



Being an Activist and Becoming a Refugee: Conflicting Subjectivities?

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Introduction

Now it has become more common to think of displacement as experienced differently across refugee groups belonging to different ethnicities, religions, classes, social statuses, or along gender. This experience is understood as relating to how life is managed and how people adapt to new situations in exile, but also how such a disruptive event may encourage displaced persons to draw on their identity to cope with its effects. A stunning body of empirical literature has been growing on the experiences of displacement from various perspectives thanks to the refugee crisis which provided a new ideal context where new arguments could be raised and old ones revisited. In further attending to the diversity of this group and in capturing a wide range of experiences, this essay will focus on the experiences of political activists. This group refers to people who had been previously involved in political activism in their home countries prior to displacement. Assuming the existence of conflicting representations emerging from being a political activist, which is ascribed with a great deal of agency, and a refugee, often associated with disempowering representations, this essay looks more broadly at how activists cope with both identities, the imposed and unchosen refugee identity and the conscious political identity. It is further to explore how they renegotiate their position in the receiving context and how they navigate through institutional pressures, the humanitarian discourse, and camp life. It is important to theorize upon this encounter and transition, also where it remains largely unexplored and where, from the representations accompanied by each identity, there is expected to be a violent clash rendering it a case worthy of scholarly attention.

This question will be problematized by its reliance on some theoretical convergencies, mainly Agamben's *Homo Sacer* and the theory of performativity developed by Butler. The essay seeks to contextualize aspects of Agamben's argument by looking at the camp as a means of control and the shifting role of the nation-state. On the other hand, Butler's performativity will be used in building a performative understanding of refugeeness. While both theories will be used independently vis-à-vis the available empirical data, they are complementary in some respects. While Agamben's account does not take agency into consideration, Butler brings agency to the center of her theory, leaving a room for shaping different agential modalities.

The purpose of using Butler's theory is not to draw parallels to the construction of refugeeness among political activists. This particular aspect, although limited to refugees in general and not political activists with a refugee background in particular, has been examined before, especially as to showing how refugeeness is constructed from above. Research reveals how the life of refugees is shaped and moulded through a constellation of governmental, non-governmental, and international actors as well as their intricate regimes, which follow a normative agenda to achieve certain outcomes¹ in terms of unproblematizing the presence of refugees and mitigating its effects. Studies following this strand, but accommodating Butler's theory more concretely in theorizing refugeeness, are only a few, also when it applies to political activists². More generally, the literature approaches this institutionalized world of refugees through discussing aid dependency³ and humanitarian and material representations⁴. Closely linked to this are also the analyses tracing the discursive and bureaucratic emergence of the refugee which is slowly assuming a political character in subjugating refugees to further controls and justifying securitizing and disempowering approaches to dealing with them.⁵

Thus, this essay does not strive to add to this body of literature in this way as to exploring how refugeeness is internalized by political activists, as much as it is interested in observing how it is resisted and subverted by this group of people in a context where political activism as a source of identification comes to be jostled by another category in labeling them. In this sense, the theory of performativity is used as a point of departure in exploring the possibility of subverting this role associated with the refugee label among political activists and locating the mechanisms adopted in the process of subversion. In contexts where there is a strong rhetoric of integration and assimilative measures in place, and in line with what has been highlighted above in regard to refugeeness as top-down process, this essay deals with refugeeness as a given; a process already going on as underpinned by the existence of these very measures and macro asylum politics. It is contended that refugeeness as a process prescribing a favourable behaviour to be followed is met with a wide array of responses, ranging from total compliance to outright resistance. Due to their special situation as people previously involved in opposition and dissent, political activists are argued as likely to show more resistance to these impositions.

¹ Lippert, R. (1999). Governing Refugees: The Relevance of Governmentality to Understanding the International Refugee Regime. *Global, Local, Political*, Vol. 24, No. 3: pp. 295-328. Olivius, E. (2017). Sites of Repression and Resistance: Political Space in Refugee Camps in Thailand. *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol.49, No.3: pp. 289-307.

² Rivetti, P. (2013). Empowerment without Emancipation: Performativity and Political Activism among Iranian Refugees in Italy and Turkey. *Alternatives: Global, Local, and Political*, Vol.38, No.4: pp.305-320. Szczepanikova, A. (2010). Performing Refugeeness in the Czech Republic: Gendered Depoliticisation through NGO Assistance. *Gender, Place & Culture*, Vol. 17, No.4: pp.461-477.

³Harrell-Bond, B. (1997). The Experience of Refugees as Recipients of Aid. Marie de Voe, D. (1981). Framing Refugees as Clients. *The International Migration Review*, Vol. 15, No. 1/2: pp. 88-94.

⁴ Pupavac, V. (2008). Refugee Advocacy, Traumatic Representations and Political Disenchantment. *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 43, No. 2: pp. 270–292. Olivius, E. (2016). Constructing Humanitarian Selves and Refugee Others. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol.18, No.2: pp.270-290.

⁵Malikki, L. (1995). Refugees and Exile: From Refugee Studies to the National Order of Things. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 24: pp. 495-523. Zetter, R. (1991). Labelling Refugees: Forming and Transforming a Bureaucratic Identity. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol.4, No.1: pp.39-62. Zetter, R. (2007). More Labels, Fewer Refugees: Remaking the Refugee Label in an Era of Globalization. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2: pp.172-192.

