

Resisting Societal Bordering through Political Subjectivity: Aboubakar Soumahoro's Activism in Italy

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Abstract *This paper analyses how societal and political borders perform processes of inclusion and exclusion. It does this in focusing on the process underlying the role categorizations play in migration narratives. These categorizations shape social and political outcomes, influencing migrants' opportunities to belong to the national community and access fundamental rights. Migrants, already positioned as outsiders, are often negatively categorized when portrayed as failing to meet normative expectations. Using the case of Aboubakar Soumahoro, the paper examines how migrant activism seeks to re-signify these categories, challenging dominant external representations. Such challenges can empower migrants by granting social and political visibility—a prerequisite for influencing migration discourse. However, they also risk reinforcing perceptions of migrants as lacking integration resources. From a democratic perspective, contesting exclusionary narratives may deepen marginalization, yet remains essential for addressing democratic injustices. This analysis highlights the ambivalent dynamics of categorization and the transformative potential of migrant political subjectivity.*

INTRODUCTION

For years, migration has been a key issue in public debates and political strategies in Western countries. Beyond public policies on regulating migration flows or integrating immigrants, migration is widely discussed in the form of narratives. Migration narratives are stories developed through communicative practices that represent a specific view on migration, migrants or a country's migration history.¹ Narratives are regularly considered by policymakers and migration specialists as one of the most important determinants of public attitudes and behaviours towards migration.² Thus, social borders are reproduced through narratives. The latter are used to create, maintain, or dissolve these borders by defining “us” versus “them,” inducing feelings of solidarity or exclusion, and hence legitimizing (or not) social boundaries that dictate access to resources, rights and social esteem. One of the

most important components of narratives are categorizations. Social categorizations stem from a process that involves grouping individuals into categories — such as “us” and “them”— based on (supposed) common characteristics (such as age, gender, nationality, etc.) in order to structure and simplify the complex social reality that surrounds individuals. Their main function is to simplify the heterogeneity of a vast and chaotic social world into understandable, meaningful units, thereby enabling individuals to understand the behaviour or values of others and forge their identity.

This essay addresses how dominant categorizations affect migrants' political subjectivity by focusing on the dynamic between the majoritarian categorizations of non-belonging minorities and the production of counter-categorizations by the members of such minorities, in this case migrants. We uncover this dynamic by analysing the case of migrant activist and politician Aboubakar Soumahoro.³ Soumahoro's case study is paradigmatic of the role categorizations play in migration narratives and how they contribute to social and political outcomes that affect migrants' opportunities to be part of the national community and, possibly, be protected in their fundamental rights and relational equality with the members of the national majority. Drawing from studies on processes of categorization and radical democratic theory,⁴ we ask how marginalized groups can resist dominant categorizations and become societally and politically visible subjects.

A radical democratic perspective understands democracy as an open and conflictual process in which new political subjects emerge to challenge established orders of inclusion and exclusion.⁵ Such a process, in which a marginalized group claims an equal right to participation in shaping the collective order and acts of protest/resistance are perceived as manifestations of democracy's core rather than disruptions to it, is illustrated by Soumahoro's activism, which contests the societal borders that restrict both full belonging and political agency. We argue that by resisting externally imposed narratives, migrants are also faced with counter-narratives that aim to once again categorize them as problems void of political subjectivity. Indeed, through Soumahoro's case study, we show that the construction of a political subjectivity conflicts with migrants' social representations as non-belonging, and this can lead to their re-categorization, and further exclusion, by dominant narratives.

