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## Refugees as Gamblers: Eritreans Seeking to Migrate Through Italy

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### ABSTRACT

Although the Dublin Regulation aims to prevent secondary movements within Europe, refugee flows from Italy toward northern Europe persist. Existing literature has investigated the relationship between refugee flows, policies, and other macro socioeconomic and cultural factors but the individual decision making underlying refugee mobility is relatively unexplored. Based on my ethnographic research, this article investigates how Eritrean refugees in Italy decide to move toward other European countries. It will be argued that refugees' decisions can be analyzed by using conceptual tools borrowed from the study of gambling and that they tend to be little (if at all) affected by policy constraints.

### KEYWORDS

Secondary movements;  
Eritrean refugees; gambling  
studies; decision making;  
Dublin Regulation; Italy

### Introduction

Although the Dublin Regulation (1990, 2003, 2013) has severely limited refugees' possibilities in achieving legal status in more than one European country, it has not prevented them from attempting it. Asylum seekers from Asia and Africa usually enter Europe through Italy, Spain, Malta, and Greece, where their fingerprints are taken upon identification, unless they manage to escape the authorities. However, recently arrived refugees rarely seem interested in living in the southern European countries of their arrival, even if they have been granted legal status there. They rather aspire to seek asylum in northern Europe, where they believe that better socioeconomic benefits will be provided to them (Brekke & Brochmann, 2015). Thus, even if current policy measures make it almost impossible to obtain asylum in another European country, many refugees have repeatedly tried to reach other destinations over the last 10 years. They hope their fingerprints will not be found, that their cases will be considered differently by the authorities, and that they will not be returned to their first safe European country. These secondary movements are not only a concern at the state and inter-state level, due to lack of compliance to the established rules and debate about the distribution of asylum

applications within the European Union. They are also a reason of alarm for NGOs and civil society working for refugee protection in Europe. In fact, these migration attempts entail risking long periods of imprisonment, belated integration processes, and related psychological problems (ECRE, 2009). Against this background of obstacles and risks, this article investigates why, most notably from the perspective of Eritrean refugees in Italy, it is still worth trying to acquire refugee status elsewhere.

To address this puzzle, this article analyzes the tradeoff between risks and social expectations associated with migration in terms of a gambling analogy. As I will illustrate, for a number of Eritrean refugees migration has become a bet in a lottery in which the “jackpot” is what they and their group of reference perceive as the “good life” in northern Europe. This analogy enables me to investigate secondary movements of refugees in Europe by considering not only the social dimension of migration but also the micro-dynamics of individual decision making.

## Methodology

This article builds on an ethnography of the migration dynamics of Eritrean refugees conducted in Italy, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Eritrea between 2012 and 2014. In particular, the material used for this article was collected through participant observation in several informal settlements and settings of sociability in Rome, Genoa, and Milan (July–October 2012) and in Asmara in my informants’ families’ houses (January–April 2013). The role of key informants has been crucial to access the field in Italy and in Asmara: recently arrived Eritrean refugees in Italy tend to perceive themselves “in transit” and usually live in ethnically and socially segregated areas, which are hardly accessible to outsiders. In Rome, for example, Eritrean refugees often live in ethnically segregated squats in the periphery of the city. The role of Alazar and Jonas,<sup>1</sup> my key informants in Rome, was fundamental in allowing me to visit some of these squats and live in one of them for 2 weeks. Living in these squats and spending time in bars, cafés, and areas frequented by Eritrean refugees enabled me to see how pervasive in their daily lives is the view of Italy as only a temporary residence in their greater plan to move elsewhere in the future. My key informants and the multiplicity of other Eritrean refugees that I met through them in Rome, Milan, and Genoa, were mainly young men in their twenties or thirties who had arrived in Italy in the last 5 years and had been granted legal protection by Italian asylum commissions. My fieldwork in Italy also involved more institutional settings as I interviewed representatives from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Rome, as well as officers from local and national NGOs such as the JRS (Jesuit Refugee Service), Centro Astalli, and CARITAS. This article also draws from a 3-month fieldwork in a temporary center of assistance for asylum seekers in Tuscany (2008) and on another field research on the impact of Dublin II Regulation on refugee flows from Italy to Norway (cf. Brekke, Brochmann, & Belloni, 2012). Some of my key

informants in Italy also played a crucial role in opening up my field possibilities in Eritrea, where, by living with my informants' families for 3 months, I could observe and appreciate the perception of migration from the perspective of those who are left behind and the expectations related to the departure of a close relative.