The structure of the essay will be as follows: I will engage in a substantive theoretical discussion on Agamben, demonstrating its relevancy to many situations across the refugee crisis based on a reinterpretation of his text. I argue that this is a sorely needed discussion in order to provide a proper understanding of how Agamben will be recontextualized, while engaging with the literature criticizing him. This will be followed by a section on Butler's theory and how it can be connected to refugeeness by providing summaries on the literature using her and further adding to it in order to widen the set of situations in which refugeeness occurs. I will draw thereafter on one empirical case of a Syrian political activist I interviewed last year as part of my fieldwork for my master's thesis in Berlin. This activist was involved, and continues to be, in what I would consider one of the most well-known and important Syrian political organizations in Germany which are actively against Assad. I am aware that a bigger empirical data is important to investigating such a question, but I am using the present case just to open up the question and sensitize us to the importance of political activism vis-à-vis refugeeness. Furthermore, I will examine subversion in two contexts/spaces: camps and charitable spaces. What is meant by charitable spaces are the organizations involved in refugee assistance and integration. People with a history of activism in their home countries are expected to get involved in these spaces as informed by their background. Temporally, subversion will be examined across two different phases: one when the activist had not yet been granted a refugee status, and the second when he already secured it.

The ultimate aim of this essay is to help with framing the subjects under investigation in my PhD thesis, namely political activists, and to learn about the challenges of their activism as practiced in post-displacement settings. It relates strongly to how activists perceive of their positionality as political activists working on homeland issues from afar. In this sense, the traditional schism of agency vs. structure is being revisited here in emphasizing the significance of political configurations in influencing the environment in which political activists operate and that issues of integration are of huge impact and relevance to the kind of work they are doing despite its seeming disconnectedness from the homeland context.

The Camp in Homo Sacer: Where does Agamben stand on the Refugee Crisis?

Agamben wrote thoroughly on the foundational logics of the camp. Taking Nazi concentration camps as a case of illustration in anatomizing the camp, Agamben's underlying aim appeared as particularly concerned with understanding how human beings could be stripped of any say in protesting their own perishment⁶. In other words, how people could be transformed into such mute subjects that their death could be easily sanctioned without contestation, and defending their own life, which is a basic human instinct, becomes impossible to stage. Drawing on Foucault's notion of biopolitics which, very briefly, investigates how liberalism promoted a particular kind of institutionalized rationalization dealing with human bodies as entities to be regulated, managed, and disciplined according to a prescribed set of rules in order to ensure stability⁷, Agamben saw the camp as the

⁶ Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford University Press: Stanford CA, p.173.

⁷ Foucault, M. (2008). *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at College De France 1978-79*. Palgrave Macmillan: Great Britain, p.317.

ultimate materialization of biopolitics⁸ that cannot be possibly rivalled in its dehumanization of humans. Expanding on the notion which Agamben understood as marking the beginning of politicizing *Zoe* (life in its simplest form as equating with survival) by redeeming it an area of government calculation and intervention, the camp was considered a “state of exception” where *Zoe* is the only form of life existing amongst refugees⁹. The camp is “zone of indistinction” in which several dichotomies of legal and illegal, rule and exception, inside and outside converge in producing such an indistinguishable entity. Both a space of inclusion and exclusion, the camp represents a state of in-betweenness where it is cast outside the recognized sociopolitical order, and yet it is this outsideness which characterizes it as included¹⁰. Put differently, it is the recognition of exclusion, in emphasizing the camp as an exception, that counts as inclusion.

Reading through Agamben’s account, the camp appears to have persisted because of the solution it offers to the conundrum of refugees in an international order that continues to privilege the nation-state. Democracies and the Nazi regime represent a continuum of two contrasting poles in which the function of the camp transformed from being a tool of extermination based on race to a tool of exclusion based on nationality¹¹. Borrowing from Hannah Arendt in linking the nation-state to the problem of refugees, Agamben contends that refugees are placed in this state of exception because they are not citizens. Citizenship is what qualifies humans as political beings. Being reduced to a bare life situation, that is being a *Homo Sacer* (a person entitled to no rights but the right to life as an animal with no political existence) is inevitable when refugees cannot be categorized according to the conventional wisdom of nation-states. Where they remain immune to categorization, when the normal order of things that citizenship is conferred based on membership of a nation, that birth is what produces the subject as a political subject, bare life becomes the only alternative to dealing with refugees. Their very existence however exposes the system of nation-state to a crisis where sovereignty stems from this entangled web of birth, nation, and citizenship¹². In order to maintain the centrality of nation-state in governing modern day life and avoid its erosion as posed by such a crisis, refugees are treated as an anomaly in the system by being shunned completely from life as defined by the nation-state, taking refugee camps as vehicles of exceptionalizing where the absence of rights mandated by citizenship leaves no other form of life thriving but life in its naked, bare form. What is striking, according to Agamben, is that the camp, originally designed as an emergency tool in order to respond to a particular situation of particular delicateness, is now acquiring permanency and becoming an accepted spatial reality. The banalization of the camp seems to serve as both a symptom and a consequence of the system’s continued dysfunctionality in addressing the refugee problem¹³.

⁸ Agamben, 1998, p.119.

⁹ Ibid, p.1, 119, 170.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 170.

¹¹ Ramadan, A. (2013). Spatialising the Refugee Camp. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, Vol.38: pp.65-77, p.68. Owens, P. (2009). Reclaiming Bare Life? Against Agamben on Refugees. International Relations, Vol.23, No.4: pp.567-582, p.574.

¹² Agamben, 1998, p. 126-131.

¹³ Ibid, p.168-169, 175.

Agamben's analysis, although focused in its entirety on the nation-state, did not overlook the international aspect in relation to the question of refugees. It is observed that the systematic subjugation of refugees in the context of nation-state is also replicated on the international level. Humanitarian organizations supported by the international community conceives of refugees in the same logic of bare life. Human life is defined as synonymous to the preservation of bare life. Using refugees from Rwanda as an example, Agamben shows that donations collected for their help, although a good-intentioned deed, served as an extension of bare life by reducing refugees to objects in need of aid and protection. Humanitarianism in this sense does not emerge as separate from politics as being claimed, but in fact as complicit in perpetuating and triumphing natural bare life as the ultimate form of life pursued for refugees¹⁴. Ultimately, humanitarian organizations are perceived as the guardians of nation-state system by promoting solutions (repatriation or integration and eventual naturalization) that help to keep the system in place and ensure its survival¹⁵. Bare life is thus produced and reproduced by a matrix of national and international actors where the nation-state remains the sole sovereign power drawing and redrawing lines, drafting laws that non-state actors comply with through remodeling in their mandate of refugee protection.

