

Irregular Migration and Geopolitical Stigma in the Mediterranean: A Bourdieusian Field and Capital Approach to the Algerian Case.

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ABSTRACT:

This article explores Algerian irregular migration by putting human experiences at the center. It connects the journeys of harraga — young people who risk their lives in small boats toward Europe — with the quieter but far more protected movements of Spanish workers and firms who travel south to work in western Algeria. It asks why, in the same Mediterranean space, some bodies are treated as “illegal” and deportable while others are welcomed as experts and partners. To answer this, the article introduces the idea of “migration stigma regimes” to describe how laws, borders, and public narratives work together to mark certain people as dangerous, expendable, or undeserving of rights. Using Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of field, capital, habitus, and symbolic violence, the analysis shows how these regimes shape not only policies and statistics, but also self-image, hope, and dignity. Drawing on research on harraga, changes in work and migration in Algeria, and the mobility of Spanish workers, the article argues that the Mediterranean has become an unequal “migration field” in which chances for safe movement are distributed very unevenly. In this light, irregular migration appears less as an irrational gamble than as a desperate, strategic attempt to claim a livable future.

Keywords: irregular migration; harraga; migration stigma; Mediterranean migration field; Capital and precarity ;Mobility justice

Introduction

Irregular migration has become a key lens for understanding contemporary social and political transformations in Algeria and across the Mediterranean. The phenomenon of Harraga – young people attempting clandestine sea crossings towards Europe – cannot be reduced to “illegal border crossings”. It condenses, in a highly visible and often tragic form, the crises of labor markets, the

closure of socio-economic horizons for large segments of youth, and the reconfiguration of the Mediterranean as a contested space over the right to move and the meaning of citizenship and belonging. At the same time, less visible in public discourse, there has been a reverse movement from North to South: the post-2008 crisis has prompted Spanish workers and small and medium-sized enterprises to seek opportunities in western Algeria, using the South as a space of economic survival and professional circulation.

These intertwined movements are often described in terms of “flows” between sending and receiving countries or framed through simple logics of labour supply and demand. Such framings, however, tend to obscure the historical power relations forged under colonialism and its aftermath, and to neglect the symbolic, cultural and legal dimensions that structure who can move, under what conditions, and with which forms of recognition. There is a need for a sociological perspective capable of linking macro-level structures and policies with micro-level experiences, and of grasping how migration trajectories emerge at the intersection of legal regimes, economic restructurings and lived biographies.

Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptual apparatus – particularly his notions of field, capital, habitus and symbolic violence – offers a powerful set of tools to address these questions. By conceiving the Mediterranean as a “migration field” in which states, firms, intermediaries and migrants themselves compete over value and legitimacy, it becomes possible to reinterpret Algerian irregular migration as a strategy of repositioning within a stratified space whose rules are set by dominant actors. This perspective resonates with recent scholarship on migration stigma, migrant illegality, deportability and border violence, which has highlighted how states, media and health institutions produce representations of migrants as threats or burdens and institutionalize precarious legal and psychosocial conditions.

Building on this literature, the article develops the idea of “migration stigma regimes” as the configuration through which legal classifications, border practices and public discourses together assign migrants to inferior positions in the migration field. It mobilizes empirical work on harraga and on the long-term transformations of industrial labour and rural-to-urban migration in Algeria, as well as research on the post-crisis mobility of Spanish workers and firms to western Algeria. In doing so, it aims to contribute to the sociology of migration in the Maghreb and the Mediterranean by shifting attention from “causes of migration” to the conditions of its possibility and to the unequal logic through which opportunities for mobility are distributed.