### **Jonas' story: A vignette to start with**

*Jonas comes from Asmara. He was in the military for 8 years. During those 8 years he tried to escape on many occasions and was frequently imprisoned for long periods of time. In 2008, he finally escaped from the country and managed to reach Italy through Sudan and Libya. He remained in a CARA (centre of reception for asylum seekers) for 8 months until he was recognized as a beneficiary of subsidiary protection (3-year-stay permit). In his own words: "Except for the document, the Italian government has not done anything for me." On leaving the camp, he went to Rome, where he met an old friend who used to serve in the army with him. His friend helped him find an informal accommodation in an occupied building, together with other refugees, migrants, and Italians. Jonas found a job in a soap factory in the periphery of Rome, but in 2010 he was one of the many employees laid off due to the economic crisis. He thus decided to try his luck in Sweden. His friends and family told him that Sweden is not like Italy: there, housing and pocket money are provided to asylum seekers and refugees. He burnt his fingerprints, left his papers with a friend, bought a ticket to Stockholm, and left. Although Jonas knew of numerous failed attempts, his brother had successfully acquired legal status in Switzerland—his fingerprints had not come up in the EURODAC—and Jonas hoped to follow in his footsteps. He went through the whole bureaucratic process for an asylum seeker in Sweden, met many of his friends and had a pleasant time with them in the housing facilities that the Swedish state provides to asylum seekers. He still keeps the pictures of that experience on his Facebook profile. After 9 months he was sent back to Italy because his fingerprints had been found in the EURODAC. I met him just a few weeks after he had been returned, at which point he was already planning a second attempt to go to Sweden.*

This is just one of many stories of Eritreans who have been recognized as refugees in Italy but aspire to go further. Jonas's story has all the ingredients that will be further analyzed in this article: the challenges that refugees face to reach Europe, the difficulties of starting a new life in Italy due to the economic crisis and poor integration measures, and finally, the desire to migrate further in spite of law and policy constraints.

### **The context: Eritreans migrating through Italy**

The bulk of Eritrean migration over the last decade stems from the harshening of the military government and declining living conditions in the country (UNHCR, 2014). After a 30-year-long liberation war, Eritrea finally gained its independence in 1993, following which it enjoyed a period of relative peace. In 1998, another serious conflict arose against Ethiopia. This lasted three years and led to a heavy militarization of the population; after then, periodic military trainings, compulsory conscription and ongoing mobilization of the population over 18 for military purposes have been maintained on the alleged grounds of a continued threat (O'Kane & Hepner, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2009). Most recent immigrants to Italy are

typically young men aged between 17 and 40 years old, escaping from unlimited national military service. Contrary to the previous generation of migrants who came to Italy mostly by plane, these asylum seekers face long journeys through Sudan, Ethiopia, and Libya and reach the Italian coast mainly with small boats (Arnone, 2008). Most of them acquire legal status (political asylum or, more often, subsidiary or humanitarian protection) (Ministero dell'Interno, 2012). However, Italy is rarely their desired final destination. In fact, it has a long history as a transit country. Before 1993, Italy used to apply the regional clause of the Geneva Convention, whereby non-Europeans were not eligible for asylum (Hein, 2001). Once this geographical limitation was removed, the legislation on asylum remained weak and no systematic national law has yet been approved. Refugees in Italy face significant integration challenges because of insufficient policy measures (Korac, 2003) and the deep economic crisis (Reyneri, 2010). There is a limited offer of language courses and vocational training, housing facilities are relatively scarce, and financial support is lacking. In 2011, SPRAR<sup>2</sup> and related regional projects, the main reception system in place for refugees, could only host up to about 7,595 individuals against a number of 37,000 asylum applications (SPRAR, 2012: 17).<sup>3</sup> Extreme poverty among refugees has been documented by several reports (Gunten et al., 2011; Ministero dell'Interno, 2012). During my fieldwork I was able to observe that many Eritrean refugees live in squats, in shanty towns on the periphery of Rome and Milan or in overcrowded houses. Many of them had recently lost their jobs, while others were struggling to obtain full-time employment. Given these conditions it is hardly surprising that they try to reach European countries with better welfare provisions.