Providing a summary of Agamben's work in addition to a brief commenting, it should be established by now that Agamben's reading cannot serve as a general model in understanding today's camp functions. Reiterating what has been already extensively debated in literature between opposing Agamben's perspective altogether¹⁶ and acknowledging his contributions yet taking a critical take on it by confirming possibilities of resistance¹⁷, this essay stands with the second in recalling the need for Agamben to be reinterpreted and used selectively according to the context in hand if its analytical power is to remain relevant. Indeed, in some situations, especially as it appears to be the case now with asylum seekers denied protection in Europe and facing pending deportation, Agamben offers a timeless analysis in making sense of these recurrent plights. However, there even exists some debate in this respect with a growing scholarship studying the protest movements of rejected asylum seekers in Europe, and arguing that, contrary to Agamben's complete negation of agency, they demonstrate an example of power resistance, which is evidenced by their turning of camps, the very space believed to be responsible for their exclusion, into a space of contention and even spatializing their resistance beyond the camp to include other places as a means of acquiring visibility¹⁸. These studies corroborate the arguments of, and in fact converge with¹⁹, an earlier trend known as "Critical Citizenship Studies" which views the contentious actions of asylum seekers as a way of enacting

¹⁴ Ibid, p.133.

¹⁵ Owens, 2009, p.571.

¹⁶ Levy, C. (2010). Refugees, Europe, Camps/State of Exception: "Into The Zone", the European Union and Extraterritorial Processing of Migrants, Refugees, and Asylum-seekers (Theories and Practice). *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No.1: pp.92-119. Owens, 2009.

¹⁷Darling, J. (2007). *Becoming Bare: Asylum, Hospitality, and the Politics of Encampment*. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol. 27: pp.649-665. Edkins, J, & Pin-Fat, V. (2005). *Through the Wire: Relations of Power and Relations of Violence*. *Journal of International Studies*, Vol.34, No.1: pp.1-26. Ramadan, 2013.

¹⁸ Ataç, I. (2016) 'Refugee Protest Camp Vienna': Making Citizens through Locations of the Protest Movement. *Citizenship Studies*, Vol.20, No.5: pp.629-646. Bhimji, F. (2016). *Visibilities and the Politics of Space: Refugee Activism in Berlin*. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, Vol.14, No.4: pp.432-450.

¹⁹ Ataç, I, Rygiel, K, & Stierl, M. (2016). Introduction: The Contentious Politics of Refugee and Migrant Protest and Solidarity Movements: Remaking Citizenship from the Margins. *Citizenship Studies*, Vol. 20, No.5, pp.527-544.

citizenship “from the margin” by appropriating and effectuating politicality, and of minimizing the schism between citizens and non-citizens by thinking of citizenship as something that can be lived and experienced through contentiousness²⁰. In ascribing agency to refugees regardless of their legal status as non-citizens which is often so easily mobilized upon to rule out any possibility at the emergence of political subjectivity, this trend redefines citizenship not as a bestowment granted by the sovereign, but as an enactment grounded in claims making and fight for recognition. It is a product of negotiation, and not simply or necessarily something that has to be conferred to comply with the dominant understanding of citizenship as restricted to membership. Concerned with giving meaning to refugee struggles glossed over by readings appealing to Agamben, and as opposed to sidelining them as mere “expressions of bare life”²¹, this trend emerged essentially to lessen the grip of Agamben on all that is related to refugees and present alternative narratives giving sufficient acknowledgement to their endurance. In this sense, it argues that continuing to rely on Agamben represents a form of epistemic violence against refugees, replicating their subordination as in reality in the production of knowledge given how their existence comes to be conceived only through the lens of victimization or criminalization²².

Despite the convincing articulations of this trend, Agamben’s conceptualization of the camp remains so strikingly relevant in its nuanced elucidation of the camp as a meant-to-be exclusionary space and of refugees as unwanted figures. The landscape of the refugee crisis reaffirms the relevancy of Agamben in speaking to the realities of refugees in many contexts. Camps in Greece are what can be argued as having epitomized Agamben’s description of bare life. Living in camps composed of mere tenants that fail to compare to the situation of camps in the Middle East in their dire and deplorable conditions, refugees are left in limbo waiting and trapped in this state of enduring liminality and uncertainty, unable to return or proceed to the destination they initially envisioned prior to their journey. At the same time, the economic crisis in Greece does not seem to foreclose any genuine opportunities of integration for refugees²³. Similarly, and away from post-flight accounts, Agamben is equally useful in making sense of asylum seekers’ journeys crossing the Mediterranean to Europe. In trying to cross borders illegally, the borders that serve as a symbolic and an actual demarcation between lives as politically qualified and aliens²⁴, in this transending space, asylum seekers’ lives transformed automatically into bare life. The act of crossing brought them into “a zone of indistinction”, subjecting them to the fatal consequence of having their life easily sacrificed by being left to drown in the sea for daring to transgress this demarcation in ways sanctioned illegal by the sovereign. Offered no option from the very beginning but to embark upon this tumultuous journey in hunting an escape from conflicts, the lives of asylum seekers were already in the making of becoming a bare life.