Our analysis consists in two parts. We first trace a process of construction of Soumahoro's narrative through the in-depth analysis of his manifesto, the book *Umanità in Rivolta: la nostra lotta per il lavoro e il diritto alla felicità*⁶ [Humanity in Revolt: our struggle for work and the right to happiness] and key events and speeches through his activist and political journey. The process of re-categorization is then studied by analysing narratives in articles published in Italian media outlets (La Repubblica, La Stampa, Il Giornale, and Il Manifesto) in the four weeks that followed the so-called "the Soumahoro case" (see below).⁷

NARRATIVES, CATEGORIZATIONS, AND BORDERING

The categorization process

The use of categories has been defined as unavoidable both in everyday interactions and in their analysis.⁸ However, not all categories are the same and perform the same effects. Jenkins (2000) distinguishes between self/group identification, which takes place among those inside a specific boundary, and categorization, which is a process of external definition.⁹ Through the latter process,

categories can be imposed on or fit the self-designated ones.¹⁰ Categories create specific labels which have effects on the wider discursive context, for instance, in creating and reinforcing stereotypes, influencing interpretation of messages, and contributing to the discrimination and exclusion of the members of outgroups.

Research on categorization processes has delved into the usage of categories, their meaning and performative power. It has questioned the relationship between categorization and identity, namely the implications of a discrepancy between (supposed) descriptive categories and the identity of the members of the categorized group.¹¹ Scholars underscore categorizations' consequential and performative nature, underlining their role in creating normative prescriptions on how social and political interactions should be organized.¹²

The performative power of categorization depends, on the one hand, on the social and political power and social visibility of the actors that foster them (like the state, majority group, etc.) and, on the other, on the lack of power of those categorized to socially and politically resist externally imposed categories. Social visibility here refers to the extent to which certain actors, groups, and/or identities are recognized, represented, and acknowledged in the social sphere, i.e., how they are seen and counted as legitimate members of society, both literally and symbolically. Externally imposed categorization restricts opportunities for free and autonomous self-identification of vulnerable groups, reducing their voice in affirming their social identity. However, marginalized groups do not lack a voice because they are not capable of self-identification, but because they lack the resources to make their self-identification visible and publicly recognized. As recognition theorists assert, self-identification must be recognized by the external societal world to be effective and to lead to autonomy.¹³ The constitution of a recognized group identity needs fair conditions of voice, power, and emancipation to avoid misrecognition and oppression.

The categorization of migrants

Social and political categorizations result from narratives about how immigration affects societies and how it should be governed, the contents of what migrants' integration should be, and what a cohesive (or supposedly "authentic") national society is and should be. Migrants are thus narrated in receiving societies through categorizations based on the binary division between non-migrants (i.e. citizens who belong) and migrants, outsiders coming from beyond states' borders that are often perceived as culturally distant. Such categorizations hamper the recognition of their belonging to society,¹⁴ rendering them invisible as political subjects.

The construction of common belonging through narratives is often operationalized through the distinction of "Self/Us" versus "Other/Them", shaping a common or shared understanding of the past within a group, community, or society that formulates a socially constructed narrative reflecting the identity, culture, and values of a group.¹⁵ Such narratives perform and publicly legitimize symbolic forms of non-belonging as well as the material exclusions of migrants from civil or social rights, opportunities in the job market, freedom of movement, etcetera. In this sense, the narrative construction of (national) belonging has an "exclusionary potential".¹⁶ When migrants are socially represented as deviating from the dominant national norms and values, they are more likely to elicit threats and, consequently, to be devalued as a group.¹⁷

Through the aforementioned processes, individuals on the move are not only subjected to physical borders, whose crossing turns them into migrants, but also to social and symbolic borders that affect their public identity and agency in immigration countries. Societal bordering theory explains how inter-group hierarchies are built and preserved in migration societies.¹⁸ Migrant groups are often categorized as groups seen as belonging beyond rather than within the borders of the receiving society. Bordering is an instance of unilateral external categorization that dispossesses

migrants of their agency, particular experiences, and common belonging. Indeed, social (non-physical) bordering contributes to the marginalization and exclusion of migrants' voices in the process of categorization of this group. However, as we show below, borders and closures are open to transformative processes that challenge, re-signify and de-institutionalize them.¹⁹

