

Migration, Mobility, & Displacement

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Migration, Mobility, & Displacement

Vol 6

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Introduction

Helen Lansdowne

Helen Lansdowne is the Associate Director at the Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives (CAPI) and has a BA and an MA in Pacific and Asian Studies from the University of Victoria. She specializes in issues of development and gender in Southeast Asia and rural China state-society relations. Helen teaches Gender Studies in the Department of Social Sciences at Camosun College and is co-editor of numerous academic volumes, many derived from international CAPI conferences. She helped to found *Migration, Mobility, and Displacement* in 2015.

This edition of *Migration, Mobility & Displacement* is a special volume culminating from an online conference organized jointly by the Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives at the University of Victoria and the Research Centre for the Humanities, Social and Education Science at the University of Crete and endorsed by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development. The partnership between the two institutions developed from a meeting that the author had with Maria Kousis in Rethymnon in 2017. These pre-pandemic days were full of optimism that scholars, both students and faculty from the University of Victoria would be able to travel to Crete to collaborate with European-based scholars working in the field of migration, particularly as it pertains to peoples moving into Europe from the Asia Pacific region. Many migrants had come to Greece via Turkey, on route to other locales in Europe, peoples from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and other parts of the middle east, but also many from Asia, particularly from the Indian subcontinent. By the end of 2015 the numbers of migrants moving into Europe had swelled. Political panic set in leading the European Union to strike a deal with Turkey, which was ratified in March 2016. The deal was constructed to help stop the flow of refugees traveling from Turkey into Europe. However, as one of the papers in this volume illustrates the deal placed Greece in an extremely precarious position as it became not only the entry point to Europe for many migrants but also the end point. Papadakis and Dimari's paper, "Refugee Crisis and Transformations in Greek Migration Policy: the Trend towards Securitization and its Relationship to Precarity of Refugees" focuses on the new situation that Greece finds itself in, having gone from a transit to a host country, with its reaction being a securitized approach to migrants.

Many of the contributions in this issue are authored by graduate students. This is not a coincidence as it was part of the mandate of the project to encourage and support as much graduate student participation as possible. Pre-conference graduate student workshops were held in Victoria to help those who wished to be part of the conference, grants were applied for to offset travel costs and conference program plans were solidified. In other words, much work was done in anticipation of the conference. And then COVID hit. 2019 came and went and by early 2020 it was decided that although travel was out of the question, our joint conference would go ahead online.

The conference brought together more than 40 researchers and activists of migration, including leading scholars, graduate students, filmmakers, and migrant rights advocates, for a multidisciplinary discussion and boundary-pushing transnational exercise on migration. Focusing on the theme of “creating commons,” the conference explored the intersections between the temporary, yet permanent nature of contemporary migration, the reduction of public space available to mobile people, and patterns of resilience and resistance in contemporary migrant experience.

It was a unique research event that generated new and original scholarly understandings of migration across regions by bringing together a diverse group of scholars to share their work. It enhanced awareness of widely-shared commonalities of precarity and resistance, which also transcended the limits of geopolitical understandings of migration trends. The papers that follow provide a breadth of topic areas and reflect the major purpose of the conference - generating new and original scholarly understandings of global migrations; identifying evidence-based strategies in grassroots advocacy work; and improving public awareness of the lives and agency of migrants. For example, Lynn Ng Yu Ling’s work, “Migrant autonomies in Singapore’s Migrant Domestic Workers (MDW) Industry” and Claude Beaupre’s essay, “Domestic Workers in the Arabian Gulf: Precarity, reality and resistance” speak to the specific gendered working conditions for domestic workers and how these migrants must create unusual strategies to mitigate exploitative structural conditions.

The volume also has as a number of European focused papers, which highlight the complexities surrounding the vast numbers of people moving into the region. As cited earlier, Papadakis and Dimari’s work offers analysis of Greece’s migration policies in light of the European Union’s focus on securitization of its migration policy structure and how such policies impact the precarity of refugees. Focusing on specific policies of asylum procedures and the institutional policies that govern them, Ervin Shehu offers in his work “An Asylum Seeker’s Time between Being a “Refugee” and a “Migrant”” primary data that demonstrates that the practices of the Greek Asylum Services victimizes rather than protects asylum seekers. Haris Malmidis’ work “Integration and assimilation of migrants in Greece and the response of the grassroots” analyzes the Greek government’s conservative assimilationist approach to migrant integration, offering an alternative integration practice based on the work done by local groups setting up social solidarity economies in response to the dire refugee crisis in 2015. The final paper in this volume that focuses on Europe is authored by Angelos Loukakis, Chara Kokkinou, Stefania Kalogeraki and Maria Kousis, “Transnational Solidarity Organisations with Asian and non-Asian migrants in eight European countries: Searching for the Commons”. This paper offers data from their TransSOL research project that focuses on Transnational Solidarity Organizations that support migrants, including Asian migrants in eight countries: Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. As the authors point out in their conclusion, some TSOs support migrants from a top-down approach, while others make use of bottom-up methods. However, what seems to be consistent is the lack of support for Asian migrants within the TSO support system.

The acceptance and settlement of the Asian migrant has been challenging in many parts of the world, including Canada. As Jonathan Nash examines in his work, “Traces and Residues of Migrant Boat Journeys: Reading the ‘MV Sun Sea’ and ‘Komagata Maru’ through a liberal economy of affirmation and forgetting” Canada has a historical past that speaks to endemic racism and xenophobia while in contemporary times, making use politically of the marginalities experienced by boat migrants. From a different perspective, Xue Ma’s paper, “Temporary Movement, Temporary Jobs: “Flexibility” of Food Delivery Workers in China’s Platform Economy”, offers an example of internal migration by analyzing the working life of the rural migrant in urban China, in this case the food delivery worker. The flexible gig economy provides employment for the rural migrant but one that is highly exploitative.

Included in the issue of MM&D is an interview with Ansley Sawyer discussing her film “Like We Don’t Exist”. This film not only provides an examination of the ongoing conflict between Myanmar and its ethnic minorities, but highlights the importance of creating commons for people marginalized and wanting to find a way out of their marginalities. In this case, the focus is on the Karenni School for displaced peoples on the border of Thailand and Myanmar. This school, which is run by the Karenni Social Development Centre, is a partner organization of the Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives and has been hosting our UVic interns for the past five years. Ansley Sawyer was interviewed by one of our past interns, Duncan Chalmers.

Finally, we are thrilled to be able to include a report from Jessica Ball, Debra Torok, the Suwanimit Foundation, Saw Phoe Khwar Lay, Spring Song and M. Htang Di on their partnership project between a university-based team in Canada and a migrant-serving community organization in Thailand. This project report highlights how despite the restrictive conditions brought on by the COVID pandemic, this group of researchers opted to continue their work online and in doing so found ways to collaborate that were less hierarchal and more inclusive of all partner involvement.

We are very happy to provide you with this rich research.

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Angelos Loukakis, Chara Kokkinou, Stefania Kalogeraki, Maria Kousis
**"Transnational Solidarity Organisations with Asian and non-Asian
Migrants in Eight European Countries: Searching for the Commons"**
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Migration, Mobility, & Displacement is an online, open-access, peer-reviewed journal. It seeks to publish original and innovative scholarly articles, juried thematic essays from migrant advocacy groups and practitioners, and visual essays that speak to migration, mobility and displacement and that relate in diverse ways to the Asia-Pacific. The journal welcomes submissions from scholars and migrant advocacy groups that are publicly engaged, and who seek to address a range of issues facing migrants, mobile and displaced persons, and especially work which explores injustices and inequalities.

We welcome submissions and inquiries from prospective authors. Please visit our website (journals.uvic.ca/index.php/mmd/about/submissions), or contact the editor for more information.

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Transnational Solidarity Organisations with Asian and non-Asian Migrants in Eight European Countries: Searching for the Commons¹

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Abstract

With migration waves from Asia increasing in the past decade, numerous studies focus on how civil society organizations have responded. However, there is a lack of systematic research on the solidarity approach different organizations follow and whether specific types of solidarity approaches are related to constituency groups of Asian origin. Using primary systematic data from the TransSOL (EC Horizon 2020) research project, the paper first examines specific organizational features (such as activities, aims, etc.) of Transnational Solidarity Organizations

¹ Results presented in this paper have been obtained within the project 'European paths to transnational solidarity at times of crisis: Conditions, forms, role models and policy responses' (TransSOL), and specifically Work Package 2. TransSOL has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 649435. The TransSOL consortium is coordinated by the University of Siegen (Christian Lahusen), and is formed, additionally, by the Glasgow Caledonian University (Simone Baglioni), European Alternatives e.V. Berlin (Daphne Büllsbach), the Sciences Po Paris (Manlio Cinalli), the University of Florence (Carlo Fusaro), the University of Geneva (Marco Giugni), the University of Sheffield (Maria Grasso), the University of Crete (Maria Kousis), the University of Siegen (Christian Lahusen), European Alternatives Ltd. LBG UK (Lorenzo Marsili), the University of Warsaw (Maria Theiss), and the University of Copenhagen (Hans-Jörg Trenz).

(TSOs) aiming to support migrants (among them Asian) in eight European countries. Moreover, the chapter investigates the main solidarity approaches (top-down, bottom-up or mutual-help oriented) and the values adopted by TSOs addressing the needs of constituency groups from Asia and those catering to the needs of non-Asian constituency groups. The indicative findings aim to shed light on distinct features of commons among TSOs supporting Asian and non-Asian migrant groups across European contexts.