However, in the last decade the European refugee policy has been characterized by the attempt to standardize the asylum regime and to regulate secondary movements of refugees across the continent. Together with the Dublin II Regulation, the EURODAC system has been established. This is a European software system that enables European states to share biometric data on asylum seekers and illegal migrants. The Dublin Regulation and EURODAC are expected to prevent abuses of the asylum system, such as the submission of several applications by one claimant in more than one European country.

Even so, significant numbers of refugees and asylum seekers try to move further, even after reaching a "safe European country." Although this has now been occurring for several years (ASGI et al., 2011; Brekke & Brochmann, 2015; Schuster, 2005), the phenomenon became especially noticeable in the summer of 2014: out of 165,000 individuals who reached the Italian coasts in 2014, only about 65,000 applied for asylum in Italy.<sup>4</sup> The rest continued their journey toward northern Europe, thus triggering a spiral of accusations between governments as regards which authority should be responsible for receiving these applications.

According to the available data, Eritreans are among the most mobile refugee populations (ASGI, 2011). Much anecdotal evidence I collected in the last few

years—including interviews with refugees in informal settlements and refugee camps and interviews with social workers in charge of the latter—indicates this to be true: the bulk of recent Eritrean refugees in Italy are, or at least consider themselves to be, in transit toward other destinations.

### **Literature review: How do refugees make their choices?**

While asylum seekers' preference for northern European countries is of little surprise, it is more difficult to understand why they repeatedly try this pathway while being aware of their limited chances of success. Much has been written on the cultural, political, and economic determinants of refugees' mobility. How refugees make their decisions, though, is a relatively unexplored issue.

Several studies have investigated the influence of refugee policies, socioeconomic conditions in destination countries, political discourse, and welfare systems on asylum applications (Neumayer, 2005; Theilemann, 2003), without conclusive findings (Zetter, Griffiths, Ferretti, & Pearl, 2003). Others have rather highlighted the contribution of historical ties, linguistic commonalities, and social and family networks (Robinson & Segrott, 2002). Still others suggest that the latter are not enough to explain refugees' choices and that “no single or even restricted number of factors can explain the patterns of origin and destination for asylum seekers” (Havinga & Böcker, 1999, p. 59). For example, Collyer (2004) illustrated that Algerians refused to go to France because of the negative historical relationship and so turned to the United Kingdom as an alternative. Social networks were not decisive in the case of Algerians and the historical connections with France actually discouraged asylum applicants. Likewise, Brekke and Aarset (2009, p. 31) have affirmed that it would be difficult to understand why Eritreans, Iraqis, and Somalis go to Norway on linguistic and cultural grounds. The case of Eritreans in Italy represents an interesting contribution to this debate. In spite of colonial linkages and well-established communities in Italy, most newly arrived Eritrean refugees do not wish to remain in Italy. Also, social networks do not seem to be a key factor in the decision making of the Eritrean refugees I have met. According to my 28-year-old informant Alazar, who attempted to seek asylum in Norway but was returned, “When Eritrean refugees leave Italy, they try to spread out ... if they know that many people have tried their luck in Switzerland, they will try their luck in Sweden or in Norway.” Many other Eritreans I have talked to told me that they did not have family in the places they decided to go, but they had gone anyway because they knew that many benefits were provided in those countries.

Overall, there is a lack of conclusive findings about the key factors influencing refugees' decisions or about their own awareness and perceptions of political and socioeconomic conditions in destination countries. The investigation of their social networks, in turn, deserves more elaboration as meso-level infrastructures not only facilitate the circulation of practical information (reliable or not) about policies and living conditions in destination countries (Koser & Pinkerton, 2002) but are

also conducive to the transnational flow of aspirations, images, and expectations that affect individuals' choices (Bang Nielsen, 2004; Horst, 2004).

Even a social network approach, however, is not sufficient to understand the persistence of refugees' secondary mobility across Europe. Why do Eritreans, most notably, attempt to move further, despite the implementation of the Dublin II Regulation and the EURODAC? Are they informed about these measures? And if so, what pushes them to move onward?