²⁰ Rigby, J, & Schlembach, R. (2013) Impossible Protest: Noborders in Calais. *Citizenship Studies*, Vol.17, No.2: pp. 157-172. Kim Rygiel (2011) *Bordering Solidarities: Migrant Activism and the Politics of Movement and Camps at Calais*. *Citizenship Studies*, Vol.15, No.1: pp.1-19. Kim Rygiel (2012) *Politicizing Camps: Forging Transgressive Citizenships in and through Transit*. *Citizenship Studies*, Vol.16, No. 5-6: pp. 807-825.

²¹ Owens, 2009, p.573.

²² Rygiel, 2012, p.814.

²³ Kraatz, S. (2018). *Briefing: Study in Focus: Integration of Refugees in Greece, Hungary, and Italy*. European Parliament.

²⁴ Kovras, I, & Robins, S. (2016). *Death as the border: Managing Missing Migrants and Unidentified Bodies at the EU's Mediterranean Frontier*. *Political Geography*, Vol.55: pp.40-49, p.41.

There are other countless examples that can be named in the context of the refugee crisis beyond Europe and arguably benefit from Agamben. For example, the proliferation of refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, and Northern Iraq as induced by the conflict in Syria, these camps, operating necessarily in either authoritarian or fragmented states, spatially segregate refugees from the host communities by being either placed on the outskirts of cities or within while implementing curfew on the mobility of camp residents. Living in precarious conditions, camp residents survive on food rations and limited aid services provided by humanitarian organizations. In these situations, there are no prospects of inclusion, but of managing the status quo in its current state of waitinghood until time is fit for repatriation, thus triumphing life in its bare form with people regarded as of no existence but the existence reduced to survival. Despite its apparent utility in understanding such situations, and in seconding the substantial segment of the literature arguing for revision based on the exceptional case of Palestinian camps in Lebanon from which armed and political resistance was born and organized²⁵, one has to remain cautious applying Agamben uncritically without rethinking some aspects and carefully evaluating the case in hand. Its uncritical application may result in ignoring refugee resilience as expressed now in the expansion of camps into city-like settings, with food businesses and start-ups thriving to the service of camp residents and beyond. Therefore, taking Agamben too literally risks being simplistic in terms of overlooking all these complexities and possibilities emerging from camps as sites where destinies can be enacted outside the exercise of the sovereign. So, even in these contexts where Agamben can be obviously called upon, rethinking his work is still needed to account for the larger dynamics in camps. Yet, it is important while attending to these questions not to confound resilience with agency as they imply different meanings. Resistance is at the heart of agency, while resilience means literally adaptation²⁶ and what refugees living in these situations do is adapt to the difficulties of life in the camp without majorly challenging its structure or the conditions experienced. They get on with their lives within the limits permitted by the structure governing them, acting always within the bounds of the permissible.

Beyond transit or neighbouring countries, using Agamben in the context of destination countries acquires a different meaning. It is not that, unlike in the Middle East or countries along the Mediterranean sea, camps of poor conditions cannot be found. At the peak of the crisis with the massive influxes of refugees coming to Europe, reports showed how bad the situation was in some camps where there was overcrowding, unavailability of shelters, and shortage in supplies caused partly by the massive entry of people without prior preparation. Even after the crisis was over, still many reception centers do not offer adequate conditions. This is particularly true for countries that came to accommodate large numbers of refugees, such as Germany. So, far from camp conditions as a comparable element justifying using Agamben, his perspective is operationalized differently in this context because of the group of people concerned. It has been shown earlier how Agamben applies to the case of rejected asylum seekers, but for groups guaranteed asylum, or the likelihood of getting

²⁵ Ramadan, 2013. Schiocchet, L. (2014). Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon: Is the Camp a Space of Exception? *Mashriq & Mahjar*, Vol.2, No.1, pp.130-160. Tuastad, D. (2017). 'State of Exception' or 'State in Exile'? The Fallacy of appropriating Agamben on Palestinian Refugee Camps. *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.38, No.9: pp. 2159-2170.

²⁶ Bracke, S. (2016). Is the Subaltern Resilient? Notes on Agency and Neoliberal Subjects. *Cultural Studies*, Vol.30, No.5: pp.839-855, p.850-851.

asylum, as is the case with Syrians, it works in a different way. International politics and public opinion play a significant role in constructing that image of them as needing refuge based on the wide coverage of conflicts in their homelands²⁷.

In this way, it is argued that for Agamben to be used, two conditions should be fulfilled: first, it should entail a flexible understanding of camps as sites of management and control without taking the idea of bare life to the extreme. This may be true, but not in a fully Agambian sense when applied to welfare states. However, Agamben left a room for revision. He stated very clearly in *Homo Sacer* that camps are increasingly mutating, assuming different metamorphic shapes and getting slowly inscribed within the city's landscape²⁸. This statement can be useful in thinking about camps as constantly changing and how they can develop to have different functions, purposes, and meanings. It leaves a space for recontextualization as the situation may entail, and delimits the contours of our understanding of the camp. While Foucault, on which Agamben obviously rests in his analysis, could be drawn upon in his idea of governmentality as an alternative to follow the example of most of the burgeoning studies trying to render agency a space, it is argued that Agamben, and despite being heavily criticized, still remains useful and applicable. This is because his analysis is focused entirely on the space of the camp which, in the early stages of people's lives as refugees, comes to occupy a huge part to the extent that its effects linger on years after. Also, from his perspective on the sovereign represented in state authority which is so often mistakenly assumed as a monolithic entity with a unified agenda as well as perceptions and interests, Agamben can offer an insight into the division of labour between the actors representing this authority, especially actors in charge of security, and how the power delegated to each of these actors is exercised differently. Second, it should establish a link between the nation-state and integration agendas. In this case, the approach of the nation-state with refugees is understood as limited to conditioned inclusion, vetting "good refugees" who are willing to and can adapt from "bad refugees" who are unable otherwise to meet the requirements.