Introduction

Recent reports point to the considerable increase of Asian populations' mobility towards North American and European countries (UN DESA 2019) mainly due to acute events like wars, unsafe political regimes and instability, economic crises, or natural disasters. People on the move have enhanced needs as they confront exclusion across economic, political and cultural domains. Overall conditions of socio-economic exclusion and deprivation are considered as one of the most important drivers for civil society formation and engagement (Lahusen, Zschache and Kousis 2021). To that end many solidarity movements have risen in the last decade throughout Europe, mostly during the recent 'refugee crisis' at the local and national levels, primarily in countries which were first in facing migrant-refugee inflows (della Porta 2018; Milan 2019). These solidarity movements appear at the international or transnational level including formal or informal groups with transnational features, or within the migration community itself, as self-help groups standing for each other through networking, communication and mutual support (Zamponi 2017; Gordon 2020; Kanellopoulos et al. 2020; Fernandez G.G., Lahusen and Kousis 2020; Loukakis and Maggini 2020; Lahusen et al. 2021). Although in some cases the provision of solidarity can become particularistic by targeting specific nationalities of migrant communities and excluding others, it mostly appears with universalistic values, promoting equality and shared rights (Lahusen 2020). Using digital media for communication, connectivity and networking most civil society entities of our times seem to be particularly supportive to vulnerable social groups (Nedelcu and Soysüren 2020).

Despite the increase of solidarity movements in Europe, there seems to be little evidence on the organisations engaged in transnational solidarity activities for migrants in general and specifically for Asian migration groups. Although research examining the macro and micro level determinants of international movements of people is rich (Faist 2010), the role of organisations, including those offering transnational activities, has received relatively little attention in migration studies (Castles, Haas and Miller 2014; Pries 2008). Understanding some of the main features of these organisations and their solidarity approaches is important as specific approaches (e.g. bottom-up or horizontal solidarity approach) might be more inclusive for the integration and empowerment of migrants in the host countries (Lahusen et al. 2021). Moreover, research comparing organizations offering transnational solidarity activities to Asian migrants and migrants of other origin are even scarcer.

To fill the aforementioned gaps in literature, the paper offers a web-based organisational analysis² of Transnational Solidarity Organisations (TSOs) aiming to support migrants and refugees in eight European countries, i.e. Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Switzerland, Poland, and the UK, in the context of the TransSOL research project.³ The paper offers fresh and important empirical insights on a relatively under-researched issue by focusing on specific organisational features and the type of solidarity approach that TSOs follow and how these are related to different constituency groups including those of Asian origin. It should be noted that solidarity approaches usually appear as four main types: a) mutual-help/mobilising for common interests, b) support/assistance between groups (both with a bottom-up orientation) as well as c) help/offer support to others and d) distribution of goods and services to others (both with a top-down orientation) (Fernandez G.G. et al. 2020; Kousis et al. 2020). Those oriented towards a top-down, vertical, charity and object centered model seem to be the oldest ones, while the shift to the more horizontal empowerment-based solidarity appears to have increased during the last decade. The top-down orientation of solidarity seems to be more paternalistic focusing on the distribution of goods and services that resembles the philanthropic approach, while the horizontal approach emphasizes collaboration for common interests, primarily capturing bottom-up solidarity practices by supporting beneficiaries through interaction, integration, activation, empowerment, mutual and shared responsibility (Lahusen et al. 2021).

The paper is based on an innovative method applied in the TransSOL project called Action Organization Analysis (AOA) which examines the organisations, their structural and political features, and their activities online. Through AOA the data collected systematically from organizational websites is not only unmediated by official reports or conventional media but is also updated. The unit of analysis is the TSO, a collective body targeting economic and social wellbeing for its beneficiaries and having at least one aspect of transnationality. The aggregate dataset is based on content analysis of organisational information from the websites of TSOs derived for the eight European countries under study in the fields of migration, unemployment and disabilities (Kousis et al. 2020).

To that end, the undertaken analysis in the paper uses primary systematic data of the TransSOL project following an exploratory approach, to investigate specific organisational features (such as the type of activities, the main values and aims) as well as the solidarity approach that TSOs follow. Concerning the latter the paper compares the solidarity approaches employed by TSOs supporting migrants from Asian countries, with those used by TSOs aiming to support migrants from non-Asian countries. This is a key feature of TSOs' organisational structures, barely examined in migration studies, as organisations applying a commons (bottom-up) oriented solidarity approach are more likely to enhance the integration of migrants compared to those with a top-down decision-making structure. Rare are works on this issue reflected in recent research

² The results presented in the chapter have been obtained within Work Package 2 of TransSOL (2016).

³ More information about the TransSOL (European paths to transnational solidarity at times of crisis: Conditions, forms, role models and policy responses) project can be found at: <http://transsol.eu/>

comparing TSOs across the fields of unemployment, migration and disability illustrating that unlike the unemployment sector, where horizontal solidarity is more diffused, the migration field is characterized by vertical solidarity, while the disability one by a more even distribution between solidarity approaches (Fernandez G.G. et al. 2020).

During the last decade a significant number of Asian nationals immigrated due to acute events such as wars and political instability. However, it should be noted that there is a great diversity in the nationalities of Asian migrants moving to Europe and other continents as well as notable differences in the main reasons for their movements (Platonova and Urso 2013). Specifically, the Syrian Arab Republic and Afghanistan were the top origin countries of refugees in the world and specifically in Europe (IOM 2020). For instance, in 2016, first-time asylum seekers applying for protection in European Union member-states reached the record number of 1.2 million. Of these, around 30% had origins in Syria (Eurostat 2017).

Under such a framework it is important to explore, in a comparative perspective with non-Asian TSOs, to what extent TSOs supporting Asian migrants aim to provide a commons (bottom-up) oriented solidarity approach that contributes to migrants' integration and empowerment, as well as to what extent they apply top-down solidarity by distributing goods and services.

In the sections that follow we first offer a literature review on the characteristics of the Asian migration in the countries under study. Secondly, we describe the method and the variables used for the analysis while in the section following the methodology, we present the findings by comparing TSOs supporting Asian migrants with those supporting migrants from non-Asian countries. In the last section we discuss the main conclusions of the chapter along with the limitations of our analysis and possible avenues for further research.

Describing Asian Migration: Pool Countries, Destinations and Reasons of Displacement

Playing a dominant role in global migration, Asia is one of the largest source regions worldwide, sending immigrants mainly to Europe, to Canada and the United States. Countries such as India, China, the Philippines, Pakistan, Vietnam but also Syrian Arab Republic and Afghanistan are some of the major migrant-pools, significantly increasing migration flows in recent decades (IOM 2020). The factors contributing to such high-level mobility have always been multiple, including among others colonization, geopolitics, economic adequacy and safety. Historically, developments influencing migration displacements can either be acute events such as political instability, economic crises, weather related natural disasters or long-term developments (demographic changes, technology advances etc.). According to the 2020 World Migration Report (IOM 2020) in 2018 the Syrian Arab Republic was the origin of the largest number of refugees globally (6.7 million), while Philippines had the largest number of disaster displacements (3.8 million). Moreover, the last decade examples of acute events in Asia relate to

inflows not only from the Syrian Arab Republic but also from Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen etc. Among other reasons forcing Asian populations to migrate is family reunification (Pakistanis and Vietnamese), educational opportunities (Chinese and Korean) and employment seeking (Indians and Filipinos). Regardless of nationality, some of the most skilled migrants seem to come from Asia along with refugees, asylum seekers and the most deprived ones (Platonova and Urso 2013).

Globally, India has the largest number of migrants living abroad (17.5 million), with China being the third major provider (10.7 million) (IOM 2020). Apart from separate countries, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) seems to also be another major migrant-source mainly for economic and labour integration reasons.⁴ In regard to their destination, Asian migrants mostly reside in the United States, Canada and the European Union, with the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and France receiving migrants mostly from their former colonies (e.g. India, Pakistan, Indonesia and Vietnam) (Platonova and Urso 2013). According to the UN DESA (2019) data, the last two decades Asian migrants (born in Asia) residing specifically in Europe have doubled. In the sections to follow, the paper aims to contribute towards understanding the different solidarity approaches TSOs take in addressing the needs of Asian migrants across eight European countries, including the UK and France.

Commons and Solidarity Organizations as a Means to Support and offer Protection for Migrants

Migration flows and refugee crises along with deprivation and precarity are considered some of the most important drivers for civic engagement and collective action (Lahusen et al. 2021). The 'refugee crisis' of 2015-16 has contributed notably to the importance and growth of solidarity organisations (della Porta 2018; Milan 2019). Trying to cover the policy deficit many solidarity movements arose at the national level (Bernát, Kertész and Tóth 2016; Hamann and Karakayali 2016; Zamponi 2017; Goździak and Main 2020; Kalogeraki 2020), at the international and transnational level (Fernandez G.G. et al. 2020; Kanellopoulos et al. 2020; Loukakis and Maggini 2020; Lahusen et al. 2021) and within migrants themselves in an attempt to create commons and ensure self-protection. Having digital technology on their side (Earl and Kimport 2011; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Nedelcu and Soysüren, 2020) such solidarity movements across global regions, especially European ones, aim to cover refugees' and migrants' needs during difficult times. In this context an increasing number of national, international/transnational and self-help entities -among them associations, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), grassroots movements and voluntary solidarity organisations- have risen in European countries to protect migrants' rights, promote their social inclusion, and fight against racism, xenophobia and discrimination (Van der Leun

⁴ According to Eurostat data, in 2015, around 371 thousand people with the citizenship of an ASEAN country (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) resided on a long-term basis in the EU (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=EU-ASEAN_cooperation_-_key_migration_statistics).

and Bouter 2015; della Porta 2018; Kousis et al. 2020; Fernandez G.G. et al. 2020; Fernandez G.G., Nicole-Berva and Nadler 2021). To that end, migration organizations provide migrants with actual every-day support (such as food, health care, language lessons, housing and employment opportunities), try to spread awareness and enhance people's sensitivity on the problems of migrants and refugees, or put pressure on policy makers aiming to achieve migration policy changes. Seeking representation opportunities for migrant populations many of the migration civil society entities focus on advocacy to ensure a migrant-governance that will respect and promote migrants' rights (Rother 2020). In regard to migrants themselves, populations on the move, traditionally and in terms of self-protection, develop networking strategies along with collective forms of communication and action based on self-help and solidarity, claiming their rights 'to the city' and struggling with precarity in all terms (Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou and Tsianos, 2015). For this purpose, 'mobile commons of migration' struggle to create common spaces based on shared knowledge, mutual support, connectivity, solidarity and care among 'moving' populations (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013). This type of practice and activities of migrants fits in what we named before as bottom up – horizontal solidarity type as they put emphasis on the collaboration for common interests and try to support the member of their communities through interaction, integration, activation, empowerment, mutual and shared responsibility (Lahusen et al. 2021).