### **Are refugees aware of policy obstacles and risks?**

According to Koser and Pinkerton (2002), although informal social networks play a crucial role in spreading information about policies and living conditions in destination countries, this information is unlikely to be up to date and detailed. However, my own research, consistent with other studies on Eritrean refugees (Treiber, 2013), shows that prospective leavers are fairly well informed about national and European refugee policies.

The evidence that asylum seekers are aware about EURODAC lies in the fact that they do their utmost to avoid having their fingerprints taken. On many occasions my informants said that the only way to start a new life away from Italy would be to have their hands cut off. Once Matthewos, a 26-year-old who was living in Rome but had already attempted to move onward to Norway, told me: "You do not know how lucky you are because you do not have registered fingerprints!" In the CARA of Castelnovo di Porto, Eritrean refugees showed me and other researchers a video they had shot of a group of them resisting having their fingerprints taken by Italian police officers. Other refugees were very disappointed because, as they claimed, Norway had sent them back even if they did not have fingerprints recorded in Italy. Likewise, UNHCR officers working in Lampedusa during the Praesidium Project witnessed that on arrival by boat many people would try to escape from the police to avoid fingerprinting. This shows that they knew that once fingerprinted in one country, they would not be able to seek asylum elsewhere. At the same time, my informants seemed to believe that not all those who had tried to move on to another country had been sent back. Interestingly, instances of malfunctioning have been confirmed by some UNHCR field officers. As it seems, sometimes the quality of the image of fingerprints is not good enough to trace them back to their first European country of arrival. On other occasions, cases may be considered vulnerable by authorities, who in the end might decide not to return refugees given the difficult living conditions they would have to endure in Italy. The existence of these "exceptions to the rule" and the puzzling inequalities between European reception systems have triggered a "migration lottery": in spite of low probabilities of success, Eritrean refugees attempt, often more than once, to move onward from Italy and reseek asylum in northern European countries. In order to understand what compels them to play this migration lottery



again and again, I will borrow from the theory of gambling studies (Rogers, 1998; Rosecrance, 1986).

### **Refugees as gamblers: An alternative perspective on refugee decision making**

The choice to revisit the debate of refugees' decision making through the lens of gambling studies derives from an emic understanding. As a matter of fact, my informants often repeatedly referred to the metaphor of lotteries, or "bets," as a way of framing their migration attempts. This holds not only for their attempts to move across Europe but also for their first attempts to migrate from Africa to Europe. At that earlier stage, migration is basically a life-or-death game. The positive or negative outcome of their bet is mainly framed as depending on luck and the successful conclusion of the journey is equivalent to winning a "jackpot." The attempt to move toward a better place within Europe, then, is nothing more than the continuation of the gambling game, which started in their home country. The analogy between gamblers and refugees will be developed by analyzing how cognitive dimensions that are well known in the studies of gambling behavior can be applied to Eritrean refugees' experience: the understanding of probabilities and the role played by fatalistic conceptions of luck; individuals' perceptions of possible benefits and costs of the bet; the feeling of "entrapment" experienced by those gamblers who have already invested significant amounts of money in the game. Finally, the social dimension of the migration "game" will be considered.

#### ***Probabilities or luck?***

"The most remarkable thing about lotteries," according to Rogers (1998, p. 113), "is why, given the low probabilities of winning and negative expected returns they offer, people actually play them at all." This author argues that gamblers are not fully rational actors who always make the best decision (Wagenaar, 1988). Some other factors have to be taken into account: the misunderstanding of probabilities, the attractiveness of the jackpots, and other social influences. For example, huge jackpots are more attractive to poor people, who think of them as the only way to escape from poverty, as found by Herring and Bledsoe (1994) studies. All these factors are relevant to understanding why Eritrean refugees try to leave Italy despite knowing that the chances of being returned are high. I will now consider how these gambling behavioral mechanisms apply to the case of refugees.