POLITICAL SUBJECTIVATION AND DE-OTHERING

Soumahoro's case study allows us to shed light on such social and political dynamics. Our reconstruction of the case starts in 2012, when Soumahoro played a crucial role in the European Sans-Papiers and Migrants march organized by the International Coalition for Sans-Papiers, Migrants and Refugees, of which he was one of the founders.²⁰ The march, which mobilized migrants without regularized documents, was an attempt to show dissent towards nation-states' physical borders. Through the march, migrants enacted a narrative contesting the European system that marginalizes them, presenting themselves as subjects, protagonists of the march, highlighting they too can enjoy the right to move freely and that they are ready to fight for this right. Against what they perceived as stigmatization, marginalization, and oppression, the campaign fostered political subjectivation and collective worth through new means of self-identification. By political subjectivation we mean "a process through which "those who have no part" emerge as political subjects and demonstrate that they must be counted as a part of society, despite their differential exclusion".²¹

Soumahoro's journey and experience in Italy, together with the first years of activism, are narrated in his *Umanità in Rivolta*. In the book, Soumahoro outlines the process of bordering in Italian society, mentioning how migrants are considered to be beyond the borders of the country even when contributing to the country's economy. According to him, Italian society's indifference towards migrants' social invisibility strengthens the

criminal groups that are exploiting migrants in vulnerable conditions.

Soumahoro emphasizes the commonalities between migrants and Italian nationals regarding economic vulnerabilities. In attempting to give voice to the experience of exploited migrants discriminated against in Italian society, he shows that the former group shares the same condition as many Italian citizens, namely their exploitation as workforce (especially in the context of Southern Italian farms controlled by *mafia*). Soumahoro thereby calls into question the social bordering of migrants. On the one hand, he gives voice to a specific history of discrimination and exploitation of non-White migrants; on the other, he reframes the dichotomy “Self/Us” versus “Other/Them” in showing that majoritarian and minority groups, despite being represented as being in opposition, share this form of exclusion. For him, the two groups do not oppose each other. Instead of their supposed antagonism, they share common struggles, and they are concerned by the same injustices.

Soumahoro’s narrative not only called into question the mainstream categorization of migrants, which portrays them as beyond the nation. It also underpinned Soumahoro’s activism. When he established an organization to combat exploitation in the agricultural sector, he mobilized those that were not considered political subjects (namely migrants), alongside those who were the (supposedly) legitimate political subjects (namely Italian citizens), who have voting and political rights. In contesting the external categorization of migrants, Soumahoro challenges both invisibility and the deprivation of rights, allegedly reserved for those who belong to the nation-state. In doing so, he becomes a political actor. This development created a tension between the external categorization of migrants (as non-belonging to and excluded from the national political community) and the self-identification of Soumahoro and the constituents of his collective as political subjects. This conflict of categorizations is produced by the refusal of Soumahoro (and more generally

migrants) to stick to what their external categorization entails, namely their political invisibility and exclusion. In contesting exploitation in the agricultural sector, Soumahoro calls for the political agency of all people working in this sector, both migrants and citizens. The counter-narrative allowed marginalized migrants to potentially gain support and solidarity from the native population in the fight for their rights, and to acquire a political voice.

RE-CATEGORIZATION OF RACIALIZED MIGRANTS IN ITALIAN SOCIETY

In October 2022, Aboubakar Soumahoro was elected to the Italian Parliament, the only member of African descent among 400 deputies. As a member of Parliament, he declared his intention to be the spokesperson of the poor and marginalized, regardless of their colour and of their origins.

His election represented a step forward in his political role. He initially emerged as a representative of non-White, undocumented, and exploited migrants. Then, as a representative of the exploited working class in the agricultural sector. Finally, he positioned himself as representing all individuals living in Italy and suffering from poverty.

As in his previous activism, he fostered representation and political voice for the marginalized, foregrounding common goals between diverse marginalized groups and promoting migrants’ categorization as belonging to Italian society. Poverty, exploitation, and vulnerability are social conditions that both migrants and members of the national majority may share. Equated with poor and working-class Italians, migrants acquire additional societal and political subjectivation and visibility, despite other significant social, political and economic differences.

However, Soumahoro’s narrative on the convergence of struggles between migrants and Italian vulnerable citizens was soon called into question by a process of migrants’ re-categorization, in which the differences between migrants and nationals (in cultural, political, and

economic terms), once again were to be seen as much more relevant than the similarities existing in their economic exploitation.