In the following sections, first we describe in detail the Action Organisation Analysis, an innovative method that we used for the purposes of the TransSOL project as well as the sampling procedures, and we give some examples of "typical" TSOs. In the findings section we provide the results of the comparison between the TSOs targeting Asian migrants and the rest of TSOs. We examine their Activities, Aims, Values and Solidarity Approaches, trying to investigate, whether and to what extent Asian TSOs differ from the rest of TSOs.

Action Organization Analysis: Offering Unmediated Large Scale Data

The paper uses fresh data derived from a new approach, namely Action Organisation Analysis in the context of the TransSOL project (Kousis, Giugni and Lahusen 2018; Kousis and Lahusen 2021; Fernandez G.G., Kousis and Lahusen 2022), which highlights the increasing importance of mapping organisations, their features and activities online following earlier works (Earl and Kimport 2011; Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Building on protest event analysis (Tilly 1978) and political claims analysis, AOA aims to identify and encompass a 'population' of unmediated online digital activism by both formal, but more importantly, informal groups. Using the organisational website as source in the data collection, limitations of mediated sources (e.g. public registers and official reports, or news coverage by conventional mass media) are avoided. Compared to conventional sources these include not only formal but also informal initiatives and organisations. Even though resource-rich organisations may have more developed and updated websites, the hubs-retrieved websites approach offers the best available information on an extensive number of informal and grass-roots organisations in each country,

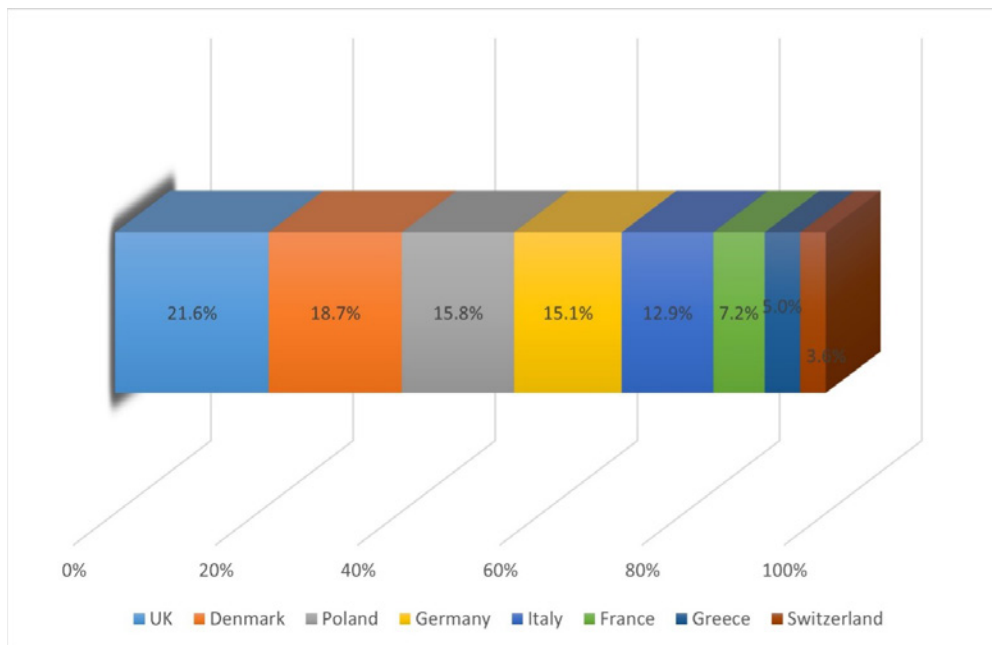
not available from conventional sources (Kousis and Lahusen 2021). Accordingly, the hub-website approach has been selected due to its advantage in providing large numbers of organisational links on TSOs and the best possible coverage of the main categories of (non-protest) action types at the transnational, national, regional and local level, related to urgent needs, economy, energy and environment, civic media and communications, alternative consumption/lifestyles, self-organized spaces, as well as art and culture (TransSOL 2016).

The aggregate dataset is based on content analysis of organizational website information derived from the eight countries participating in the project in the fields of migration, unemployment and disabilities. The unit of analysis is the TSO which is defined as a 'specific formal or informal group of initiators/organisers who act in the public sphere through solidarity events with visible beneficiaries and claims on their economic and social well-being' (Kousis and Lahusen 2021, 622). TSOs of the research sample were transnational in terms of at least one of the following categories: a) Organizers with at least one organizer from another country, or supranational agency, b) Actions synchronized/coordinated in at least one other country, c) Beneficiaries with at least one beneficiary group from another country, d) Participants/Supporters with at least one participating/Supporting group from another country, e) Partners/collaborating groups with at least one from another country, f) Sponsors, with at least one from another country or a supranational agency, g) Frames with cross-national reference/s, h) Volunteers with at least one volunteer group from another country, i) Spatial at least across two countries (at the local, regional or national level). Moreover, TSOs under study were neither operated nor exclusively supported by corporate, state, or EU-related agencies and were solidarity-oriented in terms of at least one of the following categories: a) mutual-help/mobilizing or collaborating for common interests, b) with support/assistance between groups (both bottom-up oriented/ horizontal solidarity approach), c) helping/offering support to others, d) distributing goods and services to others (both top-down oriented, vertical solidarity from above). Finally, they were active at any time within the period of the recent global economic crisis (i.e. at least between 2007 and 2016). The total sample consisted of 2,408 TSOs for the three issue sectors under study (migration, unemployment, disabilities) in the eight European countries participating to the project. The selected TSOs have been analyzed through their websites with the use of an analytic coding scheme which quantified their characteristics on their: activities, actions, aims, solidarity approaches and values.

For the purpose of the present paper we used data from 848 (out of the 2,408) TSOs, active in the migration field. Out of the 848 the 139 were Asian-Migrant Related TSOs, addressing needs of constituency groups from Asia. Those organisations included Asian migrants as beneficiaries of their actions or offered support to Arabic and/or Afghan speaking migrants -as reflected through the languages on their websites. The rest 709 TSOs were Non-Asian-Migrant TSOs also active in the migration field but without the above features. For a more profound understanding of the organizations targeting Asian migration, the descriptive analysis sheds light to the main characteristics (activities,

aims, values, solidarity approaches) of both groups, the Asian-Migrant related (AMR) and the Non-Asian-Migrant related (NAMR) TSOs, in a comparative perspective.

Figure 1 AMR TSOs' Country of origin (%)



N=139, Source: TransSOL Research Project

The majority (72.1%) of the 139 TSOs aiming to support Asian migrants are based in the UK, Denmark, Poland and Germany, while a minority is located in Italy, France, Greece and Switzerland. Such a pattern is expected given the size of the host country and their respective number of migrants.

A typical example of AMR TSOs included in our sample is the Centre France-Asie, a formal organization in France offering French lessons to migrants from Asia in order to assist their social integration (<http://centrecfa.mepasie.org>). Another example is The Middle Eastern Women and Society Organisation, a registered charity in London, which seeks to build links between female refugees and combat isolation and social exclusion (<http://mewso.org>). Finally, we also included organizations such as the Danish committee for aid for Afghan refugees (dacaar) in Denmark, a Danish non-political, non-governmental, non-profit humanitarian organisation working to improve the lives of the Afghan people, especially vulnerable, disabled, displaced and women (<http://www.dacaar.org/>).

Migration TSOs' Analysis: Findings on their Activities, Aims, Values and Solidarity Approaches

Despite the increase of Asian populations' mobility towards west countries, our data revealed the prevalence of the NAMR TSOs, as in our sample TSOs targeting Asian migrants seem to be a small part (16%) of those active in the migration field (139 out of 848). Apart from the AMR TSOs underrepresentation in our sample, all TSOs were examined in terms of their qualitative features, critical for their role in assisting migrants/refugees.