The refugees I met during my fieldwork did not seem to fully understand their very low chances of "making it" in another country, but the simple fact that "someone made it" was apparently enough to try. "It's just a question of luck," everyone told me. Sometimes your fingerprints do not come up in the database and you are safe." Sometimes a friend of a friend of a friend made it and the news would spread across the community. This makes for a remarkable parallel with the ways in which gamblers think about the lottery. Luck is a fundamental element from the



outset of Eritrean refugees' experience. Leaving their homeland already entails a high risk of being shot, if taken by surprise when crossing the border (Human Rights Watch, 2009). Their lives are obviously in danger when they cross the desert and then the Mediterranean. They have reasonable grounds to regard themselves as lucky, then, if they have reached Italy. In the words of Gebre, a 25-year-old refugee I interviewed in a refugee camp in 2008,

Sometimes I think back on all the things I went through: when I fled the military, when I crossed the desert, escaped Libyan soldiers, survived the sea ... God has been with me all this while. I say "Thank God!" If it is His will, I will also overcome this last challenge [referring to his next journey to Norway].

In this case and in most of the narratives I have heard, the religious idea of "God" works as a functional equivalent of "luck" in Gebre's fatalist perspective. As some authors in gambling studies have suggested, perceived luck can play a major role in people's key decisions (Smith, Wiseman, Harris, & Joiner, 1996).

### ***Cost and rewards of the bet***

Among cognitive approaches to gambling studies, prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) could be usefully applied to migration and refugee studies. This theory explains why people play the lottery even though the chances of winning are almost equal to zero. According to this perspective, the small amount of money paid for lottery tickets can be balanced by the potential benefit from a huge jackpot win. In a nutshell,

The relative difference between the seemingly insignificant but almost certain loss versus the highly unlikely but potentially huge wins will lead to a positive reframing of lottery gambles. Ultimately, this will result in more risk accepting attitudes and hence a greater acceptance of lottery probabilities. (Rogers, 1998)

In the same vein, refugees' journeys to other European countries are relatively inexpensive and these costs are considered worth paying for the possibility of making it in the North. Sometimes refugees have only to buy a train ticket or be driven across borders by facilitators for a few hundred Euros.<sup>5</sup> While gaining refugee status in a northern European country would be of enormous value to them, sanctions for infringing Dublin II are not so severe from their point of view. They basically amount to being sent back to Italy after a period in a reception center, not a worrying prospect compared with their previous migration experience. "What can happen to me if worse comes to worse?"—demanded Jonas, as I questioned him about what the consequences of his second attempt to move to Sweden would be—"I will sleep in a nice house with a warm bed, a nice kitchen and TV for a while! Better than staying here," he said, pointing to the poor furniture and the paint flaking off the walls in the room where he was squatting in Rome. Other costs like time, psychological energy and long periods of inactivity, which delay their

integration into Italian society, are not highly valued by my informants in Italy and were considered worth the “bet.”

### ***Entrapped***

Cognitive approaches to gambling behavior have also highlighted some misperceptions that lie at the base of this behavior, such as the gambler’s fallacy, unrealistic optimism, and other superstitious beliefs (Rogers, 1998). However, a misperception that seems particularly appropriate to describe refugees’ feelings is that of *entrapment*. This basically stands for the point at which, despite mounting losses, players feel obliged to continue betting (“investing”) both time and money, somehow sensing that they have gone too far to give up. Likewise, most of the Eritrean refugees I have met in Italy seem to feel compelled to “bet” again and again—that is, to keep trying to move onwards. Moving within Europe, in their eyes, is little more than one more step forward. Having come thus far, not only in terms of distance from home but also in terms of economic and time investment, Eritrean refugees simply cannot give up at the present stage. Like Jonas, many Eritrean refugees in Italy feel *stuck in transit* (Brekke & Brochmann, 2015) because, despite the legal protection they have been granted, they still feel compelled to move on; their expected mission has not been accomplished yet. Amongst my Eritrean friends in Italy I have often heard that their minds “were unsettled.” When I encouraged them to improve their Italian so they could find work, they would answer that their minds were not clear, that they could not focus on any potential occupation in Italy. This feeling of “being unsettled” stemmed from the perception that their journey was not expected to end there, that they had not reached the expected end of their journey, according to their group of peers, their families, and their own individual aspirations. This brings us to the social dimension of the gamble.