Linking Butler's Performativity to Refugeeeness

In this section, the theory of performativity will be touched upon briefly in order to understand how it connects to refugeeeness. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Butler strives to show how gender is a performative category. Gender is essentially a social construct, a total fabrication of no true or false appearance. Gender is malleable, taking different shapes as such might be encouraged by the dominant culture and its accompanying discourse. The body, which is the reflection of gender, merely its displaying mirror, and which is established in this reading as a neutral object, takes on a variety of gestures and conducts in the sense that the substance of gender is revealed through corporeal signs. Gender is a fluid construct which can be denaturalized and reinstated elastically contrary to the essentialism presumed and nurtured by hegemonic cultures that gender is fixed. Gender performance, as a collective of acts, is established through repetition and endless reenactments. The bodily appearance, or as in Butler words, "the exterior space", is performed through "a stylized repetition of

²⁷ Revitti, 2013, p.309.

²⁸ Agamben, 1998, p.175-176.

acts". In reconceptualizing gender, Butler argues that gender should be seen as a "social temporality" instead of an identity²⁹.

It appears from this description that gender is more than just a social construct, but a political issue. According to Butler, it is a way of ensuring conformity and producing compliance for they are sacred to cultures. But conformity requires punishment, or at least the fear of reprimanding, to be sustained. Non-conformist gender performances within a hegemonic culture are punished and demonized, while conformist behaviours, in following this logic, are what essentially "humanize" humans. However, there is a room for maneuvering that such imposed naturalized categories of gender, despite being so hegemonic, can be challenged and subverted. Nevertheless, there is no set of recommended subversive acts. An act of subversion depends on the reaction it triggers and how much it can be considered a challenge to the bodily acts consented upon by the dominant culture. Subversion should be understood as context-dependent in terms of how it will be received in the context in which it occurs, how profoundly troubling it will sound to the established norms of gender, and finally whether its repetition can be at all effective³⁰.

Established within this context, the concept of refugeeness is suggested to constitute also performative process³¹. More precisely, refugeeness is defined as a:

Social construction of what is considered to be typical for people labelled as refugees. This construction changes over time and varies in relation to different beholders and performers. It is by no means a set of given psychological or social features. It is constantly being recreated and performed in social interactions³².

Refugeeness is often discussed vis-à-vis relations between NGOs and refugees. There is much emphasis on how NGOs play a vital role in the construction of refugeeness by encouraging a particular behaviour among refugees. They are accused of socializing refugees into behaving gratefully by prioritizing women as the targeted group because they are believed to have more flexibility and patience, thus locking refugees into having to perform these roles of being in need. In this way, NGOs are implicated in further embedding gendered representations of women as helpless and powerless and men as impatient and angry, while at the same reducing them to mere objects of assistance with no potential but pleading for help. In this way, they also nurture compliance because the kind of behaviour expected of women is what can be safely coopted by the designed interventions of NGOs. Refugeeness has to be emphasized however as of strategic use to some given the access to benefits it allows them based on their performances of neediness³³. Similarly, in one study focusing more specifically on Iranian political activists, who often seek asylum because of their activism, it was shown how NGOs entrenched this role of them being activists by locking them into the category of "Green Movement" activists despite their internal ideological diversity. Because proving their

²⁹ Butler, J. (1999). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge: New York and London, p.164-179.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p.176-178.

³¹ Revitti, 2013, and Szczepanikova, 2010.

³² Szczepanikova, 2010, p.473.

³³ Szczepanikova, 2010, a short summary of the article.

deservingness of asylum was contingent on how well they can play the role of the activist, performing refugeeness became closely linked to affirming this identity of political activists, thus conflating refugeeness with political activism. This was mutually reinforced by activists themselves and never really radically subverted given the benefits stemming from it³⁴.

More generally, these studies show how refugeeness plays a different role across the asylum cycle, with people yet waiting for their asylum status more likely to be merged into refugeeness. While at the same time, when granted asylum, they are presented with chances at subversion, with taking themselves out of this role. Furthermore, they also place little emphasis on subversion as either absent or limited to verbal criticism and highlight that most of the time refugeeness is fostered and instrumentalized by refugees themselves because it comes with rewards.

To further add by borrowing from Butler more directly in expanding the horizons of refugeeness, institutional pressures are also means of enforcing refugeeness. Integration measures are vehicles of normativity and socialization, providing a script of how refugees should act to be included and accepted in the society. Those who do not abide by the script are looked down upon and dealt with through penal responses. Non-compliance is punished at times by reducing social benefits. In Germany, those who fail to take orientation courses and achieve the minimum level required in language education get their benefits substantially reduced³⁵. There are also restrictions on the freedom of movement³⁶ which are also met by reduction in benefits³⁷ and is creating a clandestine movement among refugees. To conclude, a holistic view of refugeeness combining camps, charitable spaces, and institutional requirements will be useful in an analysis seeking to explore ways of coping and subversion among political activists.

Between Activism and Refugeeness

Studies underline how the camp nurtures mistrust among its residents and between residents and humanitarian organizations, and contributes to exacerbating community tensions and competition³⁸. Based on my own fieldwork in Berlin last year, many informants reflected retrospectively on how life in camps constituted a source of distress for them with the cramming, lack of privacy, and tensions growing along gender, ethnic, political, and religious lines as facilitated by these very conditions. Moreover, camps as understood from above, or the disciplinary reasoning behind camps as the preferred tool of governments, has been also thoroughly studied showing how camps operate as a means of control and an intervention designed essentially to make refugees governable and

³⁴ Revitti, 2013, a short summary of the article.

³⁵ Funk, N. (2016). A Spectre in Germany: Refugees, a 'Welcome Culture' and an 'Integration Politics'. *Journal of Global Ethics*, Vol.12, No.3: pp.289-299, p.291.