In regard to their activities, the analysis reveals significant differences in no more than three fields: As seen in Table 1, environment and alternative consumption actions seem to appear twice as often in TSOs targeting Asian populations than the TSOs targeting non-Asian migrants. Moreover, economy related activities, such as seminars or vocational training, which aim to enhance migrants' labour inclusion, score ten percent higher in AMR than in NAMR TSOs. However, our findings -in line with the literature- reveal that both TSOs groups score considerably high (more than eight out of ten) in activities related to urgent and basic needs. Those activities assist migrants in their every-day needs by providing free food/meals, clothing, housing and medical care along with legal assistance and free language lessons, necessary for the migrants' communication with the authorities. The next most prominent activity-category is related to the public dissemination of the problems and issues migrant communities face, aiming to spread awareness and raise people's sensitivity. Sharing migrants' needs seems to be a strategy both TSOs groups employ to support their beneficiaries, enhance their visibility and put policy pressure to bring about changes. Interestingly only a few organizations (from both groups) are dealing with issues such as trafficking, or self-organized spaces. Although, AMR and NAMR TSOs' activities in general follow a similar pattern, NAMR TSOs are less active in almost every activity field except that of lobbying and preventing hate crimes.

Table 1 TSOs Activities*

TSOs Activities	AMR TSOs n=139	NAMR TSOs n=709	Chi-square score
Basic/Urgent Needs	87%	84%	.479, p=.489
Dissemination in the public sphere	73%	67%	1.550, p=.213
Economy	55%	45%	3.954, p=.047
Culture	47%	41%	1.666, p=.197
Interest Group representation, advise state bodies and lobbying	19%	25%	2.631, p=.135
Alternative consumption	13%	7%	4.470, p=.035
Activities related to preventing hate crime	12%	16%	1.654, p=.189

Environment	12%	6%	4.905, p=.027
Activities related to stop human trafficking	8%	8%	.012, p=.914
Other	5%	3%	1.058, p=.304
Self organised spaces	4%	3%	.083, p=.773

*Dummy variables, multiple answers allowed

Moving on to the level of actions, Table 2 shows that most of the TSOs under study conduct their activities at the sub-national level, regardless of the beneficiaries they target. Comparing the two groups, AMR TSOs seem to operate in a higher level (and therefore are more transnationally oriented) than NAMR: significant differences are reported in the supra-national level (European and global) where TSOs targeting Asian migrants are considerably more active than NAMR TSOs. NAMR on the other hand seem slightly more active at the local level. The level of action, however, should also be examined in relation to the TSOs networking, but mainly to the country they are based in and the opportunities available in each level.

Table 2 Level of Actions*

TSOs Scope of actions	AMR TSOs n=139	NAMR TSOs n=709	Chi-square score
Local	67%	73%	2.403, p=.121
Regional	40%	40%	.003, p=.959
National	40%	31%	4.109, p=.043
European	20%	13%	4.015, p=.027
Global	19%	10%	7.969, p=.005

*Dummy variables, multiple answers allowed

With respect to the aims TSOs promote in general, three different clusters arise: the charity related, the one focusing on rights and equality and the one focusing on social movements and collective identities. The charity related cluster includes organizations that mostly target towards every-day relief related activities aiming to help others, promote health education and welfare, reduce poverty, facilitate job finding, etc. AMR TSOs seem to score a bit higher in the charity related cluster than the NAMR TSOs. Similarly AMR TSOs seem to score higher in four out of six aims in both two other clusters (right-based/equality related and social movements/collective identities related). However significantly higher is the score (57.8% versus 43.9%) of the NAMR TSOs aiming to increase tolerance and mutual understanding. The aims almost equally present in both TSOs groups are: helping others (68.3% AMR TSOs/ 66% NAMR TSOs), promoting and defending individual rights and responsibility (41.7% AMR TSOs/ 40.8% NAMR TSOs) and promoting self-managed collectivity (9.4% AMR TSOs/

9.2% NAMR TSOs). Overall, despite some differences in the scores, the two TSOs groups seem to share the same aims, focusing on migrants'/refugees' wellbeing, empowerment, social and labour inclusion and equal treatment, along with their visibility and a wider political change. High scores in the charity cluster are indicative to the increased needs migrants/refugees face and the urgency of their nature. However high score in the other two clusters are indicative of the TSOs universalistic values aiming to promote equality and shared rights along with their commons' orientation through mobilization and collective action.

Table 3 TSOs Aims*

Cluster	TSOs Aims	AMR TSOs n=139	NAMR TSOs n=709	Chi-square score
Charity aims	To promote health, education and welfare	56.10%	46.40%	4.392, p=.036
	To reduce poverty and exclusion	30.90%	36.50%	1.587, p=.208
	To help others (e.g. charity aims)	68.30%	66%	.284, p=.594
	To facilitate the return/enter to the jobmarket/into employment and to promote long-term/lasting employment	30.20%	23.30%	3.037, p=.081
Right based - equality aims	To combat discrimination /to promote equality of participation in society	62.60%	68.50%	1.882, p=.170
	To increase tolerance and mutual understanding	43.90%	57.80%	9.015, p=.002
	To promote social exchange and direct contact/integration in society/local communities	67.60%	59.90%	2.889, p=.089
	To promote and defend individual rights and responsibility	41.70%	40.80%	.045, p=.832
	To improve the pay and working conditions/ to promote equal and just pay	8.60%	6.20%	1.110, p=.292
	To promote self-determination, self-initiative, self-representation and self-empowerment	30.90%	21.40%	5.919, p=.015
Social Movement - collective identity aims	To promote and achieve social change	34.50%	39.90%	1.415, p=.234
	To promote democratic practices/ equal participation	23.00%	18.80%	1.348, p=.246
	To promote self-managed collectivity	9.40%	9.20%	.005, p=.945
	To promote collective identities and community responsibility/empowerment	17.30%	12.40%	2.389, p=.122
	To promote collective (protest) action and/ or social movement identities	8.60%	12.70%	1.811, p=.178
	To promote and achieve political change	19.40%	17.20%	.394, p=.530

*Dummy variables, multiple answers allowed

Following the trend above, Table 4 shows that the vast majority of both TSOs groups under study adopts a top-down, service-oriented solidarity approach, i.e. by helping or offering every-day support or through distributing goods and services to cover migrants' enhanced needs. Most obvious differences can be spotted in the rest of the solidarity approaches as more AMR TSOs follow the collaborative solidarity scheme, which promotes networking and collaboration between different migrant groups in order to help their beneficiaries. Moreover, one third of AMR TSOs group (contrary to the one fourth of NAMR TSOs) promotes participatory solidarity as it is depicted by the mutual-help approach mobilizing for common interests. That said although both groups seem to mainly focus in assisting and covering migrants' needs through a vertical and from above solidarity approach, TSOs targeting Asian migrants seem to score higher in the mutual-participatory based and bottom-up solidarity approaches, indicative to their commons orientation and to the general shift of the TSOs towards an horizontal solidarity approach which serves beneficiaries through their empowerment and their social and economic integration. This more inclusive approach seems to be more supportive of Asian migrants to become part of the host country.

Table 4 TSOs Solidarity Approaches

TSOs Solidarity Approaches	AMR TSOs n=139	NAMR TSOs n=709	Chi-square score
Mutual-help/mobilising for common interests	33.8%	23.3%	6.887, p=.009
Support/assistance between groups	43.2%	34.8%	3.490, p=.062
Help/offer support to others	82.7%	84%	.151, p=.697
Distribution of goods and services to others	64%	55.3%	3.616, p=.057

*Dummy variables, multiple answers allowed

Finally with respect to the values that TSOs promote, Table 5 shows that almost two thirds of the solidarity organisations of both groups promote humanitarian and philanthropic values such as solidarity, altruism, truthfulness, honesty, sincerity, trust and dignity. Slightly less than the half of both groups promote values related with empowerment and participation such as multiculturalism, mutual understanding, individual and community empowerment. Both groups of TSOs similarly promote values related to rights such as equality, civil or human rights and liberties. Diversity and sustainability is supported by significantly less TSOs (10.8% AMR and 13% NAMR) while economic virtues and community values are rarely supported by both TSOs groups.

Table 5 TSOs Values*

TSOs Values	AMR TSOs n=139	NAMR TSOs n=709	Chi-square score
Humanitarian/Philanthropic	68.3%	65.2%	.545, p=.461
Empowerment and participation	45.3%	48.2%	2.542, p=.111
Rights-based ethics	42.4%	39.8%	.637, p=.425
Diversity and Sustainability	10.8%	13%	.041, p=.839
Economic virtues	2.9%	3.4%	.000, p=.985
Community and Order	2.2%	1.7%	.323, p=.570

*Dummy variables, multiple answers allowed

Concluding Remarks

After decades of Asian migration to Europe and only a few years following the huge refugee influx from the Middle East and Afghanistan in 2015-16, solidarity organisations focusing on these migrants seem to differ in their experiences across Europe. Given the mass Asian migration wave and civil society's response to cover the corresponding policy deficit, our research, based on an innovative method applied in the TransSOL project and using an aggregated dataset from eight European countries aims to fill the gap of literature in terms of the solidarity approaches employed and their relation to constituency groups of Asian origin.

For the purpose of the paper we examined the TSOs' organizational features related to the goals of commons in a comparative perspective (those targeting Asian and those targeting non-Asian migrants), in order to document the general tendencies of their organizational profiles and detect any possible differences between the two groups. Our first indicative finding is that in our random sample of the 848 TSOs active in the migration field, those centring on Asian migration (AMR TSOs) are significantly under-represented (16%), despite the increased migration wave from Asia the last decades.

Moving on in investigating TSOs' distinct features of commons, our findings reveal that although some minor differences in specific organizational aspects and features have been noticed, these differences do not seem to affect their general portrayal, showing that migrant and refugees populations in Europe, regardless their origin, face similar problems (e.g. covering basic and urgent needs such as food, housing, clothing, health care, etc.); hence organizations trying to deal with them have similar aims and values and provide with comparable activities.

