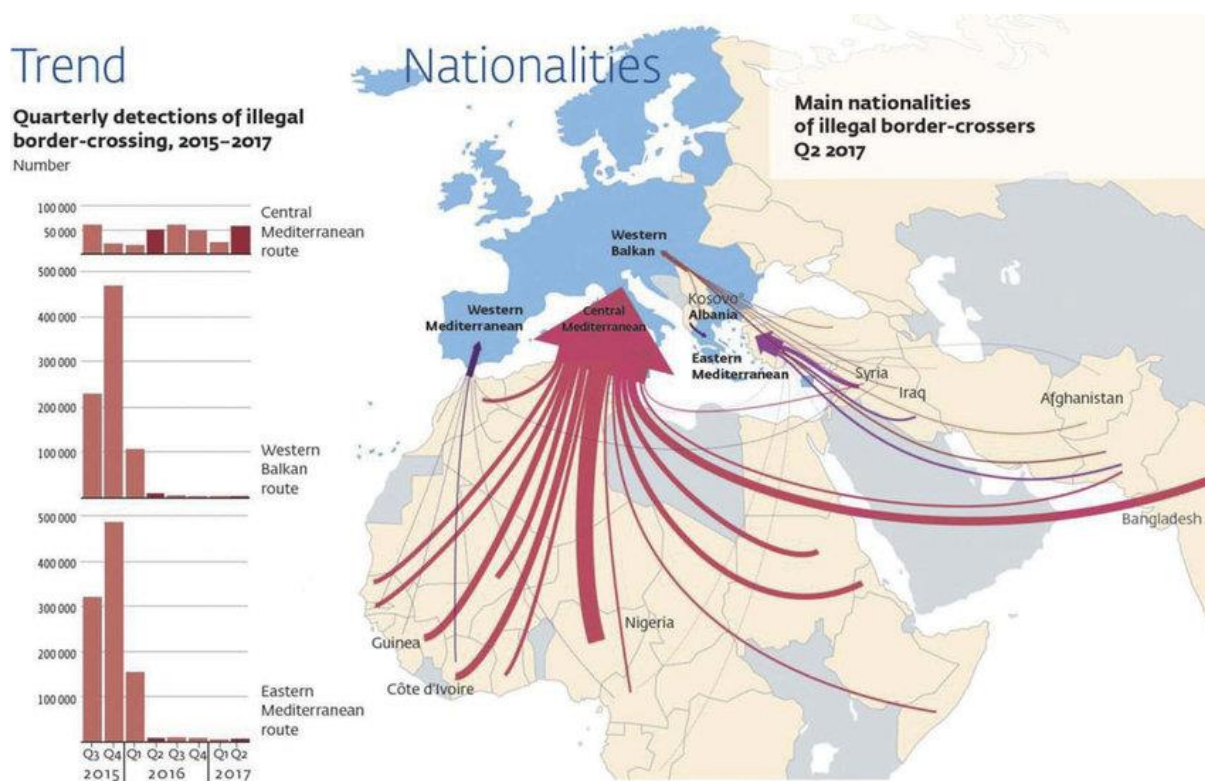


For All Those – Public Sector Sensitivities

Danny Dorling

In April 2023 Michele Lancione, a Professor of Economic and Political Geography at the Polytechnic University of Turin, was interviewed about his work. The interview appeared on the faculty of law blog at the University of Oxford.¹ Michele had risen in prominence nationally, and then internationally, because he had complained that his university was allowing Frontex, the EU border agency, to subcontract work making maps concerning the activities of the agency. The agency had been accused of carrying out many serious human rights violations at the EU's external borders.



Source: Frontex off Campus! An Interview with Professor Michele Lancione

When Professor Lancione asked the university he worked for to end its contract with the agency, he was informed (by those with the most power in his university) that the project was simply producing 'harmless data'. He explained: 'the collaboration was presented as proof of the department's "research excellence". But what my colleagues are doing is not research. It is essentially service provision. Frontex asked for maps, my department agreed to deliver maps using data that is either open source or provided by Frontex. The problem is that maps are never neutral. Indeed data, any kind of data, is never harmless. Frontex's maps commonly show big red arrows that point from Africa to Europe. These supposedly indicate migration flows, but they produce a sense that we are under siege by threatening migrants landing on Italian shores.'