³⁶ Aida, Asylum Information Database. (2016). Country Report: Germany, p.12.

³⁷ Funk, 2016, p.291.

³⁸ Raghallaigh, M. (2013). The Causes of Mistrust amongst Asylum Seekers and Refugees: Insights from Research with Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Minors Living in the Republic of Ireland. *Journal of Refugee Studies* Vol. 27, No. 1: p.82-100, p.85. Sigona, N. (2015). Campzanship: Reimagining the Camp as a Social and Political space. *Citizenship Studies*, Vol.19, No.1: pp.1-15, p.8.

receptive to rehabilitation in a global order where they are perceived as a problem³⁹. It remains unclear however how this control comes to be experienced from below as established and foregrounded by refugees themselves. In this section, a grassroots perspective is taken in understanding how life in camps, especially in respect to control, is experienced by political activists. The activist's account offers an insight into this question:

I lived for a period of time there [in refugee camps]. Refugee camps existed at the time [2014], but surely it wasn't like [as in numbers] the camps of 2015 and 2016. Not as bad and poor in quality. I had other places to live, so I used to leave the camp. I also had, somehow, the financial capacity to rent a place outside, but I had to remain in the camp as part of the process. So yes I lived in the same situation, not like others but I did experience it. I had networks before I came to Berlin, so people helped me find a place immediately. For me I just stayed for about two months, but in reality I had to go check my post every now and then; you know there are these legal issues we have to take care of. When I would show up, I get asked why you are not here? Where do you go? You know this control from guards. It was like we want to know what you are doing in your life, your work; they wanted to know what was going on with me. Not because it is legal, of course legally it is not their right. Surely security guards do not have the right to ask you any questions. So, there was this state of containment at the camp. There was this impression that they have the authority to cancel one's entire asylum application if he protested. There was this attempt to keep us under control, that everything we do must first be considered by the guards. There was this authoritarian role, to control us and take advantage of our unfamiliarity with laws. This was felt strongly by the young people [in the camp] but no one was able to speak because we just arrived. We did not know anything yet.

Personal networks, as argued elsewhere⁴⁰, played a significant role in terms of guaranteeing him a place to live despite his yet unsettled legal situation. As a political activist, and obviously as a well-connected person even though the context was yet apparently new to him, enabled him to play on his status strategically in order to evade life in camps. Having what it takes to carve out a different path from that prescribed by the asylum process, namely the social but also the symbolic capital, was crucial to maneuvering with the procedures that other people had to undergo. This can be argued to constitute a mechanism not of subversion, but at least of aversion which could be done in the first place because of his financial means and personal connections. It is a mechanism often pursued by all those in possession of the same capital without having necessarily to be activists. This cannot be exactly considered a subversive act because it does not demonstrate an example of organized resistance, for instance as in camps similar to earlier examples in the theoretical discussion.

More importantly however, what stands out in his narrative is not the conditions of the camp, which are often dominating in such accounts, as much as control. There was much emphasis on control, not only as implied by the frequency of the word in the text, but also as to how it was manifested and practiced as facilitated and functionalized by the camp. Mentioning it only briefly, he did not elaborate on the camp conditions and how deteriorating they were, suffice that he just compared it to the situation when he first arrived, but was in fact more concerned with what the camp, as a closed space run by managers and security guards, subjected people to in terms of constraining their freedom of movement and choice. Not saying much about conditions in camps could be also because, as clearly stated in this excerpt, he did not experience with the same conditions, regarding poor living conditions, as those who came later in the larger influxes. It is the form of control being

³⁹ Olivius, 2017, p.291-292.

⁴⁰ Rivetti, 2013.

experienced here, also in a way corroborated by other informants interviewed around the same time but who do not happen to be activists, which deserves a close inspection.

Within this context, it is important to mention that this statement was obtained in relation to the role of Arab communities in assisting with the reception of Syrian refugees in Berlin. Many of the security guards who are referred to in this statement, if not the majority, were Arabs or of Arab origins, coming specifically from the same region as Syrians, the Levant. The role they played was particularly problematic as they contributed to the camp being perceived more and more as a controlling space. The story reflects harassment and social control exercised by the community, but in other stories, unpleasant incidents ranging from beatings to handling problematic situations with unjustified arbitrariness were frequently mentioned. Intercommunal tensions stemming from reasons dealing with the sending context, mainly political reasons and historical divisions, but also with the receiving context in relation to the favourable asylum conditions of Syrians and the consequences of the expansion of the Arab community on the relations with the German society, led to a situation where these renewed as well as newly created tensions interfered with the management of the refugee crisis. This points out to the significance of intra-ethnic relations and the role ethnic communities as intermediaries come to play in refugee governance. Chosen because they are thought as likely able to deal with refugees coming essentially from a similar culture and also due to linguistic proximity identifies another way of how the presence of refugees was securitized. Because they are viewed with skepticism and suspicion, with their presence resulting from war and underdevelopment, rendering them to be perceived as incapable of self-regulation also because they originate from an authoritarian context and therefore susceptible to terrorism⁴¹, the responsibility to maintain order in the camps where they are placed is assigned to people believed to possess the skills to understand the mentality of those governed. The prevalence of this kind of control somewhat denotes that there was this sense of rationalization that dealing with newcomers should depart from a similar securitized reasoning to that of home, that these people should be treated with firmness and harshness whenever needed. All in all, this highlights that the exercise of control is so diverse and governed by different reasonings that can be harmonized, but may also come to clash.

Away from camps, the second excerpt concerns more concretely how the activist deals with another challenge of being a refugee, that is integration:

I do not speak German, I don't read German at all. I failed to integrate. That [Integration] I did not intend or like to do. I have no project. I know people who have this project of integration in their mind, but this is not exactly working for me. I see no particular conditions. What is on the table is assimilation not integration. What is being presented as integration is in fact assimilation and I do not want to play a game of assimilation. Second, as a consequence of these conditions and because of the mentality of those asking us to assimilate and call it integration, I took an oath not to stay here. I will finish my PhD and then go.

