

Introduction. Sayad and Migrants' Descendants: A Renewed Gaze

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Abstract

Despite being widely known and cited, Abdelmalek Sayad remains an author subject to divergent representations and interpretations and frequently reduced to a superficial use of some of his most famous concepts. Contrary to this simplifying reading, Sayad's work crosses different fields of study and is characterised by a particular reflexive depth. Through migration, the author is able to analyse the dynamics of social and symbolic inclusion and exclusion, the construction and modification of social hierarchies at both local and international levels, and social change and conflict at large. In this sense, Sayad also offers important and little explored keys to understanding the experiences and trajectories of the children of migration. This introductory contribution aims to draw attention to the way Sayad has studied migrants' descendants, highlighting how his approach is helpful for the renewal of this field of study. The contribution concludes with a presentation of the papers that are part of this Special Issue.

Keywords: Sayad, migrants' descendants, social theory, reflexivity, migration studies

1. Studying Sayad further, studying further through Sayad

Abdelmalek Sayad seems to belong to that group of authors who, while easily and widely quoted, are often referred to in an episodic manner and without an in-depth study of their thought. Sensing the need to enhance a deeper knowledge of the author, we three editors launched in the scope of the 2023 IMISCOE conference two different panels entitled "Beyond «absence».

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Rediscovering Sayad's approach for the study of migration-related inequalities". In the course of the discussion, it emerged quite strikingly the fertility of Sayad's conceptual tools for the current study of migrants' descendants' trajectories. His "heretical" practices of socio-analysis (Avallone, 2018), his capacity to interconnect structures and individuals, his reasonings about social presence/absence, his longitudinal analysis of social trajectories, and his valorisation of biographies in the empirical research, are among the legacies he left to later sociologist and migration scholars, although little applied to the study of the descendants of migrants. The aim of this Special Issue is to rediscover Sayad's approach and propose a reinterpretation of his concepts in the study of migrants' descendants' social trajectories. On the one hand, this project allows us to recover and update the legacy of an author who is by now a classic in migration studies, contributing to their theoretical advancement. On the other hand, it also promises to refresh the perspectives and analytical tools of the scholars working on the children of migration, inspiring innovative empirical research with a solid theoretical anchorage.

The Issue therefore aims to bring a better understanding of Sayad's thought. The author has been the target of divergent interpretations. On one side, he is recognised as an innovator in the study of migration, the proponent of a "general approach in the analysis of modern immigration" (Rea, 2021, p. 62) and also endowed with a transnational sensibility ahead of his time (Martiniello & Lafleur, 2008). On the other side, Sayad is also portrayed as tied to outdated structuralist approaches (Rea, 2021), flattened on the description - almost lyrical rather than scientific - of the emigrants' sufferings. A role in the development of this latter interpretation was undoubtedly played by the transnational perspective that, at least at the beginning, postulated for migrants the emergence of a transnational "double presence" (Diminescu, 2002, p. 7) antithetical to the "double absence" (Sayad, 1999a) with which Sayad's work is often entirely associated. Lastly, the reduced dissemination of Sayad's texts, only lately and limitedly translated into English, seems to have contributed to the development of a restricted and superficial reading of the author (Saada, 2000).

The fact that Sayad has been associated with narrow theoretical interpretations and anachronistic analysis seems surprising considering that this author advocated an understanding of migration as a "total social fact" (Sayad, 1990, p. 13). Indeed, a closer regard of Sayad's works reveals the multifaceted dimensions of his studies, spanning from the process of nation-building (Sayad, 1999b) to intrafamilial cultural transmission (Sayad, 1994a), from transnational communication (Sayad, 1985) to integration policies (Sayad, 1994b). Not only has Sayad used migration as a "mirror" (Sayad, 1999b, p. 7) to investigate different aspects of the social world - far beyond migrant's condition alone - but the author also developed a comprehensive interpretive approach

(Avallone, 2018), capable of transcending the common sense and the political categories of the ordinary (Sayad, 1999b) to understand the reproduction of power hierarchies, symbolic orders, and dynamics of exclusion and inclusion within and beyond migration (Témime, 1999). In this same optic, Sayad adopts an inductive methodological approach, starting from the specific and concrete level and then progressing towards the general, thus avoiding approaching the research subject through generalisations or abstract inquiries, as would have done dominant powers. In fact, Sayad aligns with the perspectives and methodological inclination of Frantz Fanon (1952), and resists comprehending migration processes and racism solely from the state-centric viewpoint, which embodies what is considered universal, general, and “objective”. Instead, their proposal emerges from the realm of the concrete, specific, and particular, recognizing the significance of individual subjects and narratives that constitute their tangible reality.