The article proceeds in six steps. The first section revisits classical stigma theory through a Bourdieusian lens, shifting from stigma as an individual attribute to stigma as a relational position in a field. The second examines illegality and deportability as forms of field management through legal capital and symbolic violence. The third turns to border violence as a key mechanism for governing the bodily and symbolic boundaries of the migration field. The fourth analyses migrants’ everyday experiences and strategies to cope with stigma, focusing on harraga and their double stigmatization. The fifth re-reads the shift from post-independence industrialization to contemporary harraga as a transformation in class positions within the Algerian field. The sixth mobilizes the concept of



“migration-facilitating capital” to highlight Mediterranean inequalities in access to mobility. The conclusion reflects on the implications of a Bourdieusian approach for both migration theory and policy.

1. From Classical Stigma to Migration Stigma: From Attribute to Field Position

Erving Goffman’s seminal work conceptualizes stigma as a “spoiled” attribute that disqualifies individuals from full social acceptance and forces them to manage their identity in everyday encounters (Goffman, 1963, pp. 3–5). This interactionist perspective, focused on the micro-level management of spoiled identities within institutions such as schools, hospitals and prisons, remains highly influential. Yet, by privileging face-to-face settings, it is less equipped to capture the geopolitical dimensions of contemporary migration, where labels such as “illegal” or “dangerous” are produced and circulated through legal regimes, media discourses, and transnational policy networks.

In this sense, Goffman’s framework is indispensable for understanding the intimate work of identity repair under stigma, but it needs to be extended by field-oriented approaches to grasp how those stigmas are produced and enforced at a transnational scale. Bourdieu’s notion of field allows us to move from stigma as an individual attribute to stigma as an instrument for fixing actors’ positions within a relational social space. Fields are structured spaces of positions and position-takings, defined by unequal distributions of different forms of capital and by struggles over the legitimate principles of hierarchization (Bourdieu, 1994, pp. 40–45). In the Mediterranean migration field, the value of migrants’ economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital is not intrinsic, but depends on rules set by dominant actors – states, supranational institutions, employers and intermediaries. Migration stigma is one of the mechanisms through which these actors devalue certain capitals (for example, degrees or work experience obtained in the South) and construct migrants as deficient or threatening.

While Bourdieu developed his concepts in other empirical contexts, their translation to Mediterranean migration shows how flexible the field perspective is for capturing the layered and contested nature of North–South mobility.

Recent work on migration stigma shows that the politicization of migration as a security, cultural or epidemiological threat generates powerful forms of symbolic violence that undermine migrants’ mental health, sense of worth and capacity to convert their resources into recognized positions (Yang et al., 2024, pp. 5–12). Research on returning migrants likewise highlights how return may entail a loss of symbolic capital originally acquired abroad, forcing returnees to reconstruct their narratives to avoid downward status mobility in their home societies (Mueller, 2022, pp. 6–12). Reading these findings through Bourdieu suggests that stigma is not merely attached to individuals but operates as a device for policing the boundaries of the field, determining whose capital counts and under what conditions.

At the same time, most of this literature focuses on case studies in the Global North; applying it to Algerian trajectories foregrounds how migration stigma regimes are shaped by postcolonial histories and by South–North asymmetries that are often treated only implicitly.

2. Illegality and Deportability: Managing the Field through Legal Capital

Nicholas De Genova’s influential intervention reconceptualizes “migrant illegality” as a legal-political production rather than a natural given, showing how immigration law constructs hierarchies among categories such as citizen, legal resident, asylum seeker and undocumented migrant (De Genova, 2002, pp. 419–424). From a Bourdieusian perspective, this can be understood as the state’s monopoly over legal capital – the recognized authority to define legitimate membership and the rights attached to it.

In this framework, deportability is not only a factual possibility but a pervasive condition that shapes undocumented migrants’ everyday lives. It structures their access to employment, housing and public services, and produces a chronic sense of insecurity and vulnerability (De Genova, 2002, pp. 421–423). This condition reshapes their habitus: migrants learn to internalize the risk of removal, to avoid institutions, to accept exploitative work arrangements and to navigate spaces where they remain visible enough to work but invisible enough to evade enforcement. De Genova’s later notion of “spectacles of migrant illegality” – highly visible border operations, raids and deportations – points to the performative reaffirmation of state sovereignty and field boundaries through public displays of exclusion (De Genova, 2013, pp. 38–42).