In November 2022, a scandal affected Soumahoro's political standing. Two cooperatives providing services to migrants and run by Soumahoro's mother-in-law reported irregularities: migrant workers had not been paid for two years, were given accommodation without water and electricity, and had been forced to sign fake invoices. The scandal, reported by the media as "Soumahoro's Case" [*Il Caso Soumahoro*], involved the activist and politician's wife and mother-in-law, who came under investigation in December 2022. It is important to underline that Soumahoro was never under investigation and was formally declared innocent by Latina's district attorney's office in April 2023. Nevertheless, the scandal gave Soumahoro a strong negative visibility in Italian media.

In the most widely read newspapers in the country, the mainstream media narrative of "Soumahoro's Case" underlined the following aspects: First, the impossibility for Soumahoro to be innocent or uninformed of the irregularities.²² Second, the cruelty and ruthlessness of a man, his family, and other non-White migrants allegedly involved in the irregularities, who did not hesitate to take advantage of the deprived and of people with whom they have shared much and who have lived their same struggles.²³ Third, Soumahoro's and his family's luxurious lifestyle – as evidenced by the activist and politician's house, his wife's brand clothes and accessories, and pictures posted by them on social media.²⁴ The mainstream media narrative illustrates how societal bordering operates through moral discourses in the public sphere, as deviation from expected migrant behaviour triggers renewed exclusion.

Soumahoro responded to the accusations in the Italian mainstream media narrative and to his colleagues' silence by reiterating his innocence and suspending himself from the parliamentary group. This self-suspension expressed a voluntary exclusion from the very system that aimed to

preserve its societal border and thus exclude him – and his migrant peers – from belonging, status and rights. Soumahoro's response consisted mainly of three elements. First, the reiteration of his innocence. He opposed the categorization that portrays him as a deceptive criminal. Second, through his self-suspension from the political group he belonged to in the Parliament – which did not support him actively during the mediatization of the scandal – he affirmed his power to act independently as a member of the Parliament. Finally, in reiterating his confidence in the Italian judiciary system, he enacted a process of de-othering by expressing loyalty to the institutions of the society to which he belongs.

Although the formal case against Soumahoro was rapidly closed by the investigation conducted by the Latina district attorney's office, we argue that it has contributed to the re-categorization of non-White migrants, even the ones not directly involved in the trial, as criminal, deceptive, ruthless and as incapable of integrating into the nation.

Concerning Soumahoro, the activation of the criminality trope can be understandable given that his family members were involved in criminal activities. However, it is plausible to think that for Soumahoro, the public judgement he faced was harsher than for similar cases involving white Italian politicians. The principle of presumption of innocence, a stronghold of Italian penal law, often put forward to calm the public controversies raised by the behaviour of Italian politicians, was not effectively mobilized for Soumahoro.²⁵

In more general terms, what emerged from the public narratives devoted to the case was not only the stigmatization of Soumahoro's action and political ambitions, but also the (re)deployment of the framing of migrants as criminals and untrustworthy. Such a re-categorization can be understood as a re-enactment of societal bordering by mainstream media outlets, prominent politicians and public opinion, according to which the non-White migrant is represented as deceptive, having a propensity for criminal acts, not loyal, not fitting the moral values of the nation, and thus undeserving to

be part of the receiving society. Such representations were intensified by the fact that the victims of the fraud were the migrants that Soumahoro should represent and, politically and humanly, take care of. Migrants are untrustworthy to the point that they deceive other migrants, their peers. Ultimately, such a portrayal underlines the inhumanity of the successful migrant exploiting the deprived and disadvantaged individuals with neither political voice nor social capital to oppose their condition. These categories, building up a narrative of the “generalized” migrant, are not simply reactive inventions, but part of the persistent xenophobic structure of Italian society, the one Soumahoro's political action aimed to challenge.