2. Sayad and migrants' descendants: past studies and future applications

Although mainly associated with the figure of the migrant, in its dual role of emigrant and immigrant, Sayad also worked extensively on migrants' descendants, central subjects in the development of his reflections. In fact, the generational peculiarities of the *children of migration* (in biographical but above all political terms) allow Sayad to bring to light the processes of social and symbolic exclusion that affect “non-nationals”, their persistence, reproduction and change, and in broad terms the readjustment of the State and its thought when faced with the hybridity of this generation.

In particular, in *Les enfants illégitimes* (1979a; 1979b) Sayad investigates conflicts and continuities within the Algerian community in France and - through the voice of the young Zahoua - highlights the dynamics of social and cultural reproduction and the emergence of different orders of meaning between generations, as well as the material and symbolic role of the country of origin in this relationship. In another fundamental publication, *Le mode de génération des générations immigrés* (1994a), the author focuses on the relationship between migrants' descendants and the white French society, analysing the determinants that lead to the emergence of a new generation and the ambivalent processes of inclusion and exclusion to which it is subjected. Both articles were brought together in the volume *L'immigration ou les paradoxes de l'altérité : Les enfants illégitimes* (vol. 2) (2006), preceded by the essay: *Exister, c'est exister politiquement*. In the later text, Sayad shows the political consequences of the coming into the scene of the new generation, which, despite being subjected to

marginalisation and exclusion, is able to develop its voice and claims. Finally, Sayad focuses specifically on the descendants of migrants in the various essays assembled in the volume *L'Ecole et les enfants de l'immigration* (2014) in which he critically discusses the inner selection processes of the school, the culturalist postures of this institution, and its participation in the State order through “school thought”. Apart from these specific texts, Sayad’s attention to the children of migration runs through his entire work, as in some powerful parts of essays such as *La naturalisation* (1999a) or *Immigration et pensée d'Etat* (1999b). Hence, in studying the trajectories of migrants’ descendants, Sayad develops important considerations about the formation of social identities, the processes of social ageing and changing intergenerational conflicts, the construction of symbolic hierarchies and power relations, definitely nurturing his overall elaboration.

The study of migrants’ descendants can only unfold for Sayad in dialogue with that of the previous generation since the two analyses illuminate each other. Indeed, there are many dynamics of “continuity” between the two generations, both subject to the impositions of *State thought*. This shared condition manifests itself for instance in the notion of *integration*, described by Sayad (1994b) as “a loaded notion” and a “discourse meant to produce an effect of truth”. In this discourse, social science and myth intertwine, creating a complex interplay between a proclaimed scientific and a hidden mythical coherence (Sayad, 1994b). A telling illustration is provided by the case of Aicha, a student interviewed by Sayad, who compares the myth of integration to the asymptotic curve of the exponential function, meaning that integration is elusive, requiring continuous pursuit, and the closer one gets, the more apparent its unattainability becomes (Sayad, 1999a, p. 466). This metaphor underscores the inherent impossibility of achieving integration, conditioning migrant subjects - and their descendants - to experience the futility of reaching this goal. This shared experience of unfulfillment is also noted by Fanon (1952) among black individuals, who, like migrants, are defined by privation and categorised as members of the “area of non-being” individuals perennially lacking something. In this optic, Sayad’s analysis also serves as a critique of imperialistic tendencies and State thought, revealing its functioning through the transformation of partiality into totality, into “the universal”. On the contrary, Sayad’s scrutiny shows that the analysis of migrants’ conditions in host societies through State-defined categories such as “assimilation” and “integration” pre-determines the understanding of the phenomenon. It steers research towards cognitive objectives aligned with the perspectives of immigration States and societies, thereby obscuring the genuine conditions and life trajectories of migrants. These considerations still inform some recent works. We refer to *Rester barbare* (Yousfi, 2022) and *Beaufs et barbares* (Bouteldja, 2023) which reason

about the racial character of the State and the forms of exclusion towards black and Arab people (especially if of migrant origin) in France, and about their resistances.