Bringing this perspective to the Algerian–European context shows how deportability is unevenly distributed across nationalities and routes, and how it interacts with post-independence state projects and rentier configurations rather than with liberal democracies alone.

Studies in the “psychology of migrant illegality” complement this picture by documenting how legal precariousness generates cycles of fear, anxiety, self-stigma and institutional avoidance, with significant implications for migrants’ mental health and life trajectories (The Psychology of Migrant “Illegality”, 2021, pp. 4–10). In field terms, legal capital emerges as a central resource governing the distribution of positions in the migration field: some migrants are granted pathways to recognition and membership, while others are confined to marginal, deportable locations and subjected to specific forms of symbolic violence.

Yet, most psychological studies treat the legal environment as a given; a field perspective insists that these legal constraints are themselves the outcome of struggles among states and other actors, and that migrants’ coping strategies must be understood in relation to those shifting power balances.

3. Border Violence as the Bodily and Symbolic Governance of Field Boundaries

Scholarship in critical border studies has shown that borders in the Mediterranean are not fixed lines but multifaceted regimes of control, materialized in interdictions at sea, pushbacks, detention centres and offshoring of enforcement to third countries (Wang, 2020, pp. 2–6; Augustová & Sapoch, 2020, pp. 3–8). These practices are accompanied by powerful visual and discursive representations of boats, fences and “waves” of migrants, which frame mobility as crisis and invasion.

Viewed through Bourdieu's lens, borders are key sites where states concentrate legal and symbolic capital to reaffirm the boundaries of the migration field. They are stages on which the rules of the game are dramatized: some bodies are allowed to cross, others are repelled or left to die; some documents are recognized, others are declared invalid. The "spectacles of migrant illegality" described by De Genova can thus be interpreted as rituals that sustain the *illusio* of the field – the taken-for-granted belief in the legitimacy of its hierarchies and exclusions (De Genova, 2013, pp. 40–45).

In North African contexts, European externalization policies push borders southwards, transforming states such as Algeria into buffer zones or "gatekeepers" for EU migration control. This generates new categories of actors who wield migration-specific capital: smugglers, legal intermediaries, local officials and security agencies who possess knowledge of routes, procedures and enforcement gaps, and can convert this knowledge into economic and political resources (Souiah, 2011, pp. 10–15). Meanwhile, the costs of this regime are borne primarily by the most vulnerable migrants, who endure repeated cycles of clandestine travel, detention, refoulement and attempted re-entry, and by their families and communities

4. Everyday Experiences and Strategies of Coping with Stigma

4.1. Harraga: Habitus of Rebellion and Capital of Despair

Qualitative studies of harraga in Algeria reveal that decisions to undertake irregular sea journeys emerge at the intersection of structural and biographical factors: persistent unemployment or underemployment, experiences of family loss and conflict, and a pervasive sense of blocked futures in the national context (Mjahdi & Kebbaty, 2012, pp. 16–23). These trajectories crystallize a habitus of rebellion and disengagement, in which risky mobility is seen as preferable to a life of stagnation and humiliation. Irregular departure becomes a way to exit a field perceived as saturated and to seek an alternative horizon of recognition abroad.

Upon arrival in Europe, harraga are re-positioned through a dual stigma. Legally and institutionally, they are categorized as "illegal" or "undocumented", with all the associated constraints on work, housing and access to services. Socially and symbolically, they may be framed as irresponsible risk-takers or failed migrants, both in host societies and, upon return, in their communities of origin. In response, harraga develop a range of coping strategies: building dense support networks that provide informal jobs and shelter; redefining their journeys as sacrifices for their families or as quests for dignity; and using digital media to craft alternative narratives of success and resilience (Souiah, 2011, pp. 12–15). These practices can be read as attempts to rebuild symbolic capital within sub-fields of migrant communities, partially offsetting the devaluation imposed by official categorizations

