps (where not only “illegal crossers” are imprisoned but also those requesting asylum), we cannot help but think of the booming population of migrants (380 000 in 2009) locked up in private prison companies throughout the United States. Perhaps the biggest rivals of U.S. private prison companies (like Corrections Corporation of America) are actually the Mexican cartels, most of which have similarly taken to exploiting migrants’ vulnerable condition, that is, locking people up for profit.

Indeed, as Dean points out, our insensitivities are injurious at best and murderous at worst. Recently, on December 4, in a meeting of the Pacific Alliance of Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Mexico, the first three proposed the free transit of citizens among the four allied countries. Mexico rejected the request, President Calderón claiming that there is “an enormous pressure on Mexico because it is a country of high transit of migrants on their way to the United States.” But the high transit of migrants is exactly why they should be—to use this sad and bizarre qualification—“legalized.” Despite Draconian political deterrence (walls, inhumane detention conditions, racist climates) and inhospitable routes and methods (dangerous seas or deserts), history has repeatedly shown that it is nearly impossible to stop human migration. So Calderón’s statement is akin to saying that despite the large numbers of migrants who pass and will continue to pass through the country, Mexico will not offer them a hand and will not try to make their lives safer or more comfortable. Illegal presence in a country *de jure* prohibits and *de facto* denies a whole host of social services (even often including health care and police protection) and invites exploitation,

kidnapping, rape, murder, etc. And the Mexican government, the U.S. government, and Fortress Europe governments continue to withhold support and recognition of migrants, even going so far as to criminalize them, making a better or more dignified life for millions not only illegal to have, but illegal to even want, that is, as Dean puts it succinctly, it is “illegal to be illegal.”

One of the more telling examples Dean gives is of the drawn-out kerfuffle over the “Cap Anamur Case,” in which three German citizens were arrested and tried for rescuing 37 Africans from a distressed boat in the Mediterranean. The Germans, along with their new 37 passengers, were denied entry for three weeks into an Italian harbor. Neither Germany, nor Malta (the closest country to where the migrants were rescued), nor Italy offered the least assistance during these three weeks. In the end, the boat was allowed into the harbor, but the 37 migrants were deported and the trial of the Germans lasted three years. In the final ruling they were eventually acquitted of all charges of human trafficking, but, as Dean points out, “since then, captains of ships, fishermen, or tourists who travel these waters will think twice about rescuing any migrants in distress.” Similarly, United States citizens have gone to trial for transporting dying migrants to the hospital, or for leaving water bottles in the desert, and now, with increasingly malicious laws in Arizona, Alabama, Georgia, and Oklahoma—copycat laws are pending in 13 other states—certainly many U.S. citizens will think twice, considering the potential legal ramifications, before helping a fellow human being in need, especially if that human being has the look of an “illegal.”

This is the kind of international frame Dean gives us in *Ser migrante*, shining, if not new at least more light on the inhumanity of our migration policies. I wish that Dean were around to give us more. And I hope that some of our lawmakers read this book and feel rightly ashamed.

Ser migrante is part of the Frontera Press series published by Sur+. John Berger’s *Un séptimo hombre* (A Seventh Man), part of the same series, was reviewed in the Autumn 2011 issue of *Voices of Mexico*.¹ **NM**

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¹ *Voices of Mexico* no. 94, pp. 125-128. [Editor’s Note.]