Absences

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International and transnational migrants have given a new dimension to the globalisation of the world: it is estimated that 281 million people (3.6% of the world's population) were living in a country other than their country of birth in 2020, 128 million more than in 1990 and more than three times as many as in 1970[1]. The routes they take on a global scale are now less dependent on the legacies of colonial pasts and open up a whole new range of possibilities in terms of location and relationships with the countries of origin. By changing the relationship between proximity and distance, globalisation has also transformed the ways in which people live and project themselves in the world and caused a reconsideration of the forms of presence in the countries of origin.

With the diversification of migration profiles, globalisation has also been accompanied by the production of situations of absence, rarely experienced before on this scale. These situations of absence reveal the inequalities in access to the space of mobility and the new forms of dis:connectivity (→ **Introduction**) that shape them. The health measures generated by the recent Covid 19 pandemic demonstrated this powerfully by restricting movement and confining the population, generating isolation and loneliness throughout the world, shaking up our ways of life and causing tension between the distance that protects and the proximity that exposes. These situations of absence within families reflect the geographical frontiers that separate people who share a bond of proximity, either by descent or by elective affinity, that forms the social fabric, along with the organic bond and the bond of citizenship (Paugam 2023).

It is important to distinguish the contexts of separation (historical forms) from the situations of absence (social forms) that result from them. This is because separation and absence refer to different acts and processes. This decoupling of separation and absence is justified by the identification of situations of absence that differ according to the contexts that produce them. Indeed, there is nothing in common between the mobility of Algerian workers in France up until the 1960s during the 'Trente Glorieuses' and that of mothers who went to work in the personal services sector in a country other than their own. In the first case, the mobility documented by Abdelmalek Sayad (1999) was predominantly male. These men, either mandated by the group or driven by individual motives, spent a few months in France before

1 State of migration in the world 2020. Available at: https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/wmr-2020-interactive/?lang=FR (accessed 18/12/2023).

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returning to their families back home. The context of separation involving the departure of mothers who have gone to work abroad is very different.[2] The result is new family configurations linked to the reorganisation of roles within these families, with children being entrusted to close family members. Situations of absence in the contexts described above differ from one another because of the length of the separation, the reorganisation of roles within transnational families, the care of children left behind, the administrative and legal arrangements governing these absences and, more broadly, the economic, material and emotional resources that may circulate within family configurations.

Although the contexts of separation have multiplied in a globalised world, absence as a way of maintaining a link remains little studied in the field of migration, even though inequalities in access to mobility influence this experience, its duration and the ways in which the link is maintained. Some would say that this approach is outdated, obsolete, because communication technologies (→ **Communication Technologies**) have considerably altered the relationship between presence and absence. By promoting 'dual presence', the paradigm of transnationalism has not only accompanied these technological developments, it has made them a marker of the transformation of the social bond at a distance (Glick-Schiller, Basch, and Szanton Blanc 1995). In a way, it is no longer possible to be absent when people on the move maintain links with their separated loved ones that can be described as permanent. However, while it is undeniable that long-distance exchanges attenuate the consequences of distance to a certain extent by ensuring that people far from each other maintain permanent ties, they do not put an end to absence, because the link is in the relationship of absence.[3]

Absence: a common basis for mobility

While there are several forms of absence (absent infrastructures, absence of certain actors from history books, etc.) which have a relationship with globalisation and dis:connectivity, the one presented here is linked to international mobility and the forms of disappearance that illegal mobility entails (De Gourcy 2024). Maintaining links in the most precarious situations, marked by strong disconnections between social worlds governed by different norms and references, is only possible if the

2 Since 2021, the Philippines has had a Minister of the Department of Migrant Workers. The mandate was to regulate access to healthcare and legal aid, allow migrant workers to file complaints and monitor the actions of recruitment agencies. Sources: https://www.ohchr.org/fr/news/2023/03/dialogue-philippines-experts-committee-migrant-workers-commend-ratification-key-labour (accessed 18/12/2023).

3 This chapter is based on a book on the analysis of remote social links (De Gourcy 2024).

missing persons are included in relationships of absence, as parents, spouses, children, friends, etc. How else can the missing presence be recognised, and mobilised on its behalf, if it is not part of a close network of ties? It is only because ties exist prior to mobility that a given person can be considered absent.

In the same way, absence refers to what is instituted in the long-distance link, i.e. attachment techniques that vary according to the state of the technological conditions that produce abundant material in societies, from epistolary correspondence to messages transmitted instantaneously via digital technologies. By giving absence both visual and aural materiality, these traces document the changing norms at work in the way we refer to the distant person, disclosing the transformations of the intimate and revealing points of view that seek to adjust to distance. In this sense, the absence has a spatiality, materiality and agency (Meyer and Woodthorpe 2008) that merit attention and consideration in a globalised world.