Without further elaboration, this excerpt evidently provides an example of how refugeeness, as prescribed by the state, is subverted at best. Not only did he criticize integration measures, which is a

⁴¹ Olivius, 2017, p.291-292.

highly contested issue among Syrian refugees in general, he acted outside of the script, choosing to perform himself in a different way from that suggested by integration agendas by not following it altogether. But again, supported in his endeavors by symbolic capital, he had the choice not to abide and the means to stage this subversion unavailable to a sizable segment of the refugee population. His subversion is justified upon his critical understanding of integration as assimilation in camouflage, denying actors an opportunity at choosing how to integrate by confronting them with a set of given rules and not giving them a voice in the decision-making.

In the following statement, the activist explains why he was not involved at the time of the interview in initiatives related to humanitarian and refugee assistance in addition to political activism. He was asked if he takes part in these initiatives in order to understand whether individuals coming earlier, and since they have a more stable situation and are more familiar with the context, tried to assist with the arrival of refugees. Part of it was also to see if there are any tendencies among Syrians in general to take part in voluntary work considered so important to the well-being of their community. His answer was unexpectedly surprising in deflecting attention to other hidden aspects than those initially intended by the question:

Two years ago, there were attempts [as to getting involved in refugee assistance], but there was something fishy about it. A lot of Germans not knowing anything about the cause are now working with refugees because there is a lot of funding. With the big refugee influx of 2015, just as soon as I go [to organizations with the intention to help] I would get disturbed. I know people who have nothing to do with refugees and now are working as part of the refugee cause. Seriously it became like this that people not knowing anything they submit a proposal and receive a lot of funding just to do any work with refugees. This was really disgusting for me, so I had to withdraw my hands altogether. I immersed myself more in the Syrian cause. Politically speaking, [in Germany] we are not talking about a situation where things would become better; probably it will get worse. There is a feeling of supremacy in the streets. People do not care anymore, and those who care feel like they are special that well I care about refugees, I am good and kind and so I deserve credit. I won't give credit to someone who is actually doing something political. And second thing, when there is a terrorist attack I get asked about my opinion. Like based on what exactly should I be giving my opinion on what happened in Paris? I was particularly sensitive, so I withdrew and decided not to take part anymore. There was no purpose for doing any activity regarding German politics, and in relation to the situation of refugees given that I do not want to become part of the bigger political scene. I felt I couldn't become an equal, and this made me feel a bit humiliated. I was part of the movement, and yet it did not consider me a real equal. Never did I feel a real equal while working within these circles concerned with the refugee cause. There was no need to continue. I withdrew more or less, I declared complete hostility to the entire cause. Whenever I got asked to talk about refugees I became more of a hostile person, that's what I noticed more generally. So, why should I remain there then if that means becoming more aggressive and hostile? Aggressive to all that is local.

His rationalization is multilayered, reflecting more than one position and one reason. First, his brief experience with involvement in refugee assistance provided him with a critical view of the "welcome culture" so widely celebrated at the time. Being on the team of the giver not the receiver, while at the same time belonging to the community of receivers, being in this third position enabled him to acquire a different understanding of the workings of these organizations. By highlighting their incompetency to deal with refugees and questioning their *raison d'être* lacking the experience qualifying them for this kind of work, he acted against the expectations of him as a "grateful" refugee. This suggests that expectations has a performativity, that there was a certain performance, that of gratitude, being encouraged, although implicitly as in his case. To elaborate further, by mobilizing on his outsidersness to reflect critically on their work from within, and not simply commending on it

because it is political and politics involves interests, and contesting the obligation to acknowledge their efforts and withdrawing therefore in response to this imposed refugeeness, he subverted this role of having to show gratitude. Subversion was dual in this case manifesting itself not only in criticism but also in withdrawal. It is clear however that it is because he was outside of these circles that he was able to voice these criticisms and reflections more openly. More importantly, being not a beneficiary of their work and having not to depend on their assistance, being in this privileged position, made it easier for him to consider the possibility of subverting this role and proceeding with it. This highlights the significance of need in entrenching power inequalities between the giver and receiver in charitable spaces.

In keeping with this thread on his position within these circles, the second observation shows that his role had other performative functions apart from gratitude. In this situation, it is not that there was a particular performance of refugeeness fostered, but that a certain power structure characterized by unequal relations ensued based on the performativity of his status. Joining as a refugee, as a person who might be able to contribute to their efforts being part of the community targeted by aid, he was integrated in the movement due to his potentially useful role, yet seemingly in a subaltern status. Feeling less than of an equal means that he was somewhat relegated to a secondary position in compatibility with his status as an outsider, being part of the receivers' community whose points of views are not so often incorporated by NGOs⁴². These power imbalances, as emerging from differences in background and status, appeared in the question about terrorist attacks, exemplifying a dichotomy of "us" vs. "them". This question functioned as tool of exclusion and differentiation by orientaling and racializing him, that being a Syrian refugee, and thus necessarily a Muslim, he was obliged to make a stand on this kind of incidents. Subverting being fixed in this position again was expressed in withdrawal from these circles. But withdrawal here did not translate into apathy from associational life in the receiving society. On the contrary, refugee politics was replaced by homeland-oriented politics or translated into stronger commitments to the homeland cause instead of following a balanced agenda divided between the two activisms concerning his community both in the diaspora and in the homeland. In other words, responding to feelings of unequalness in these spaces, the activist turned to his political past by working on something related to the political cause of his home country. Because he has the social capital needed as an activist, he was able to create, in cooperation with others, a field for homeland political mobilization in the new context. Unlike the case of Iranian activists in which political activism was turned into a means of domination, political activism in this situation acted as a means of subversion.