In general, in terms of the solidarity approach employed, both AMR and NAMR TSOs of the eight European countries participating in the research, mostly aim to provide top-down relief and every day support to socio-economically vulnerable migrant

beneficiaries in order to cover their basic and urgent needs. Given the nature of the field, inevitably, most of the TSOs of the sample mainly adopt philanthropic roles, i.e. top-down, vertical solidarity approaches. Nevertheless, as the findings indicate, a considerable number of AMR TSOs (larger than that of NAMR) does adhere to a participatory, bottom-up solidarity orientation that accords with the basic principles of the commons' orientation achieved through mutual-help practices and mobilization for common interests. So there is some preliminary indicative evidence that whilst most AMR TSOs (as all TSOs of the sample) focus on remedying urgent needs, some of them are likely to encompass more inclusive horizontal solidarity practices that aim to enhance migrants' integration and empowerment. This tendency was noticed more among the AMR than the NAMR TSOs.

This common, horizontal and participatory orientation is also reflected in TSOs' activities, aims and values. With respect to the former, AMR TSOs differ significantly in conducting activities related with alternative consumption and environment, along with actions related to migrants' economic integration, while NAMR TSOs are more engaged in political activities such as lobbying. Apart from the activities that cover migrants' everyday urgent needs' which score considerably high in both TSOs groups, the next most prominent activity for both groups is related to the public dissemination of migrants' issues, the increase of migrants' visibility, the spread of awareness to both people and the state and the rise of political pressure. As seen, AMR and NAMR TSOs' activities in general follow a similar pattern with slight differences. However, NAMR TSOs of our sample have proven to be less active in almost every activity field except that of lobbying and of preventing hate crimes. Moreover examining the level TSOs seem to be more active, we found that AMR operate in a higher level NAMR, finding indicative of their transnational orientation.

In regard to TSOs aims, although findings indicate that those related to charity are more prevalent among AMR TSOs than NAMR TSOs, a more thorough look reveals that AMR TSOs score higher in most aims of all three clusters. Overall, a substantial number of TSOs from both groups emphasize aims related to equality/rights' protection and to mobilization/collective action and identities. Despite some noticed differences, the two TSOs groups seem to share the same aims, focusing mainly on migrants' survival and wellbeing and then to their empowerment/equal treatment and their inclusion/mobilization. Similarities are noticed also in the values the two TSOs groups promote: the main focus of both groups in humanitarian and philanthropic values seems to be in accordance to the charity-related aims, the top-down solidarity approach and the activities targeting migrants' basic and urgent needs which in turn are indicative of the global migration phenomenon. However, almost half of the TSOs in both groups promote values related with empowerment and participation such as multiculturalism and mutual understanding, while next come the values related to migrants' rights, equality and liberties. Those values are in line with the bottom-up, horizontal, participatory, and commons oriented solidarity approach, present in both TSOs group but more prevalent among TSOs targeting Asian migrant populations.

In studying TSOs targeting Asian migrants however, the heterogeneity of Asian migration as a phenomenon should also be considered: Asian migrants come from different ethnic and cultural groups and end up migrating for considerably different reasons (Platonova and Urso 2013). Some become economic migrants, while others leave their countries forcibly in order to save their lives. Given this large diversification in Asian migration, a more specific dataset on Asian migrant TSOs in future research could reveal more refined patterns of TSO organizational features, approaches and activities.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

The aforementioned findings about TSOs supporting Asian migrants should be treated as indicative rather than representative of the European countries under study. It should be noted that the TransSOL project examined the migration civic organizations field as a whole and did not center specifically on Asian migrant organizations. As the TransSOL project focused on migrant and refugee-related solidarity organizations in general, future studies could centre exclusively on Asian migrant-related organizations and its special characteristics.

Concerning the method applied, it should be noted that AOA excludes organizations without websites or hubs/subhubs connections. Therefore, specific migrant organizations mostly informal which purposely avoid online media exposure but are active in supporting migrants -such as grassroots, ad-hoc created organisations mostly using social media accounts- were not included in our dataset. The analysis may therefore have excluded such self-help groups, created by migrants themselves who seek to network and form a commons' oriented approach.

In regard to future studies, given the notable differences among the diverse Asian nationalities and their main reasons to migrate, research on TSOs aiming to support specific Asian nationalities might be particularly important for understanding how the commons orientation is shaped in accordance to the peculiarities of different Asian nationalities. Such diverse experiences include, TSOs targeting: refugees from Syria or Afghanistan who are forced to leave their homes, immigrants from Pakistan and Vietnam who primarily move for family reunification, immigrants from China and Korea who come to Europe for educational reasons or Indians and Filipinos immigrants who primarily leave their country for labour integration.

Moreover, future studies based on qualitative research (such as in-depth interviews, biographical analysis) with Asian migrant-beneficiaries/participants, or representatives of TSOs by and for Asian migrants could also shed additional light on how they perceive TSOs supporting activities, aims, values and solidarity approaches as well as on the extent to which the basic principles of commons are adopted.



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Claude Beaupre "**Domestic Workers in the Arabian Gulf: Precarity, reality, and resistance**" *Migration, Mobility, & Displacement* 6: 25-42

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Domestic Workers in the Arabian Gulf: Precarity, reality, and resistance

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Abstract

This paper's aim is to further the literature on the global Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs) social movement aimed at denouncing their exploitation and asserting the value of their labour as an irreplaceable contribution to the functioning of society. The Gulf region has been largely absent in this literature. This article argues that this exclusion from the migrant-led domestic care mobilisation in no way implies that MDWs have made no efforts in Gulf states to improve their labour conditions, but that the context in which they are employed make it such that they are unable to organise together due to the stern policing and isolating norms that prevail. Instead, their resistance is predominantly situated within the confines they are subjected to, resulting in what has been called "everyday resistance." Drawing on relevant secondary literature on the systemic precarity experienced by domestic workers in the Gulf region and feminist scholarship on MDWs micro-level, everyday assertions, this article argues that the confined living situations under the Kafala labour system set the terms and conditions for how MDWs political resistance can be - and is - expressed.¹ By focusing on a global social movement premised on outward expressions of protest, the existing literature's omission of micro-level acts of resistance results in MDWs in certain contexts being overlooked as agents of social activism in their own right. This article contextualizes the strategies of resistance made by MDWs in the Gulf region by first examining the systemic and gendered control under the Kafala system. It then argues that the inclusion of everyday resistance allows for a more holistic vision of MDWs assertions of labour rights consciousness and ultimately of justice, one that includes a defensive protection of personal dignity and notions of selfhood.

Introduction

Most Arabian Gulf countries, meaning Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, organise their migrant labour through the Kafala system. It is a temporary, contract-based system known for creating asymmetric power

¹ Hollander and Einwohner, 2004, 545.

imbalances between the sponsor and the migrant, as the former is entirely in charge of all aspects of the latter's life, including residency, travel, and more.² Consequently, the labourer often finds him/herself in unfavourable working conditions with little to no recourse available to them. Half a century after discovering its vast oil reserves, Gulf nationals have grown accustomed to a lifestyle resulting from abundant, cheap-foreign labour, and the region is dependent on these power imbalances.³ While the labour of migrants is recognized and indeed welcomed, they are viewed in terms of their labour output (i.e., expendable human commodities) in the context of the global, neoliberal political economy's logic of the division of labour. One can observe a paradox in which labour migrants in the Gulf are acknowledged as cornerstones of economic, social, and political sustainability but are met with wariness, stern policing, and general marginalization.

Within this broad context, migrant domestic workers (MDWs) are in a unique position given the specific nature of their work. Historically, MDWs have been subjected to two phenomena that have greatly limited their freedom and bolstered the authority of institutions and organizations to which they are subjected.⁴ The first factor emphasizes MDWs' disposability in the workforce as they may be easily replaced due to the sizeable global supply of domestic labour. The second stresses the gendered control exercised by states, international enterprises, and individuals working to control to a maximum extent the embodied labour of women workers through management, discipline, and constraint. Both result from domestic labour's unique and intimate nature and the explicit power differentials that exist in the in-home situations in which their labour is based.

In response to these factors, there is a growing body of sociological and feminist literature documenting MDWs-led mobilisation efforts around the world, aimed at denouncing their exploitation and asserting the value of their labour as an irreplaceable contribution to the well-functioning of society.⁵ The work of MDWs support the family-household in host societies through their labour in cooking, cleaning, washing, and often informal caregiving work for young and elderly dependents. As Marxist feminist scholar Silvia Federici (2016) describes, MDWs are organising in a global social movement, with women joining with other women from their own country and cultural background(s) to build multinational organizations, to lobby for public recognition, and ultimately to spread awareness about the value of social reproduction.⁶ Literature to this effect also includes their growing presence in urban centers throughout the world and their increasing activist presence in transnational labour rights movements that denounce the discrimination MDWs suffer at the hands of government institutions, employment agents, and individual domestic employers (see for example research on MDW-led mobilisation in Hong Kong, the UK, the USA, Ecuador and With various

2 Roper and Barria, 2014; Fernandez, 2014; Parreñas, 2021, 17.

3 Choudry and Hlatshawo, 2015, 50.

4 Grossman-Thompson, 2019.

5 Federici, 2016; Parrenas, 2001; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002, Sassen, 2002; Beneria, 2008.

6 Federici, 2016, 12.

reception levels and corresponding mobilisation, this labour movement has been most prevalent in Europe, Asia, and North America, with little to no apparent impacts within Gulf countries.⁷

Drawing on relevant secondary literature, the goal of this article is twofold. It argues that the perceived exclusion from the above migrant-led domestic care mobilisation in no way implies that MDWs have made no efforts in Gulf states to improve their labour conditions, but that the context in which they are employed makes it such that they are unable to organise together due to the stern policing and isolating norms that prevail. Instead, their activism for themselves and the value of their labour is predominantly situated within the confines they are subjected to, using what has been called “everyday resistance.”⁸ It also argues that MDWs’ aim to reconfigure the power-over relationship of live-in arrangements should be included in the literature on the global MDWs social movement. It is important to include ‘less well-known’ contexts in social movement scholarship to allow for a more holistic vision of MDWs’ assertions of labour rights consciousness and ultimately of justice, one that includes a defensive protection of personal dignity and notions of selfhood.