RESISTING CATEGORIZATIONS AND SOCIETAL BORDERING: A DEMOCRATIC PERSPECTIVE

We have shown that Soumahoro's activism and narrative strategy called into question the dichotomy of “Us” versus “Them” that structures the main narrative of migrants in Italian society. To contest such a dichotomy, Soumahoro argued that the struggle against exploitation overcome it, creating commonalities between migrants and poor Italian citizens. Through his activism, he enacted a narrative that re-categorized non-white migrants as political subjects unified in their interests with other members of the non-migrant working class. Such a counter-narrative enables an alternative group self-identification and advances the claim that the social integration of the group needs political representation and participation. The analysis is summarized in table 1.

Table 1: Summary of the Soumahoro case study

Concept	Definition	In Soumahoro's case study
Categorization	Labelling that defines social identities (Categorization versus self-identification)	Soumahoro is categorized as “migrant” in the receiving society.
Societal bordering	Processes that symbolically and discursively separate “us” and “them,” defining who belongs without enquiring who is considered as non-belonging.	Soumahoro is categorized as “migrant” and, moreover, as non-citizen, his agency and experiences are not taken into consideration.
Political subjectivation	The emergence of excluded actors as political subjects claiming equality.	Soumahoro's activism asserts political agency.
Re-categorization	Backlash that redefines the resistant subject as deviant or illegitimate.	Media scandal reframes Soumahoro as deceptive and criminal
Radical democratic contestation	Conflictual moment exposing the limits of democratic inclusion.	Reveals how democracy is tested and redefined through struggle.

What lessons can be drawn from Soumahoro's case study? First, political subjectivity and agency of migrants inevitably conflict with the societal bordering that excludes them from society and politics. Second, migrants are re-categorized when they gain political visibility and claim better recognition or full belonging. Their political voice is framed as incompatible with what their social condition is assumed to entail, namely political invisibility or loyalty²⁶—for instance, in avoiding complaint—to the society in which they have (supposedly) chosen to live. Third, although migrants' activism aims at contesting categorizations and social bordering, it is not sufficient to transform and re-signify the narratives that marginalize them. The imbalance of power

makes resisting and subverting categorization difficult to achieve. The acquisition of an empowered form of political subjectivation is undoubtedly an important democratic resource for them and, more broadly, for democracy. However, the case shows that the political activism of the marginalized and categorized inevitably triggers a re-categorization by (almost) the same narratives they tried to contest or attempted to re-signify, reaffirming the performative effects of the societal borders that hamper their full belonging. Thus, migrants' resistance and political activism can lead to further exclusion, as the performative power of external categorization can distract attention or discredit the claims raised by migrants and re-establish the borders that marginalize them.

Over the last 30 years, political philosophers have extensively explored the question of how liberal states' policies and values can contribute to the exclusion of migrants in receiving societies.²⁷ Soumahoro's case study shows that categorizations play a central role in how such exclusions are performed. According to a radical conception of democracy such a relational dynamic seems to be unavoidable. Exclusions and political conflicts are an immanent aspect of the political. To challenge their condition of non-belonging, the members of marginalized groups are put in the condition of having to overcome the symbolic and material borders enforced by categorizations that contribute to excluding them. The main performative effect of societal external categorizations and their bordering logic is to deny agency, subjectivity, and voice to the categorized. However, according to radical democratic theorists, every individual is capable of political subjectivation. Individuals belonging to marginalized groups are key actors of regime contestation and change.²⁸ Indeed, the very existence of marginalized groups opens space for alternative perspectives and resulting contestation of the dominant order. In this perspective, gaining political agency and social visibility are democratic conditions for migrants to contest the dominant categorizations regarding who legitimately belongs

to society and who does not and, consequently, to increase their societal inclusion.