One such map is that shown here.

Professor Lancione explained to the interviewer that he was fortunate. As a full professor he could take this stance knowing that his job was fairly safe and that he was no longer seeking further promotion. However, he said, that because he had complained: 'Some colleagues are not talking to me anymore. The head of department is not responding to me. Very high-ranking members of my university have expressed the need – in private university meetings – to "get rid of that anarchist". I am fine in being labelled as such. But they won't get rid of me, or of the others fighting for a more just university, very easily.' What some of his colleagues may have most disliked was that he asked the question: 'Can I carry [out] 'ethical' research work, if my Institution is doing affairs with a third party who is involved in the systematic violation of human rights?'

You might say that all this is about 'a quarrel in a far away country, between people of whom we know nothing.'² But it wasn't and it still isn't. What do these events,

taking place fairly far away in Italy, concerning a border that is no longer ours, have to do with the public sector in the UK? The answer is that they involved what you can and cannot speak out about.

On the 13th of October Susan Brown, the then majority Leader of Oxford City Council, the public sector local authority in which I both work and live, in which I was born and where I went to school (a school where the second most common language even back then was Urdu), made a statement to the press upon the resignation of two local councillors in reaction to what the Labour Leader Keir Starmer had said about the war on Gaza – on what he believed was permissible under international law – on what Starmer thought was right.

Susan Brown wrote 'I am saddened by the decision of councillors Aziz and Latif to leave the Labour Party. ... We will continue to support and defend the Oxford Jewish community and all those who have been affected by the tragic events in Israel and Gaza.'³

No explicit mention was made of Muslims in Oxford.

They were just a part of 'all those'.

Words matter.

Because attitudes matter.

Words reveal your attitudes. Even if you try later, as Keir Starmer did, to say that what you said was not what you had meant.

One of the two councillors who were the first to resign replied in the pages of the Guardian newspaper. Shaista Aziz explained: 'If Starmer can be so reckless with his words and lacking in principle now, what will happen if he becomes prime minister?'⁴

Soon another ten local councillors resigned from the Oxford Labour party. Some resigned alone, others in groups, not all at the same time, but all having thought much more about what it was that they were being asked to be a part of by not resigning; or as Professor Lancione might have put it: being asked to think how they could be ethical if the label they held was now not.

More Labour councillors were rumoured to be on the edge of leaving. The Labour Party no longer had a majority in the City of Oxford. The minds of councillors were changing. Not just of the Labour councillors in Oxford, but soon the minds of all the city councillors from every political party. By November 28th, Oxford City Councillors unanimously voted for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. As the Oxford Mail newspaper reported 'all members voted for it including [the now minority] city council leader Susan Brown.'⁵

In his interview that had taken place earlier in 2023, Professor Lancione ended with his plans for the future when faced with a university that was trying to ignore all the complaints about what they were complicit in and making him complicit too. He said: 'Personally, I am shifting this campaign into my own teaching. I hope to engage with students about the role of universities in militarisation. I also have a book coming out in July that is specifically addressed to students. Hopefully it will be seen as a guide on how to deconstruct universities' problematic relationships. I hope it inspires them to start organising once more, with renewed energy and awareness.'

People change their minds, young people form their first opinions of international events at times like this, and of their elders, some say 'it is too complex – you would not understand, others reply – 'try'. I'll end this short piece with a part of a poem, by Suheir Hammad.⁶

What I will

I will not
dance to your war
drum. I will
not lend my soul nor
my bones to your war
drum. I will
not dance to your
beating. I know that beat.
It is lifeless. I know
intimately that skin
you are hitting. It
was alive once
hunted stolen
stretched. I will
not dance to your drummed
up war. I will not pop
spin break for you. I
will not hate for you or
even hate you. I will
not kill for you. Especially
I will not die
for you. I will not mourn
the dead with murder nor
suicide. I will not side
with you nor dance to bombs
because everyone else is
dancing. Everyone can be
wrong. Life is a right not
collateral or casual.