### ***The social dimension of the game: Peer pressure, family expectations, and the desire to be connected***

The social dimension of this gambling game—as a combination of social acceptance and social pressure—is crucial to understanding the motivation to bet and the way in which this action is interpreted by the actors and their reference community. A number of studies have looked at gambling from a psycho-social perspective. Some have emphasized the role of social learning or mimicking (Bandura, 1977), whilst others point to the desire to belong to a particular social network (Rosecrance, 1986). In the same vein, social learning and social pressure play a crucial role in shaping the migration decisions of Eritrean refugees.

Recent Eritrean refugees in Italy show strong patterns of self-segregation, as they are mostly settled in neighborhoods and houses that are, to a large extent, ethnically, economically, and socially homogenous.<sup>6</sup> For example, the huge squats in Rome or the shared houses in Genoa, where I did my fieldwork, are inhabited

almost exclusively by Eritreans who have recently arrived in the country, have experienced low levels of socioeconomic integration, and have had little contact with Italian society (Ministero dell'Interno, 2012). These places represent hubs of social and material support for those Eritreans who have just reached Italy, for those who are on their way to other places, and for those who have been returned. In the squat where Alazar was living in Rome, for instance, most individuals were on their way to somewhere else. The perceived lack of available integration opportunities in Italy, matched with the preexisting orientation to move northward and the continuous exposure to the mobility of others from the group of peers, elicited the feeling of being left behind among those who “got stuck” in Italy.

The feeling of being left behind is amplified by the continuous transnational flow of information, images, and people that connect those still living in Italy with those who have made it to the North. As several studies have highlighted, technology is crucial to the transnational and local lives of migrants and refugees, as is manifested in their use of mobile phones and Internet social networks (Harney, 2013; Panagakos & Horst, 2006). For example, Alazar, my informant in Rome, used to receive many calls a day from his friends still in Sudan, from others who had reached northern Europe, from family members who worked in Israel, and from still others in the United States. Jonas seemed to be more active on Facebook: he used to spend a long time looking at the pictures of his friends who lived in other countries and chatting with them. Such a widespread flow of information and images elicits a feeling of disparity between the unlucky ones in Italy and the lucky ones who live elsewhere. It also produces a sense of longing for further migration (see also Horst, 2006).

Where to migrate to and how to do it are common topics of discussion among Eritrean refugees in Italy. Once, for instance, I went with Alazar and Jonas to meet a friend of theirs, Iacoub, who had come from Switzerland to Rome on holiday. I sat with them for hours while they were talking in front of a bottle of beer about people living in the United States, Canada, Germany, Sweden, and Switzerland and comparing the benefits and the problems of every country and its policies. Judging from their words, it was clear that they perceived there to be an implicit hierarchy of destination countries: the top five were the United States, Canada, Australia, Sweden, and Norway. This hierarchy of destinations was generally shared by the informants I met over the duration of my fieldwork. While it was clearly affected by social representations about successful lifestyles in these countries, such a hierarchy was also the mirror of migrants' real life experiences in each of them. Long-term resettlement policies in the United States and Canada may also account for their high ranking within this list of preferred destinations.

Eritrean refugees also experience social pressure from their families back home, as I clearly noticed during my fieldwork in Asmara. Left-behind kin were well aware of the difficult living conditions of refugees in Italy, which are broadcasted by national media and spread through transnational networks of relatives and acquaintances. Therefore, they struggled to understand why their children were not making more effort to reach

other European countries, emulating their co-nationals who had already done so. When I met Gabriel's and Jonas's families in Asmara, I was often asked, "Why isn't he moving to another country?" Both families somehow blamed Jonas and Gabriel for not trying hard enough to reach a better destination. This dissatisfaction was partly due to the desire of seeing their sons "settled" and partly to their unmet economic necessities. Under the current weakness of Eritrean economy, Eritrean families have grown progressively dependent on migrant remittances even to fulfil basic needs (O'Kane & Hepner, 2013), but newcomer Eritreans—Jonas and Gabriel among them—have a hard time trying to remit in the first years of their residency in Italy. Their socioeconomic integration is an unsurprisingly slow process, even more so under the current economic crisis and given the restlessness of young Eritreans always on the move to other destinations. Ironically, the time refugees spend trying to seek asylum elsewhere also has a negative influence on their social, economic, and cultural integration into Italy, besides extending the period families back home wait before receiving remittances. In other European countries, however, refugees receive some social benefits—enough for them to remit some money home. This, in turn, induces families back home to think that their children are somewhat settled, even if still in a condition of legal, social, and economic instability.