It should be noted that this article focuses on the region as a whole. The author is aware that it would be naïve and downright erroneous to assume that each Gulf country has developed identically, be it politically or economically, since the 1970s. Indeed, tensions within the region would testify to its diversity in ideologies and governance. However, the shared adoption and similar interpretation of the Kafala system to recruit migrant workers have made this blanket approach less presumptuous. The author recognizes moreover that their analysis and its limited focus on secondary literature cannot attend to the culturally nuanced forms of MDWs’ actions, mediated by variations in nationality⁹, cultural and socioeconomic background¹⁰, class identity, and marital status, among other considerations. While similar versions of everyday acts of resistance have been found in studies on MDWs of diverse backgrounds employed in the Gulf region, one does not wish to essentialize MDWs.¹¹ Additional group-specific research would be needed to complement this article on a broader scale.

Gulf Countries and Labour Migration: Introducing the Kafala System

Prior to the oil discovery in the early twentieth century, Arabian Gulf economies were predominantly dependent on the pearling industry and small-scale entrepôt trade.¹² The lucrative extraction of oil reserves, followed by the decolonisation of the Arabian Peninsula, generated a system of fast-paced economic growth throughout the region,

7 Federici, 2016.

8 Fernandez, de Regt, and Currie, 2014

9 Hollander and Einwohner, 2004, 545.

10 Debonneville, 2019

11 For example, see studies on the experiences of MDWs in the Gulf region from South Asian (Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, 2022), African (Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, 2019b), and South East Asian (Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, 2019a) countries.

12 Hanieh, 2011.

one that depended on the influx of foreign labour migrants not only to compensate for the small populations in these countries but also on additional expertise.¹³ While there is a longstanding history of human mobility throughout the region, from other Middle Eastern countries as well as African and Asian states associated with the aforementioned commodities-exchange practices, it was not until the 1970's oil-price hike that foreign labour became a crucial component of the region's economic model.¹⁴ As of 2020, migrants made up the majority of the population in half of the Gulf countries, ranging from 39% in Saudi Arabia, 46% in Oman, 55% in Bahrain, 73% in Kuwait, 77% in Qatar, and 88% in the UAE, illustrating the sheer dependency of the Gulf region on foreign labour.¹⁵

While human mobility throughout the region has always existed, as noted above, such large-scale dependency on foreign labour is rooted in the region's political development. Choudry and Hlatshawo (2015) have pointed out that state formation and economic development resulted in "the emergence of new inflows of temporary migrant labour which became central to the distinctive pattern of class formation in the newly independent states. Most importantly, a systematic institutional cleavage was established between citizens and the growing mass of migrant workers."¹⁶ This 'cleavage' resulted in the entrenchment of an us-versus-them mentality, in which nationals were granted state-funded education, healthcare, housing subsidies, employment, access to land, and other miscellaneous financial support (such as marriage dowries).¹⁷ In parallel, migrant workers came to be defined by their exclusion from this system as there are - still to this day - no or often highly contingent legal pathways to citizenship or permanent residency available to migrant workers regardless of the length of time in which they resided in the country, their nationality, and/or their expertise.¹⁸ This cleavage, moreover, stands in stark contrast to the region's ingrained dependency on migrant labour. Indeed, as Choudry and Hlatshawo (2015) argued, Gulf nationals, in large numbers, having grown accustomed for over half a century to lifestyles brought about by abundant and cheap foreign labour and are now unwilling to accept the low wages and the working conditions of migrants, further entrenching the private sector's almost exclusive dependency on a foreign labour force.¹⁹

To ensure control over the large-scale migrant workforce, the region depends on a Kafala-based (sponsorship) labour system. As stated by Choudry and Hlatshawo (2015), "[t]hese features of migrant labour governance in the Gulf [via the Kafala system] are underpinned by a powerful and sustained discourse that fashions migration and migrants as variously imagined threats - 'security,' 'demographic,' 'cultural' and 'sexual' dangers are the typical tropes wielded by government spokespeople and in the region's media."²⁰ Consequently, all labour-intended entrance into the Gulf countries is devised

13 Choudry and Hlatshawo, 2015, 44.

14 Moors and Regt, 2008, 152.

15 DESA, 2021, 47-48.

16 Choudry and Hlatshawo, 2015, 44.

17 Hanieh, 2011.

18 Jarallah, 2009; Roper and Barria, 2014.

19 Choudry and Hlatshawo, 2015, 50.

20 Choudry and Hlatshawo, 2015, 49.

through this complex sponsorship arrangement in which an entity - be it a private citizen or corporation - is delegated the right to control the entry, exit, and everything in between of a worker as a means of mitigating this perceived threat.²¹ In this manner, the employer owns the work permit, and the state subcontracts the surveillance and control of migrant labour to individual citizens and businesses.²² It has resulted in an elaborate system of governance consciously designed to maximize labour exploitation while minimising the possibility of protest and resistance.

The Kafala system has widely been criticised for creating asymmetric power imbalances between the sponsor and the migrant.²³ If anything, numerous authors have pointed out the similarity between the Kafala system and bonded labour as workers are tied to particular employers, denied mobility between jobs, frequently have their passports withheld as well as their salaries, and are often trapped with significant levels of debt associated with purchasing their work permit.²⁴ Moreover, overlaying these controlling features are highly restrictive laws that ban migrant workers from forming unions, going on strike, or engaging in any political activism.²⁵ Any attempt at worker mobilisation or protest can be legally met with the termination of employment and immediate deportation, producing a state of permanent precarity for the vast majority of the Gulf's foreign working classes.²⁶

Ultimately, the system creates a paradox, in which most labourers are widely acknowledged as cornerstones of the economic - and therefore social and political - well-being of the region but are met with wariness, stern policing, and general marginalisation. As such, for the migrants themselves, while their value and labour are recognised and indeed welcomed, they are deemed expendable via the simple fact that the neoliberal reality of the world economy renders them easily replaceable.

Domestic Workers in Gulf Countries: Systemically-encouraged Control

As of 2013, Gulf countries were estimated to make up the largest MDWs hosting region in the world. By 2016, moreover, Gulf countries hosted nearly 4 million MDWs, 44% of which were women, with the remaining 56% being employed as drivers, mostly in Saudi Arabia where women are legally prohibited from driving.²⁷ These numbers, however, are most likely underestimates owing to the concentration of domestic workers in informal employment and among migrants in irregular situations. Indeed, according to a study by Shah and Al-Kazi (2017) in Kuwait, for example, 50% of irregular migrants in the country could be deemed MDWs.²⁸ The majority of MDWs in the Gulf originate from Asian and African countries such as Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Nepal, India, and Ethiopia.²⁹

21 Roper and Barria, 2014; Fernandez, de Regt, and Currie, 2014; Hvidt, 2019.

22 Choudry and Hlatshawo, 2015; Malit and Naufal, 2016.

23 Roper and Barria, 2014; Fernandez, de Regt, and Currie, 2014; Roper and Barria, 2014; Hvidt, 2019.

24 Roper and Barria, 2014; Hvidt, 2019; Choudry and Hlatshawo, 2015.

25 Choudry and Hlatshawo, 2015.

26 Roper and Barria, 2014; Choudry and Hlatshawo, 2015, 50.

27 International Domestic Workers Federation, 2018, 17.

28 Shah and Al-Kazi, 2017.

29 International Labour Office, 2013, 32; Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, 2022.

To facilitate these sizeable international movements, MDWs have multiple entry channels into the Gulf. In some instances, migrant-hopefuls who intend to work as MDWs do so through informal channels, asking relatives or friends employed outside of the country to find work for them and help organize their migration. A common term for this social process is chain migration which depends on personal networks, communication, and organisation. In other cases, employers reach out to their current MDW and inquire whether they are aware of someone else looking for domestic employment. In such instances, having a network of relatives and/or friends nearby who may act as a kind of support is an important factor when deciding where to migrate.³⁰ It would mean that the social and/or physical isolation that frequently befalls many MDWs would be lessened, even if only a little. Chain migration MDWs have access to greater job security as they are not subjected to a trial period once they arrive, rendering it more difficult to send them back to their home country if the employer is unsatisfied. As a result, they have more of a say in negotiating their labour contract before arriving in the host country/household.

Oftentimes, MDWs who arrive in the Gulf use recruitment agencies to identify and broker employment opportunities.³¹ Those who migrate via the use of agencies - meaning that they have been recruited by them but are not in their direct employ - usually undergo a three-month trial period, in which case, should the employer be unsatisfied, the agency is obliged to find a replacement.³² These agencies, as such, act as more than quality control middlemen for MDWs. As studies have shown, it is common practice for agencies to discipline (often corporally) the MDWs returned to them to ‘convince’ them to rejoin the family “as a better, more submissive worker.”³³ Some agencies also strongly advise employers to restrict the mobility of MDWs altogether by disallowing their leaving the house without constant supervision.³⁴ Such notions only further entrench the regional practice of policing migrant workers and the perception that they are a potential threat and untrustworthy.