... [continues]

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⁵ Noor Qureshi (2023) Oxford City Council votes for Gaza ceasefire in full meeting, The Oxford Mail, 28 November, <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/23953394.oxford-city-council-votes-gaza-ceasefire-full-meeting/>

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FOR ALL THOSE – PUBLIC SECTOR SENSITIVITIES

Danny Dorling is an English social geographer and academic. Since 2013, he has been Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography of the School of Geography and the Environment of the University of Oxford.



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“ *What do these events, taking place fairly far away in Italy, concerning a border that is no longer ours, have to do with the public sector in the UK? The answer is that they involved what you can and cannot speak out about.* ”

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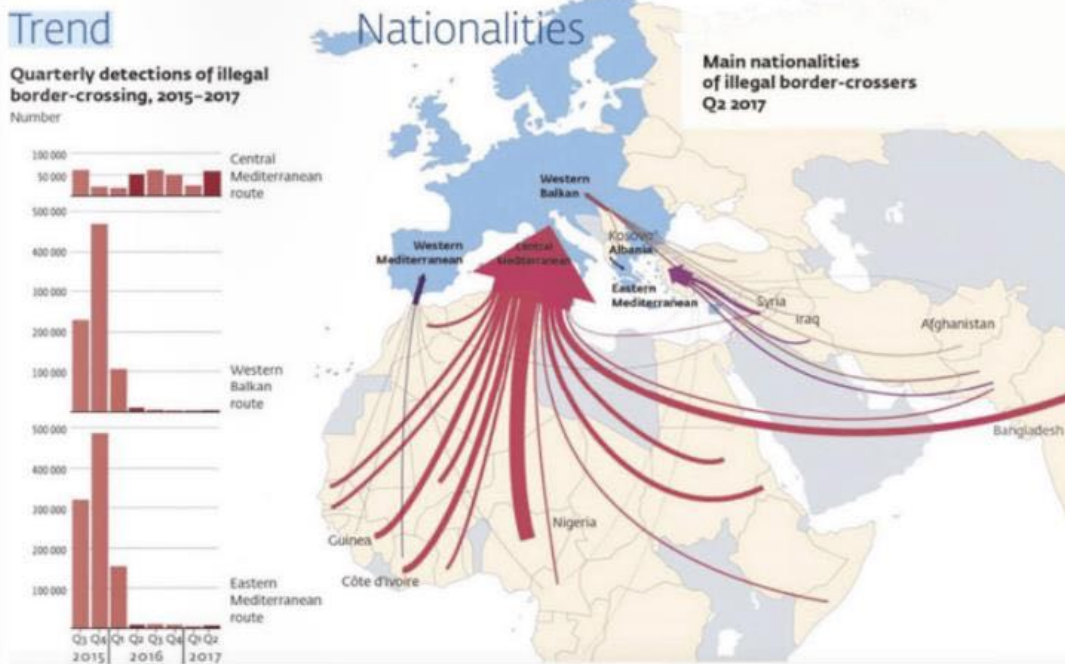
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- 1 Maurice Stierl (2023) Frontex off Campus! An Interview with Professor Michele Lancione <https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/border-criminologies-blog/blog-post/2023/04/frontex-campus-interview-professor-michele-lancione>
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www.dannydorling.org/books/shatterednation

What I will

I will not dance to your war drum.
I will not lend my soul nor my bones to your war drum.
I will not dance to your beating. I know that beat. It is lifeless.
I know intimately that skin you are hitting. It was alive once hunted stolen stretched.
I will not dance to your drummed up war.
I will not pop spin break for you.

I will not hate for you or even hate you.
I will not kill for you. Especially I will not die for you.
I will not mourn the dead with murder nor suicide. I will not side with you nor dance to bombs because everyone else is dancing.
Everyone can be wrong. Life is a right not collateral or casual.

Suheir Hammad