### *The goal of the migration bet*

Being able to send remittances to family members left behind is not only seen to demonstrate respect for the important value of intergenerational solidarity but also allows the sender of these remittances to acquire social status in his or her community back home. In Eritrea, as in other African societies (Christiansen, Utas, & Vigh, 2006), adulthood, and especially manhood, is associated with the ability to support elders and other family dependents. For young generations, the transition to adulthood has become increasingly difficult because compulsory, unlimited, and almost unpaid military service does not allow young men and women to start a "normal life" that includes contributing economically to the community, marrying, and having children. In this sense, migration is also a response to social anomie (Hirt & Mohammad, 2013).

If Italy cannot provide the socioeconomic conditions required to start contributing to their community life and pursuing "the future," migration as a mission fails. Not unlike most labor migrants, for these refugees, leaving Eritrea was not just a question of survival but a means of building a "future" for themselves and their families. This implies not only the certainty of a safe life but also the possibility to earn money, to send remittances home, to have enough stability to marry and form a new family. Adam, for example, worked as a fruit picker for 4 years in southern Italy before leaving and trying to reach Switzerland. When, in 2012, I met him in Genoa on his way to join his wife in Switzerland he was complaining about his situation: "I have tried my best but I still cannot help my brother back home who is now going to marry ... this is not fair: I am not a child anymore." Adam's inability to help his brother and his community back home was experienced as a proof of his unachieved adulthood.

The above mentioned social expectations are intertwined with globalized aspirations to live a “modern” life, which is related to the desire to partake in the global capitalist order and its associated lifestyles. These aspirations are shared not only by most of the young Eritreans I met in Eritrea and in Italy but also by many other young people all over Africa who feel disconnected from the possibility of achieving what consumerist society has defined as valuable and meaningful (Piot, 1999).

Moreover, the fact that Eritreans have been migrating from their country for over 50 years must also be taken into account (Getahun, 2007; Kibreab, 1987). This along with the effect of global media connections has triggered a sociocultural and economic transformation in Eritrean society, as also reported in other traditionally sending societies such as Bangladesh (Gardner, 1995), Mexico (Kandel & Massey, 2002), and Romania (Horváth, 2008). In these places, migration represents a highly valued strategy of socioeconomic mobility and emigrants are often seen as models of success for young local men and women. Eritrean refugees’ secondary mobility toward northern Europe, and their orientations and social representations of destination countries, are also embedded in a sociocultural background in which migration plays a crucial material and symbolic role.

Family expectations and globalized aspirations are useful for interpreting the social dimension of the migration bet that is played by Eritrean refugees. By understanding how Eritreans interpret their migration as a mission to achieve certain goals, such as a modern lifestyle and the ability to support their families, it is possible to realize what the aimed jackpot is and to analyze how costs and rewards of the bet are balanced.

### **Discussion: The value added of a gambling framework**

As the previous sections suggest, the analogy between refugees and gamblers has several advantages compared to previous approaches on refugees’ decision-making processes. Firstly, it overcomes simplistic models that assume that refugees run into risks because they are not well informed. Borrowing from the gambling approach, I have shown, instead, how refugees may have developed a risk-prone attitude as a result of their previous experience of flight from their country and onward movements in search of safety and freedom. Like gamblers, refugees’ calculations of the tradeoff between risks and benefits may follow other cognitive mechanisms that have been triggered by previous “bets”—interpreted as psychological, social, and economic investments on mobility and as amounts of risks already incurred. What could seem a huge risk from the point of view of an external actor—for example, NGOs worried about the psychological consequences of long-term detention in refugee centers in different European countries—is not perceived as such if emic lenses are used. For Eritrean refugees in Italy, trying to move on to other European countries is worth the risk of being detained for a certain amount of time, of being returned, and of bearing the stress of their failed attempt. This perception of risk is partly affected by the huge risks they have already taken,

while also mirroring the social, even existential, importance of the migration mission to be completed. This is another crucial advantage of the gambling approach, as it enables a focus on the individual process of decision making without neglecting the social aspect of it. The value and the attractiveness of the “jackpot” in fact are not absolute but are constructed by the social environment in which the gambler identifies himself or herself most. In the case of Eritrean refugees, this means that their perseverance to move further, along the lines set by their families back home and their broader group of reference, is important not only because of the money they are expected to send home, but also in terms of social recognition. As I have highlighted, it is only following this mobility pattern that refugees comply with the values of intergenerational solidarity together with the contemporary values of personal freedom and a modern lifestyle.