If the trajectories of migrants' descendants have strong elements of continuity with those of their parents, mainly related to the persistence of their classification as "non-nationals", nevertheless there are many conditions that "break" this intergenerational continuum and mark the specificities of this group of youth. First, what specifically characterises the descendants of migrants is a peculiar temporal perspective. If, in fact, the parents' biographical and migratory experiences are based on the illusion of the provisional (Sayad, 1999a), an illusion politically imposed by the State of settlement but emotionally supported by migrants themselves (Calabretta & Ragone, 2024), the next generation has the lucidity to criticise such illusions and lies (Sayad, 1979b), understanding the non-provisional nature of the migratory experience. This posture is not without effect. On the young themselves, who are the "products and victims" of their double history (Sayad, 1999a, p. 156); on the parents, who - sensing the permanent nature of migration - are also brought into existence as a generation (Sayad, 1994a); on the State, whose political and symbolic borders are placed under attack by this generation of "hybrids" (Sayad, 1999a, p. 505).

The difference in temporal perspective between the generation of parents and children thus takes on a political value. In fact, what also characterises the group of migrants' descendants compared to their parents' experience is full socialisation to the European context and (in some cases at least) easier access to legal citizenship, conditions that generate the suspicion of a distancing from the group of origin (Sayad, 1999a). Therefore, these young people are "illegitimate" in the eyes of the community of origin that asks them to continuously prove their attachment, but they are - despite naturalisation - also "illegitimate" in the eyes of the natives, experiencing stigmatisations that they cannot pretend to ignore, but from which they cannot escape either, ultimately occupying "in the field of symbolic power relations a position even more dominated and more critical than that of their parents" (Sayad, 1999a, p. 447). Obtaining legal citizenship is in fact not associated in these young people's experiences with social citizenship (Sayad, 1999b), and it is precisely the space between these two aspects that becomes - for this generation, unlike the previous one - a space of political claim, sometimes acted out explicitly (Sayad, 2006), sometimes developed as a daily rebellion built on sarcasm and self-definition (Sayad, 1994a).

These temporal and political differences, which mark the break between the generation of parents and children, then crystallise in terms of identity. It is in fact in the new generation, the one that grew up in the immigration country, that family emigration touches a new level of "depersonalisation" and

“denaturalisation” with respect to the country of origin (Sayad, 1999a, p. 211), opening up real identity crises (Sayad, 1979b). Thus, for this generation, the symbolic possibility and the social and cultural capacity to “integrate” the society of origin and the society of living, becomes a question of identity (Sayad, 1994b), inextricably linking one’s biography to the political and social conditions of its unfolding.

Among the strengths of Sayad’s way of studying the new generations of migration is, therefore, the rare ability to place their trajectories within material and symbolic structures without falling into determinist understandings, that is, to understand their aspects of continuity with the previous generation, while still being able to grasp their characteristic features. Ultimately, to practise a lucid and critical analysis, capable of bringing the structural and subjective aspects of the social world into conversation within a relational perspective (Emirbayer, 1997). Hence, adopting Sayad’s theoretical - and before that, epistemological - perspective, anchored on a focus on the power structures that insist on and around migration, opens new doors to the understanding of the children of migration.

In fact, this is a field of study that has accompanied migration studies from the outset, developing on some consolidated but always renewed themes such as new generations’ “assimilation” (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Alba & Nee, 2003) or their transnational relationship with the country of origin (Levitt & Waters, 2002). The interest in the trajectories of migrants’ descendants has never faded and indeed, the processes of ageing of the foreign population in Europe seem to give it new emphasis. To date, therefore, studies on new generations with a migratory background continue to interrogate the processes of assimilation and integration and symbolic and social exclusion (van de Werfhorst & Heath, 2019; Beaman, 2020); the multiplicity of young descendants’ identity references (Berry & Hou, 2019; Cerchiaro, 2020); the dynamics of cultural reproduction within families (Peristianis, 2024; Miglietta et al, 2024); material and imaginative relations with the country of origin (Kılınç et al., 2022).