4.2. Spanish Workers in Western Algeria: Economic and Symbolic Capital under Renegotiation

In contrast, studies of Spanish workers' mobility to western Algeria after the 2008 financial crisis highlight a different configuration of capital and field position. Spanish engineers, technicians and managers entering sectors such as construction and energy do so with substantial economic, cultural and symbolic capital: recognized qualifications, experience in European markets, and the



prestige associated with “foreign expertise” (Sempere Souvannavong & Cabezón Fernández, 2016, pp. 35–40). Yet they encounter a national field governed by specific legal and bureaucratic rules – notably the 51/49 ownership regulation, administrative hurdles and banking restrictions – and by workplace cultures that may diverge from their expectations.

In this setting, Algerian partners hold critical legal and social capital, functioning as gatekeepers to contracts, permits and local networks. Spanish firms are compelled to convert part of their economic capital into relational investments and to adapt their practices to navigate the institutional habitus of the Algerian field. Historical ties between Alicante and Oran, as well as memories of Spanish presence in colonial Algeria, provide ambiguous forms of symbolic capital that can facilitate local acceptance while remaining entangled with a colonial legacy (Sempere Souvannavong & Cabezón Fernández, 2016, pp. 44–47). From a field perspective, this “new Spanish migration” is less about downward displacement and more about the internationalization and spatial redeployment of capital in response to crisis, albeit from a relatively privileged starting point compared to harraga.

5. From Industrialization to Harraga: Shifting Class Positions in the Algerian Field

To understand why irregular migration has become such a salient option for many Algerian youths, it is necessary to go back to the earlier project that was supposed to anchor them socially: post-independence industrialization.

Post-independence Algeria pursued an ambitious project of state-led industrialization aimed at building a national productive base, achieving economic sovereignty, absorbing rural surplus labour and reducing emigration to Europe. This project integrated large numbers of rural migrants into industrial workplaces, transforming their relations to space, time and social identity: peasants became wagedworkers, villagers became urban dwellers, and collective representations of work and consumption shifted accordingly (Kebbat, 2012, pp. 45–50).

However, this trajectory was marked by structural tensions between central planning and local realities, and between industrial organizational cultures and enduring rural-based values and solidarities. Sociological studies of labour show that many workers maintained strong family and cultural ties to their regions of origin and engaged in continuous negotiation between factory norms and local moral economies (Kebbat, 2012, pp. 51–53). Over time, economic crises, restructuring and the decline of certain industrial sectors eroded the employment base that had underpinned this partial integration.

For younger generations, especially the children of first-generation industrial workers, this erosion translated into precarious and fragmented trajectories: they neither inherited stable agricultural livelihoods nor secured durable positions in industrial employment. They found themselves on the margins of the national field, with limited prospects for upward mobility (Kebbat, 2012, pp. 54–56). In this context, irregular migration by sea can be interpreted as a strategy to relocate class struggle to the Mediterranean field: instead of contesting their position solely within the Algerian social space, young people attempt to reinsert themselves into global hierarchies by seeking recognition and opportunities in European labour markets (Mjahdi & Kebbat, 2012, pp. 24–27).

The move “from industrial worker to harrag” thus signals not merely an individual choice but a collective reconfiguration of class trajectories under changing structural conditions. It reveals the failure of the national field to reproduce integrated working-class positions over time and shows how the boundaries of class are redrawn through cross-Mediterranean mobility, whereby some members of the working and lower middle classes become “illegal migrants” in European fields, while others in the North become “mobile experts” in the South.

6. Migration-Facilitating Capital: Mediterranean Inequalities in Access to Mobility

Against this backdrop of shifting class positions, it becomes crucial to ask who is actually able to move, and on what terms. Jaeun Kim’s concept of “migration-facilitating capital” names the bundle of resources that make international migration practically possible: not only money and education, but also state policies, selection criteria, legal statuses, intermediary services and networks that provide information, documentation and strategic advice (Kim, 2018, pp. 116–120). Embedded in a Bourdieusian framework, this concept underscores how various actors – states, intermediaries and migrants – participate in the production and accumulation of such capital, and how its distribution reflects and reinforces existing inequalities.

