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[Review of: M. Belloni (2019) The Big Gamble. The Migration of Eritreans to Europe]

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DOI

[10.1111/imig.12725](https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12725)

Publication date

2020

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

International Migration

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Heelsum, A. (2020). [Review of: M. Belloni (2019) The Big Gamble. The Migration of Eritreans to Europe]. *International Migration*, 58(3), 267-268.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12725>

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doi: 10.1111/imig.12725

Book Review: Belloni, Milena (2019) *The Big Gamble. The Migration of Eritreans to Europe.* University of California Press. 228 pp.

Anja van Heelsum* 

This is an exceptionally good ethnographic study that follows Eritrean migrants on the way from Eritrea to Ethiopia to Sudan to Italy. Belloni's lively and empathic descriptions provide a deep understanding of the young men and women to whom she became close, both before they decide to start their journey and on the different points of their journey. She fascinatingly shows the reasoning, the motives and the choices that they take, in all the different contexts. The book is not only a joy to read but has also a very original research design, but is a must-read for those who study migration motivations. Not for nothing, the first version of this study has won the prestigious IMISCOE PhD-thesis award.

One of the book's notable strengths is that Belloni not only convincingly situates the particular nature of the Eritrean migratory issues, but also provides an important contribution to the migration and mobility literature in general. Whereas most migration research only takes one country as a basis, this design where multiple points in the journey are studied offers unique but also sequential insight into the reasons why the travellers move on and how motivations remain constant, and/or change but also add up during the trip.

With their family in the capital of Eritrea, Asmara, respondents find themselves already stuck in the first impossible dilemma. They have to choose between the infinite national service on the one hand, without opportunities for social mobility, or to establish a family and to earn enough to provide support for children and elderly parents, and on the other hand a dangerous and unclear trajectory, with a lot of risks, with an uncertain chance for a better life later. They do not stay at the first safe place they find, in this case, for instance, in the camps near the Eritrean border, nor in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa where they still understand the language, nor in Khartoum, but decide – acknowledging the dangers ahead – to continue their journey. Not only abuse, high rents and the difficulties to find a job, but also networks, communal decision-making and peer pressure and religion play a role. The morality of the world of smuggling and of transnational marriages is added as another interesting aspect. And even at the last point of the study, Rome, the living circumstances turn out so disastrous that it is not surprising that many respondents cannot do anything else than escape from the entrapped situation and plan an onward trip again. Belloni shows how respondents experience the sense of being trapped again and again at different stages of their trajectories and calls the dilemma of remaining in the difficult circumstances wherever they end up and moving onwards “The Big Gamble”. Borrowing the concept entrapment from gambling studies, she makes an analogy to “gamblers” who become at each stage of the sequential process more

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The peer review history for this article is available at <https://publons.com/publon/10.1111/imig.12725>

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International Migration Vol. 58 (3) 2020
ISSN 0020-7985

likely to bet their resources and risk their everything again. Though the gambling analogy could provoke the idea that the travellers are not completely rational, we regrettably conclude that moving onwards is not an unreasonable choice, considering the difficulties they encounter in the countries described in the study.

Belloni productively employs several other theoretical concepts. Important is how she investigates – in a nuanced way – to what extent the agency of migrants and their aspirations play a role in the context of what is usually just defined as “forced migration”. Obviously, there are political consequences to the questioning of the distinction between forced and voluntary migration, but she shows convincingly how the boundaries between the two are blurred and cannot and should not be used in a too binary way, without losing sight of the right to protection that these migrants have under international humanitarian law. In her own words, the book “seeks to show the pace of refugees’ agency and explore the paradox of choice for those who are defined by the lack of it” (p. 2).