Out of the entire Gulf migrant labour workforce, women MDWs are particularly affected by the imbalance of power between the sponsor and the employee due to the intimate nature of their work in which the power structures are delineated in the employers’ favour. Furthermore, as there is no distinction between where they work and where they reside, it renders the workers subject to the employer’s command 24/7, creating a reality in which workers are at a clear disadvantage to negotiate clear boundaries around work hours, the conditions in which they work and reside, as well as the scheduling of said work.

For migrant domestic workers, the unfreedoms generated by the Kafala are so severe that they have been described as “structural violence” and forms of forced labour and

30 Moors and Regt, 2008.

31 Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, 2019a.

32 Moors and Regt, 2008.

33 Moors and Regt, 2008, 159; GWAAT, 2019a, 37; Parreñas, 2021, 120.

34 Moors and Regt, 2008, 159.

contract slavery.³⁵ The dire working conditions of migrant domestic workers in the Gulf have been well documented.³⁶ Most of these studies focus on, or at least emphasize, the human rights abuses their employers subject them to. Human rights abuses in this context refer to a wide range of actions - some of which have already been mentioned - from “sexual harassment and sexual attack (ranging from propositions, threats of rape, and groping, to repeated rape), physical abuse (ranging from slaps to severe beatings), verbal abuse (harsh insults, threats, and belittlement), imposition of excessive working hours, unfair contractual terms, confiscation of passports, confinement to private homes and it may even reach the level of forcing the housemaids into the sex trade.”³⁷

As Stroble (2009) points out, the “situation is exacerbated by the lack of labour laws protecting [migrant] workers [under the Kafala system], as well as popular attitudes [linked with the aforementioned perception that migrants pose threats] that reinforce this legal imbalance.”³⁸ As a result, various MDW-sending countries in both Asia and Africa refuse to permit their citizens from entering domestic labour contracts in all or specific Gulf countries.³⁹ Most Gulf countries, despite their significant migrant labour workforce, have not ratified most international human rights treaties, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, and the Convention against Torture, leaving these migrants particularly vulnerable to serious human rights violations.⁴⁰ As of 2013, the International Labour Office reported that all Gulf states had yet to ratify the 2011 ILO Domestic Workers Convention No. 189 protecting the rights of domestic workers.⁴¹ While each Gulf state has labour laws that apply to MDWs, domestic workers remain one of the least protected groups of workers under national labour legislation.⁴² Even allowing for the legal protections that are in place in Gulf countries, there is little procedural support to this day for MDWs to ensure that their employers abide by the agreed-upon labour contract and labour laws once they enter the household.

As private realms are frequently unmonitored, the power asymmetry created by the Kafala system is exponentially present in domestic settings. Even if Gulf countries had been signatories to every one of the aforementioned human rights treaties, the intimate reality of domestic work creates significant policing and enforcement challenges in instances of employee abuse. While this speaks to a jurisdictional obstacle that holds true in all states, it is exacerbated in a region that delegates worker-policing so willingly and indeed encourages it. As such, systemic improvements in the working conditions of MDWs in the Gulf can be understood as highly dependent on region-wide attitudinal changes towards the perception and treatment of these labourers.

35 Parreñas, 2021, 9; Fernandez, de Regt, and Currie, 2014.

36 International Labour Organisation, 2007; Human Rights Watch, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016; Varia, 2011; Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, 2019a, 2019b, 2022; Silvey and Parreñas, 2019; Parreñas, 2021.

37 Jarallah, 2009.

38 Strobl, 2009, 165.

39 Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, 2019a, 24; Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, 2019b; International Trade Union Confederation, 2017, 6.

40 Jarallah, 2009.

41 International Labour Office, “C189 - Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189).”

42 International Labour Organisation, 2014.

In a study on the working conditions of MDWs in the Middle East by Fernandez, de Regt, and Currie (2014), the authors highlighted how employers frequently ignored their contractual obligations with relative impunity, which constitutes an interesting juxtaposition to the stern policing experienced by MDWs.⁴³ For example, the majority of women they interviewed typically worked between 10 and 16 hours a day and were frequently limited to one, two - or often no - days off in a given month. Indeed, their study showed that MDWs are particularly prone to control measures as they must “abide by the ‘rules of the house’ around whether and when they can leave the house, what time they must return, and what they can do to relax both inside and outside the house.”⁴⁴

Fernandez, de Regt, and Currie’s (2014) research findings along with others on the Gulf region are consistent with studies on MDWs around the world, which show that these (predominantly) women workers have historically been subjected to two factors that have greatly limited their freedom and bolstered the power asymmetry between employee and employer. The first presents a logic of domestic workers as disposable (i.e., cheap and easily replaceable) units of labour and production, and the second presents a logic of gendered control (i.e., management, discipline, and constraint) of women workers by various authority figures from employers, states, employment agencies, and so forth. Both result from the unique and intimate nature of domestic labour and the explicit power differentials that are emboldened in the in-home situations.⁴⁵ Both factors are unquestionably applicable to the reality of MDWs in Gulf states. Not only are they a significant portion of the cheap labour workforce on which the states base their economies,⁴⁶ but also the nature of the control exerted on MDWs is predominantly gendered.

According to Fernandez, de Regt, and Currie (2014), for migrant domestic workers on Kafala contracts, freedom of mobility and behavior are the two primary areas of contestation with their employers.⁴⁷ These two freedoms are integrally linked to the structural conditions of a migrant domestic worker’s employment - that is, the (illegal but standard) confiscation of migrant domestic worker passports and working permits by employers.⁴⁸ This confiscation of papers effectively limits women’s freedom to move outside the employers’ homes and their ability to run away. Moreover, employers’ restrictions on women’s mobility are often justified to ensure “they would not ‘waste money,’ ‘get into bad company,’ or become pregnant.”⁴⁹ Indeed, one researcher examining MDWs in the UAE found that close to one-half of all the workers they interviewed had never left the houses of their employers on their own - without employer supervision - over the two years that they had been in the country.⁵⁰

43 Fernandez, de Regt, and Currie, 2014.

44 Fernandez, de Regt and Currie, 2014, 55.

45 Grossman-Thompson, 2019.

46 Jarallah, 2009.

47 Fernandez, de Regt, and Currie, 2014, 57.

48 Fernandez, de Regt, and Currie, 2014; Global Alliance Against Traffick in Women, 2019a.

49 Fernandez, de Regt, and Currie, 2014, 57.

50 Choudry and Hlatshawo, 2015, 48.

In some direst cases, these severe restrictions have been linked to MDWs attempting suicide. In Kuwait, for example, a 2002 study examined the frequency with which domestic workers would jump out of multi-story buildings, labelling this as the ‘jumping syndrome’ phenomenon, which found that there were approximately two to three cases of severe fractures per week as a result of jumping.⁵¹ Another study conducted in a psychiatric hospital in Kuwait reported that a desire to end one’s life is about five times higher among the ranks of MDWs compared to Kuwaiti women.⁵²

Isolation mixed with systemic control has often resulted in migrant workers being unaware of the legal recourse options they have at their disposal.⁵³ Legally, if a migrant has been brought into the country via a recruitment agency - which is true of most - both the employee and employer can contact the agency at any time for third-party mediation or physical removal of the labourer if the situation turns sour.⁵⁴ However, the reality remains that the power structure in place leans in favour of the employer, often resulting in the agency being an additional means of control and coercion over the migrant, ensuring submission through whichever means necessary.⁵⁵ In the Kafala system, should the sponsor decide to break the contract, the employee immediately loses his or her residence permit and is obliged to return home within a short window of time. While they are legally bound to meet every requirement of the labour contract, this obligation is often circumvented at the expense of the migrant.⁵⁶ A sponsor is not required to provide a reason or explanation for breaking a contract, and MDWs live in constant fear of angering their employers and being removed from their position. Moreover, due to financial incentives that have propelled them to seek employment abroad in the first place, MDWs are prepared to endure considerable hardship rather than shorten their contract period and return home empty-handed.⁵⁷

The experiences of domestic workers in Gulf states fall within Grossman-Thompson’s (2019) frameworks of labour disposability and gendered control.⁵⁸ Under the Kafala system, these women are considered essential to the status quo as a group; however, their place within the system is of little significance to the State, their employer, and/or the agencies that recruit them. The sociolegal and political context of their employment condones various lawful yet unjust practices that create conditions of possible abuse and exploitation in the domestic sector. Moreover, they are controlled by the Kafala system and the private nature of their work that jointly aim at ensuring obedience and docility. It should be added, however, that these factors are not solely relevant to the Middle Eastern region but also to the global domestic migration industry to varying degrees.

51 Shah et al., 2002.

52 Shah et al., 2002.

53 International Labour Organisation, 2007; Human Rights Watch, 2010; Varia, 2011; Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, 2019a; 2019b; 2022; Parreñas, 2021.

54 Fernandez, de Regt, and Currie, 2014, 60.

55 Fernandez, de Regt, and Currie, 2014, 60.

56 Longva, 1999.

57 Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, 2019a.

58 Grossman-Thompson, 2019.

MDW Resistance in the Gulf: A Covert Affair

As discussed, the Gulf region is noticeably absent in the growing body of sociological and feminist literature on the global MDW-led movement fighting for basic workers' rights and denouncing the discrimination they suffer at the hands of the institutions and their employers. As Federici (2016) describes, the movement resulted from women banding together and joining with other women from their own country and other cultural backgrounds to spearhead multinational organizations and enact change.⁵⁹ Eventually, these groups were able to spread awareness on the hidden conditions of domestic work, lobby politicians, stage marches, and hold rallies. Moreover, a crucial aspect of these efforts has been the creation of informal networks providing a reference point for new arrivals, and sharing information on vital elements such as housing, employment, and migration laws by MDWs for MDWs.