What is striking about this vast strand of literature, however, is the scant inclination to develop critical readings that highlight and overcome the fences of State thought. Within them, in fact, objectivising and “methodologically nationalist” readings are perpetuated, risking the penetration of common sense and the national-political agenda in social sciences. In this sense, if we think about the profoundness of Sayad’s analysis, capable of observing how the distinction between nationals / non-nationals is not rooted in a visibly legal aspect but depends on various factors such as agents’ social position and the power relations between the country of origin and the receiving State, we can

perceive all the importance of this author for developing in-depth, critical and comprehensive studies on the children of migration.

Sayad himself has already seized the benefits of his approach, developing some of his most solid, albeit not among the best-known, studies on the children of migration. Rediscovering these works and rediscovering how Sayad used his concepts in the study of this generation can therefore allow us, not only to have a more complete understanding of this fundamental author, but also to renew our keys to reading this population in empirical research.

3. Structure of the Issue

To contribute to a wider knowledge of Sayad at an international level, this Special Issue opens with the English translation of Sayad's article *Le mode de génération des générations immigrés*, which appeared in the journal *L'Homme & la Société* in 1994. This is one of the Algerian author's fundamental works on the theme of the children of migration, and it is precisely a passage from this text, the one in which Sayad questions intergenerational continuities and ruptures, that gives this monographic issue its title.

The translation is followed by six papers based on empirical research carried out in Italy, France, Spain, and England. The first paper, by Zakaria Sajir and Yoan Molinero-Gerbeau, questions - drawing on the Spanish case - the imposition on migrants' descendants of a charge of "otherness" that leads them to live in a "liminal space: members of the State, yet outsiders to the Nation". The authors use Sayad's perspective to investigate the symbolic hierarchies and material orders in which the descendants of migrants move, and against which they try to affirm themselves. This is followed by Francesco Della Puppa's article, which presents the case of the onward migration involving the Bangladeshi community moving from Italy (where they have been living for many years) to England. In this framework, the author studies the challenging intergenerational relationships that are constructed and the experience of migrants' descendants who are also faced with a sense of *absence*, complicated by the intricacy of their migratory movement.

In Davide Girardi's case, the central concept drawn from Sayad is that of *illusion*. The author uses this concept to analyse the social and symbolic processes that push equality with native peers away from the horizon of new Italians with a migration background. While the State and its institutions play a central role in this framework, the descendants of migrants become the bearers of important experiences of claiming. In Andrea Calabretta's article, the research context becomes the country of origin of migrants' descendants. Analysing these young people's representations of their summer returns to their

parents' country, the author observes how the children of migrants build relationships with Tunisian non-migrant networks, reshaping the social hierarchies that cross transnational space.

Marianna Ragone starts from Sayad to show how the space, and more precisely the Belsunce neighbourhood in Marseille, participates in the colonial representation of the bodies of young Algerian descendants in a continuous racist categorisation between national/non-national, civilised/incivilised and integrated/barbarians. The last research presented is by Enrico Maria La Forgia, who - again using the case study of Marseille - questions the role of Islam in the lives of migrants' descendants. Subjected to exclusionary practices on the part of the State and participants in their own experience of *absence*, religious affiliation becomes for this youth a dimension of self-significance and, at the same time, one to be re-signified.

The issue closes with two book reviews. Gustavo Dias comments Amin Perez recent book *Bourdieu and Sayad Against Empire: Forging Sociology in Anticolonial Struggle*, which reconstructs the two authors' experiences in the Algeria of the 1950s, a time when the foundations were laid for a lasting and fertile scientific and human partnership. Finally, Andrea Calabretta proposes a review of *L'école et les enfants de l'immigration*, a volume published in 2014 that collects ten unpublished essays written by Sayad on the relationship between migration and school, with a specific focus on the children of migration.

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