Applying this notion to the Algerian–Spanish configuration makes visible a North–South gradient of migration-facilitating capital, where EU citizenship, recognized credentials and institutional partnerships function as powerful enablers of mobility, while Algerian youth are pushed toward irregular routes that expose them to extreme risks despite comparable aspirations for work and dignity.

In the Algerian case, the reliance on harraga routes reveals a profound deficit of migration-facilitating capital among large segments of youth. Many lack strong passports, realistic access to visas, or credentials that are readily recognized in European labour markets. Their mobility is therefore organized through informal and often criminalized networks that offer practical knowledge of routes and crossing techniques but provide minimal legal protection and expose them to high risks of violence and death (Mjahdi & Kebbaty, 2012, pp. 20–23; Souiah, 2011, pp. 10–15).

By contrast, Spanish workers and firms moving towards Algeria command substantial amounts of migration-facilitating capital. They possess EU citizenship and travel documents that ease entry and exit; they operate through formal contracts, joint ventures and institutional partnerships; and they benefit from historical and linguistic proximities in certain regions, as well as from diplomatic and economic frameworks that support outward investment (Sempere Souvannavong & Cabezón Fernández, 2016, pp. 35–40). For them, mobility is framed less as a desperate escape and more as professional circulation and market diversification.

Analysed in these terms, “freedom of movement” appears not as a universal right but as a field effect: the ability to move across borders depends on one’s position in overlapping fields of class, nationality, race and profession. Migration-facilitating capital offers a conceptual bridge between macro-level selection regimes and micro-level capacities to move, highlighting how the same Mediterranean space offers radically different mobility regimes to different categories of actors.



Conclusion

This article has argued that understanding irregular migration in Algeria, and the phenomenon of harraga in particular, requires a shift from individualized explanations to a broader perspective that foregrounds the structure of the Mediterranean migration field and the unequal distribution of capital within it. A Bourdieusian approach makes it possible to see migration stigma, illegality, deportability and border violence as central mechanisms for managing this field through the deployment of legal and symbolic capital, rather than as incidental by-products of policy.

By revisiting the history of industrialization and labour in Algeria and juxtaposing the trajectories of harraga with those of Spanish workers and firms operating in western Algeria, the analysis has shown that the Mediterranean is traversed by multiple, intersecting and asymmetrical mobilities. Harraga enter European fields with devalued or non-recognized capital and are relegated to stigmatized, deportable positions, while Spanish actors mobilize their economic, cultural and migration-facilitating capital to reterritorialize their activities in the South from a relatively privileged position. These contrasting trajectories illustrate how class, nationality and legal status jointly shape possibilities for movement and recognition.

The proposed concept of “migration stigma regimes” captures the ways in which legal categories, border practices and public discourses co-produce hierarchies of worth and belonging, and how these hierarchies are internalized and negotiated in migrants’ habitus and everyday strategies. At the same time, the notion of migration-facilitating capital emphasizes that access to mobility is unequally distributed and structurally conditioned, challenging normative framings of migration as merely the outcome of individual preferences or push-pull factors.

For migration research, a Bourdieusian field-and-capital perspective encourages comparative analyses that situate specific national cases – such as Algeria and Spain – within broader transnational configurations of power, and that trace how different actors convert and contest various forms of capital across borders. For policy, the analysis suggests that addressing irregular migration cannot be reduced to border control or narrowly targeted development projects. It requires tackling the underlying inequalities in education, employment, legal status and recognition that shape who can move safely and with dignity, and who is compelled to risk their life at sea. Future research could extend this framework to other South–North and North–South trajectories, explore intra-African dimensions of the Mediterranean field, and examine how gender, race and religion intersect with class and nationality in structuring migration stigma regimes.

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