## Conclusions

Although Eritrean refugees are well aware of the law and institutional constraints on their mobility aspirations, they still try their luck to migrate from Italy, as a first safe country, to other and more “generous” European locations. The imbalance of integration measures across Europe, matched with the individual and community aspirations of achieving the expected goal of migration, leads refugees to “bet on (or play) the migration lottery” again and again. As this article demonstrates, they come to behave like “gamblers” trapped between the high social, psychological, and economic investments made in order to reach Europe, the desire to fulfil family expectations and their own individual aspirations to improve their lives and those of their beloved ones.

By applying the gambling framework to the study of Eritrean refugees’ migratory practices, this article suggests that secondary refugee movements within Europe are unlikely to be prevented by restrictive policy measures. The effect of policies on migration is mediated by specific perceptions of risk, social expectations associated with migration, and contextual factors that altogether shape the decision-making process of refugees. Due to Eritrean refugees’ backgrounds, experiences, and motivations, policy restrictions are not considered as barriers to be respected but as obstacles to be overcome—just like the ones previously encountered. The value of the “migration jackpot” is too important for Eritreans to give up in Italy, once they feel so close to the perceived happy conclusion of their former sacrifices.

Although the migratory practices of Eritrean refugees in Italy are the result of a specific context, they are also exemplary of refugees’ reactions more generally against the increasingly restrictive structure of opportunities. Such a gambling framework could potentially be applied to analyzing asylum dynamics on a larger scale. By using this framework, it is possible to understand why a number of more or less “forced” migrants run very high risks in order to reach developed countries and why migration and asylum flows have not significantly decreased, despite

increasingly tightened immigration policies. When refugees' intentions to start a "good life" in the North clash with poor integration measures in the first safe country of arrival, it should not come as a surprise that they try their best to circumvent the regulations that restrict their mobility.

In line with other studies (Brekke & Brochmann, 2015), my research findings highlight the importance of further developing common European asylum policies in the field of integration. If restrictive policies as driven by the Dublin Regulation seem to be destined to fail, a longer-term strategy of socioeconomic integration of recent refugees in southern European states has a stronger potential to induce a decline in secondary movements and, more importantly, in the associated personal and institutional costs.

## Notes

1. All real names have been modified to protect the privacy and the safety of the participants in the research.
2. Servizio centrale del Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati (Central service of the protection system for asylum seekers and refugees).
3. In 2014, the SPRAR reception system was enlarged and now can host up to 20,000 refugees.
4. [http://www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/dati\\_asilo\\_2013\\_-\\_2014.pdf](http://www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/dati_asilo_2013_-_2014.pdf)
5. These repeated attempts to seek asylum outside Italy involve several risks and consequences. Some journeys are extremely dangerous, such as the one from France (Calais) to England (Dover). Although refugees do not risk any legal repercussion, their failed attempts generate psychological stress, represent a significant waste of time (2 to 3 years on average), and represent, to a lesser extent, a loss of money. The psychological stress is due to the fact of living in an unstable condition for a long time—sometimes detained—without knowing the result of their bureaucratic process and being obliged, after their return to Italy, to start their life anew, such as by obtaining legal papers again and finding an accommodation and a job. However, most of the trauma also comes from the failure of their migratory plans, the same plans that pushed them out of the country and kept them moving onward from Africa to Europe.
6. This ethnic segregation in informal settlements and poor neighborhoods is partly the result of limited integration support by Italian authorities, but it also partly responds to the refugees' need to capitalize their social resources by living together. Informal house sharing not only allows Eritreans to help each other materially and psychologically but also represents a stronger position in making claims vis-à-vis public authorities (cf. Manocchi, 2012).

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