Soumahoro's case study illustrates that political subjectivity comes into being through this process: positive self-identification, an empowered collective political agency, and promotion of societal de-othering. The affirmation of a political subjectivity triggers reactions, as the re-categorization of non-White migrants by mainstream narratives (and then the dialectic continues). Such political conflicts, despite being mainly presented negatively by the majority group as disrupting and threatening the democratic order, are an unavoidable ontological element of a democratic system, especially those marked by deep structural injustices. The development of political subjectivity, understood here as political identity and agency, is a necessary condition for migrants to challenge the injustices affecting them. Becoming political subjects, migrants can engage in a conflicting process of counter-categorizations and thus contest the social imaginaries on belonging that deny them recognition and equal standing in society and politics.²⁹ Such a transformative process entails that migrants become not only a visible and socially recognized part of society, but also a political subject participating in, and having a voice about, the transformation of the narratives that symbolically and materially hampers their becoming full members of society.

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¹ Sahin-Mencutek, Z. (2020). *Migration narratives in policy and politics*. Working paper, Ryerson Centre for Immigration and Settlement / CERC in Migration and Integration.

² Dennison, J. (2021). Narratives: A review of concepts, determinants, effects, and uses in migration research. *Comparative migration studies* 9, 50.

³ Born in Ivory Coast, Aboubakar Soumahoro arrived in Italy when he was 19 years old and started to work as a day laborer on farms. After graduating in sociology, he became a trade unionist and publicly denounced the living conditions of migrant day laborers. Soumahoro has progressively become a rare figure of the African diaspora to hold a high-level position in Italy, a fact demonstrated by his election in the Italian parliament.

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⁶ Soumahoro, A. (2019). *Umanità in rivolta: La nostra lotta per il lavoro e il diritto Alla felicità*. Feltrinelli.

⁷ A full list of the cited articles is available upon request.

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⁹ Jenkins, R. (2000). Categorization: Identity, social process and epistemology. *Current sociology*, 48(3), 7–25.

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¹¹ Mason (1990).

¹² Jenkins (2000); Mason (1990); Modood (1988).

¹³ Honneth (1995); Young (1990).

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¹⁵ Hammack, P. L., & Pilecki, A. (2012). Narrative as a root metaphor for political psychology. *Political psychology*, 33(1), 75–103; Sahin-Mencutek (2020).

¹⁶ Gianni, M. (2023). For a political conception of multicultural citizenship. *Ethnicities*, 23(4), 583–600.

¹⁷ Kauff, M., Asbrock, F., Issmer, C., Thörner, S., & Wagner, U. (2015). When immigrant groups "misbehave": The influence of perceived deviant behavior on increased threat and discriminatory intentions and the moderating role of right-wing authoritarianism. *European journal of social psychology*, 45(5), 641–652.

¹⁸ Chouliaraki, L., & Zaborowski, R. (2017). Voice and community in the 2015 refugee crisis: A content analysis of news coverage in eight European countries. *International communication gazette*, 79(6–7), 613–635.

¹⁹ Benhabib, S. (2004). *The rights of others: Aliens, residents, and citizens*. Cambridge university press.

²⁰ Chimienti, M., & Solomos, J. (2013). Social movements of irregular migrants, recognition, and citizenship. In Munck, R., Schierup, C. & Wise, R. (eds.) *Migration, work and citizenship in the new global order* (pp. 95–111). Routledge; Farolfi, S. (2012, June 25). «Stop allo spread dei diritti». Arriva la marcia europea. *Il Manifesto*.

²¹ P. 400 in Schwiertz, H. (2021b). Political subjectivation and the in/visible politics of migrant youth organizing in Germany and the United States. *International political sociology*, 15, 397–414; see also Rancière (2004).

²² Cappellini, S. (2022, November 24). Soumahoro: pasticcio o imbroglio? Aboubakar e la politica come

talent show. *La repubblica*; Carugati, A. (2022, November 24). Soumahoro, due ore di vertice non bastano per un chiarimento. *Il manifesto*; Di Vito, M. (2022, November 26). Bonelli: "Le risposte di Soumahoro non sono sufficienti". *Il manifesto*; Pucciarelli, M. (2022, November 25). Soumahoro, troppi dubbi. Pressing di Verdi e Sì, il deputato si autosospende. *La repubblica*; Sablone, L. (2022, November 28). "Non c'era acqua calda, sapeva tutto". Il collaboratore contro Soumahoro. *Il giornale*.

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²⁹ Brighenti (2007).

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