Considering that mobile people are caught up in relationships of absence thus invites us to go beyond the individualistic approach to mobility and migration and its reduction to political-administrative categories. As Abdelmalek Sayad (1999) points out: 'the phenomenon of migration in its entirety, emigration and immigration, cannot be thought of, described or interpreted in any other way than through the categories of State thinking'. The figures of the migrant, the asylum seeker, the exile (→ **Exile**), the expatriate and the returnee are certainly a reminder of the primacy of mobility over sedentariness, but they represent different points of view, hierarchised on a scale of political and media value. So it is important to specify that, however different they may be, these figures share an experience of absence that appears to be a common foundation.

In a context marked by the extension of borders and restrictive migration policies, the difficulties encountered in migratory journeys and the unevenly distributed possibilities of maintaining long-distance relationships have an impact on the bonds of absence. The division is between those who can move easily and maintain an open field of attention in relation to distant relatives and those whose migration is hindered or limited by restrictive and repressive migration policies (→ **Im/mobility**). The new forms of dis:connectivity on a global scale are creating situations of great vulnerability and social, legal and economic insecurity, which do not always offer the conditions required to maintain long-distance relationships with separated relatives. When mobility becomes 'irregular', the borders are no longer just geographical; they affect the day-to-day lives of separated families, who have to deal with the technical, legal, economic and administrative obstacles that limit their ability to stay in touch.

Crossing Europe's borders: absence under strain

Situations of absence now concern the various forms of encampment in the world where people spend an indeterminate amount of time, where they are born, live and die. According to Michel Agier (2011) what is new about the camp is that these places produce exiles who 'no longer have a place of arrival from which they can tell the story of their exile. This figure of the exile can no longer be fulfilled, because he or she no longer has a place, other than the place of the camp, of isolation, of impeded movement'. What happens when the relationship of absence with distant relatives is constrained by the difficulty or impossibility of maintaining it? Under these conditions, how can they maintain a relationship of absence with people they may never see again? Is it possible to speak of a relationship without absence? What relationship does this imply with the 'country of origin'? These questions open up new avenues of enquiry into the relationship with the world when the past is missing, when the relationship of absence is thwarted and/or prevented, when migration control policies separate members of the same family for long periods. This is where the limits of absence come into play, when the relationship can give way at any time to a disconnection, and the status of the absent becomes that of the disappeared. So, one of the challenges of (re)understanding these situations of absence is to make an inventory of the attachment techniques used to resist and regain a grip on the time of waiting at the heart of the complexity of contemporary migratory situations. In other words, if there is an 'art of presence' (Bayat 2013), there can also be an art of absence based on forms of resistance in the way of diverting the spatio-temporal dimensions of confinement, exclusion and separation.

Among the attachment techniques used to maintain links with people close to them are the 'pacts' that can be documented from contemporary accounts of people whose migration is illegal at Europe's borders (Kobelinski and Le Courant 2017). The people who live in these extremely constrained situations of absence are never guaranteed to reach the end of their migratory project. So, faced with the ever-present risk of disappearance or death, strategies are put in place between fellow travellers. These strategies involve establishing pacts, in particular by memorising names and telephone numbers to inform parents and relatives in the event of death. As the ultimate acts of resistance by people whose mobility is insecure, pacts offer the hope of escaping the social and political invisibility that surrounds the regime of absence through disappearance (Stimmatini and De Gourcy 2022). Such practices, which can be observed on migratory routes, appear to be tactics of resistance deployed by those who are considered undesirable by states. More broadly, they raise the question of the autonomy of exiles, who are striving in situations of extreme heteronomy to maintain links with loved ones and to have their absence recognised, an absence under tension, shaped by the constraints on their mobility. However, beyond the danger that land and sea routes pose to those who

use them in conditions of great vulnerability, these routes can be seen as 'sites of resistance' (Hooks 1999), the ultimate places where a subject free to move about asserts themselves, capable of resisting the established geopolitical order. Looking at them in this way allows us to anticipate the political construction of the migrant's future by seizing every opportunity to maintain relationships even at the most critical moments.

By way of conclusion, I would like to emphasise the importance of maintaining relationships against all odds, despite unfavourable contexts; this is a fundamental issue in terms of recognising the common element in the different forms of mobility, from the most secure to the least secure, and all the more so when people on the move are exposed to risks that threaten their lives. This common element makes it possible to account for the depth of the social ties in which every human being is caught up, as well as the socialities that are formed along migratory routes. Reintegrating absence into migration and diaspora studies thus makes it possible to 'de-migrantize' the terms used to describe movement and mobility, and to free ourselves from the methodological nationalism that guides our approach (Scheel and Tazzioli 2022). This perspective consists of recalling that before being migrants, these mobile people are absent for their loved ones and vice versa. Failing to take note of this common feature of our mobile humanity not only means repeating the pitfall of dividing migrations according to terminologies that refer to scales of legitimacy, individualising journeys or juxtaposing forms of presence. It also means favouring an individualistic approach to mobility and migration that too often considers the individual as self-sufficient and the world of mobility as a world of access or non-access, a world without relational depth or common humanity. In the context of globalisation, which erects as many walls and barriers as it removes, absence does indeed appear to be the common foundation of mobility, generating ways of being and behaviours of attachment that transcend inequalities of access, intimacies under pressure, and contexts and modalities of separation.

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