Equally important, his withdrawal also emanates from his understanding of refugee assistance as part of German politics, which can be interpreted in an Agambian sense. Seeing it as a local issue where he would not be treated as an equal lacking essentially the political rights as a citizen to qualify him for doing so, he decided to turn to something where he can feel more entitled and as of rights to take part. Although being a refugee gives him access to these circles, it does not guarantee a

⁴² Szczepanikova, 2010, p.470.

relationship of reciprocity, which reveals the extent to which political participation, even when it comes to volunteerism and when it involves people who should obviously have a say in the way they are being integrated, is nationalized.

Without overstating the role of power inequalities in charitable spaces, there exists more to this statement than what has been already explained regarding its effects. Clearly, the activist mobilized strategically upon his political activism and used it as a mechanism of distinction to render himself distant from being categorized or labelled as a refugee. In this sense, political activism presented a strategy of exit for him. Continuing to work in refugee assistance would have continued to attach him to the stigma of being a refugee. This is evidenced by the critical timing he came to clash with these performances and representations. To explain further, this did not happen when he first arrived, but in the wake of the crisis, not only when he came to observe the workings of these circles more closely, but when he also began to be associated with the larger masses of refugees being expected to perform himself in a certain way more generally expected of refugees. This is when he had a more subversive reaction. But also more importantly, this speaks of the saliency of political activism as a source of identification and how so central it is to his identity. Rewarding gains that could be obtained from participating in these spaces (expanded social networks and other promising opportunities)⁴³ were sacrificed in this case when calculated against the cons of having to endure with certain disempowering representations and performances.

Two implications can be drawn from this example. First, it does not fully contest, but at least can be argued to challenge the established thesis postulating that involvement in voluntary and associational work can foster integration and facilitate their inclusion in the new society because it increases their social capital and networks⁴⁴. It shows that getting refugees coopted within the existing system masks power inequalities and can even contribute to further reproducing them by letting them go unchallenged. Second, the political activist's subversive acts summarized in the prioritization of the homeland cause over the refugee cause resembles with a reaction often discussed in the literature on migration as characteristic of minorities, either naturalized or second generation migrants, who develop a stronger affiliation with and orientation toward their homeland because they do not feel accepted in the society they live⁴⁵. This example signifies that this does not only apply to migrants with a longer history of immigration in the concerned country, but can be also replicated in the case of newly arrived migrants or refugees who might experiment with similar feelings of stigmatization or discrimination.

⁴³ Rivetti, 2013, p.313.

⁴⁴ Predelli, L. (2008). Political and Cultural Ethnic Mobilisation: The Role of Immigrant Associations in Norway. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol.34, No.6: pp.935-954. Wilson, R, & Lewis, H. (2006) "A Part of Society: Refugees and Asylum Seekers volunteering in the UK, A report based on Case Studies of Ten Organisations", Tandem Communications and Research Ltd, Leeds,U.K.

⁴⁵ Østergaard-Nielsen, E. (2001). Transnational Political Practices and the Receiving State: Turks and Kurds in Germany and the Netherlands. *Global Networks*, Vol.1, No.3, pp. 261–281. Koopmans, R, & Statham, P. (2002). How National Citizenship shapes Transnationalism: A Comparative Analysis of Migrant Claims-making in Germany, Great Britain and the Netherlands. In C, Joppke & E Moravska (eds) *Integrating Immigrants in Liberal Nation-States: From Postnational to Transnational* (pp.195-238). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Conclusion

Based on an empirical case of one political activist, this essay has examined how the challenge of being a refugee is perceived and handled differently by political activists. It contributed in a way to further showing how experiences of displacement are characterized by a diversity by bringing a case focusing more specifically on social status, thus highlighting the significance of ascribed identities in shaping such experiences. By discussing displacement in relation to identities and statuses, this essay tried to contest treating refugees in public discourse as undifferentiated masses, showing that their experiences are much more complex to be obscured by appealing to traditional groupings and categories.

Informed by a theoretical framework combining Agamben and Butler, it has been demonstrated how control takes a different shape where ethnic communities are involved, and how refugeeness is constantly reenacted across different phases and spaces, highlighting no end of when people stop being refugees. Relating more directly to the empirical case, the essay explained how being committed to a political cause affects the capacity of political activists to cope, while serving as a solace and a shelter against challenges encountered in contexts where they are expected to perform refugeeness. Different mechanisms of subversion have been highlighted where political activism and the privileges accompanying it was instrumentalized over and over, rendering it at the center of subversion and resistance. However, as demonstrated by this case, there is doubt that subversion as a means of empowerment is available to everyone. Not all refugees, especially those dismayed by these impositions and not those viewing them favourably as offering opportunities, could afford subverting these roles, highlighting how true emancipation for refugees is hard to attain. Moreover, theoretically speaking, this case helped link Butler to Agamben by moulding performativity as a function of the nation-state's approach with refugees. In other words, scripts of refugeeness are provided by integration measures, which are adopted by nation-states in accommodating refugees within its structure.

In this essay, humanitarianism was also interrogated showing how charitable spaces continue to be dominated by power inequalities. This is not to discredit the work of NGOs, for indeed it reflects good intentions, in addition that their assistance is extremely crucial to easing the situation of refugees. Instead, this should be seen as an invitation to reflect critically on social interactions beyond the dichotomy of givers and receivers. For relationships between givers as belonging to the receiving context, and helpers as belonging to the targeted community, there should be more investigation into this case to see how power relations work. The case of the activist brings attention to the persistence of inequalities despite the absence of "giving". This underscores the inability of these organizations to integrate people from outside the institution and how it is difficult to accommodate reciprocity within NGOs' structures.