Equally important to the MDW mobilisation efforts has been the construction of new relationships with public space(s), both physical and virtual.⁶⁰ Seen at first as a place of danger where MDWs could be stopped by the police or suffer other forms of abuse, public space has become a place of encounters, to regain the autonomy that they are denied daily and to reach out to the broader public, leading to greater visibility of their demands.⁶¹ Virtually, moreover, MDWs were able to create informal networks on online groups and forums not only to alleviate the isolation of live-in domestic work and commiserate, but also to seek guidance on difficult situations.

The literature on MDW-led labour efforts has focused mainly on Europe, parts of Asia, and North America. Even as the biggest migrant-labour receiver, little attention has been paid to such activities in the Gulf region;⁶² presumably because of the stern policing and isolation experienced by MDWs under the Kafala system. While the Kafala system may prohibit MDWs organizing en masse, this does not mean that MDWs working in these countries have not attempted to improve their labour conditions. Instead, any act of resistance must be covert and situated within the confines to which they are subjected. Due to the lack of recourse available to them, be it legal, emotional, administrative, or otherwise, MDWs in the Gulf region are perpetually under threat of being returned home penniless or in debt. Their precarity is such that they face the real possibility of not only being dismissed (without notice or reason), but also physically and mentally harmed if they are found to be defiant, let alone 'mutinying' and rallying against the system.

The public/private divide must be taken into account when making assumptions about who a real activist is, lest a bias of public visibility (i.e. street protest, high public profile) erases the resistance work of MDWs in more restrictive settings. While all state regimes disproportionately bear down on MDWs' "capacity to resist,"⁶³ studies in non-Western

59 Federici, 2016, 12.

60 Federici, 2016.

61 Federici, 2016, 12.

62 De Bel-Air, 2018.

63 Federici, 2016, 11.

settings⁶⁴ rarely associate these privatized acts with feminist labour consciousness and activist movements. A resistance, moreover, needs to be understood within the asymmetrical power relations in which it is performed. Such acts of resistance are often not confrontational or overt assertions of labour rights consciousness, but rather defensive protection of personal dignity and notions of selfhood or a reminder to oneself that their worth as human beings goes beyond their labour outputs and market wage. Such individual-level resistance follows Baaz, Lilja, and Vinthagen (2018) definition, as acts that “extend the space for making choices and open up possibilities by undermining, destabilizing, or restructuring such power relations that limit and produce our (possible) identities, actions, space or bodies.”⁶⁵

Domestic workers in the Gulf engage in what Fernandez, de Regt, and Currie (2014) called “everyday resistance” through small but consistent actions and attitudes in which workers express their agency. In this context, agency can be defined as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” within the host country and host household.⁶⁶ The conception of resistance as such is defined according to its context; in contrast to ‘louder’ forms of political assertion (i.e., mobilising, unionising, marching, lobbying, and so forth), everyday acts of resistance during live-in employment have covert, demure, and subtle qualities.⁶⁷

Moreover, the exercise of agency is linked to a call for recognizing a labourer’s worth and the worth of their labour. It is also a call for the recognition of their personhood, an attempt to remind all parties to a system that has marginalised them for so long that MDWs are integral parts of societies and that they belong with and within those societies. Agency in terms of migration is often understood in terms of the economic push and pull factors that lead one to leave their home searching for opportunity. The decision to leave one’s country and leave all reference points to work as a MDW is challenging and brave. While economic incentives might propel one to consider the move, the individuals who migrate are “combative women, prepared to face many hardships and even a loss of social status to give a better life to their families.”⁶⁸ As such, MDW agency extends beyond their ability to cope with the difficulties they might face upon arrival and throughout their stay in their host country. Agency includes all the decisions and actions they undertook before ever setting foot outside their country. Indeed, studies show that many MDWs are aware of the potential for abuse in the host country prior to their departure, with many MDWs choosing to return to domestic work in Gulf states multiple times.⁶⁹ With the exception of situations of forced migration/labour,⁷⁰ human mobility should be viewed as a kind of agency, and not merely the product of neoliberal capitalist forces.

64 See, for example, Longva, 1999.

65 Baaz, Lilja and Vinthagen, 2018, 34.

66 Fernandez, de Regt and Currie, 2014, 55.

67 Hollander and Einwohner, 2004, 545.

68 Federici, 2016, 11.

69 Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, 2019a, 4.

70 Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women 2019a, 44; Silvey and Parreñas, 2019.

As such, Scott (1985) conceptualised covert resistance as “hidden transcript[s]” that lies somewhere between structure and agency, stating that “[m]ost of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in the overt collective defiance of power holders nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites.”⁷¹ These forms of resistance are deemed particularly effective in instances where violence (or the threat of it) is used to ensure the continuity of the status quo, albeit one that allows “a veiled discourse of dignity and self-assertion within the public transcript [...] in which ideological resistance is disguised, muted, and veiled for safety’s sake.”⁷²

Under the Kafala system, workers are actively and systemically kept from each other. Hence, acts of resistance remain at an individual level, affecting only the parties directly involved in the situation, be it the employer, employee, and/or the hiring agency (if applicable). Such tactics were documented in various studies, which show that domestic workers would resort to lying, pilfering, slandering, gossiping, avoiding tasks/individuals, hiding, passive-aggressiveness, feigned ignorance, and foot-dragging.⁷³

Another means of covert resistance employed by MDWs - and indeed by those engaged in many other industries - has been to circumvent the system entirely by actively choosing to be employed illegally. As discussed above, migrant workers in the Gulf are only allowed within the region under the patronage of a sponsor; this, however, has not stopped many from engaging in “freelance” work by remaining in these countries irregularly and taking it upon themselves to seek employment once they arrive. As Moors and de Regt (2008) point out, there are various ways in which a worker may enter these countries illegally; they may stay after their initial legal contract expires and choose to remain, enter via a tourist visa, getting smuggled in, or paying someone to be their sponsor even though they are not working for them directly.⁷⁴ While freelance MDWs may enjoy greater freedoms in terms of their living and working conditions, and may even be able to earn a higher income without the direct overarching supervision of a live-in employee,⁷⁵ there is some debate over the freedoms associated with the freelance option. For example, Parreñas’ (2021) study on ‘freelance’ Filipino MDWs in the UAE found that all interviewed participants would prefer to be legally-employed in a ‘bad’ (i.e., abusive) household than remain in their current situation, often citing their lack of access to healthcare, their inability to travel, and their fear of being discovered by authorities.⁷⁶ Freelance migrants are a particularly vulnerable group. While they enjoy a range of benefits from their illicit activities, their status - or lack thereof - creates whole new set of challenges, including not being able to leave the country and/or receiving hefty fines and risking jail should they be caught by the authorities.⁷⁷

71 Scott, 1985, 136.

72 Scott, 1990, 137.

73 Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, 2019a; 2019b; 2022; Parreñas, 2021.

74 Moors and de Regt, 2008.

75 Moors and Regt, 2008, 162-163.

76 Parreñas, 2021, 122.

77 Moors and Regt, 2008; Parreñas, 2021.

Conclusion

This article examined the reasons why migrant domestic workers in the Arabian Gulf have not been part of the international domestic worker mobilisation movements that Federici (2016) identified.⁷⁸ To be sure, the region has been the subject of many studies that focus on migrant workers, including migrant domestic workers. However, as part of the growing body of sociological and feminist literature about the conditions of migrant domestic workers, most of it has focused on denouncing the treatment of mainly women workers, but rarely on their resistance - both active and passive.⁷⁹

As discussed above, the Gulf region is highly dependent on migrant labour practices, as are the political structures of these states. While foreign labour is widely acknowledged as a key to the region's economic, social, and political sustainability, it is met with stern policing, and severe marginalisation. For the migrants themselves, while the value of their labour is recognised and indeed welcomed, they are themselves deemed expendable and easily replaceable due to the neoliberal reality of the global economy. Consequently, the political and legal practices of the region and the pervasiveness of the exploitive and abusive conditions in which these workers are employed make it such that their resistance - while maybe not easily perceptible - must be covert and situated within the confines in which they are subjected. MDW resistance in the Gulf requires entirely different tactics than those mentioned in Federici's (2016) work, in which domestic workers mobilised, marched, lobbied, and/or created unions to better their situation and boost the recognition of their labour.⁸⁰ Instead, resistance is kept at the micro-level, covert, and inherently outside politics.

There are huge variance in how MDWs are expected to perform their duties, including what constitutes their duties, the hours they work, their living arrangements, including access to food, access to sleep, and even how they communicate with their families. The specificities of each MDWs living and employment situation are household-dependent.⁸¹ As such, it should be added that not all MDWs who work in Gulf are subject to abuse; rather, the Kafala system under which they are employed regularly or irregularly creates the conditions in which they are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. MDWs' individual resistance to their employment situations are as unique as their household situation.

Papadopoulos and Tsianos's (2013) formulation of the autonomy of migration thesis highlights that migration - and human mobility in general - transcends conceptualisations of authority and control and the citizen-versus-other dichotomy in a way that allows migrants to exercise their mobility against and/or beyond existing sovereign mobility controls. Indeed, according to them, migration practices have led to the creation of a mobile common, a "world of knowledge, of information, of tricks for

78 Federici, 2016.

79 International Labour Organisation, 2007; Human Rights Watch, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016; Varia, 2011; Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, 2019a; 2019b; 2022; Silvey and Parreñas, 2019; Parreñas, 2021.

80 Federici, 2016.

81 Parreñas, 2021.

survival, of mutual care, of social relations, of services exchange, of solidarity and sociability.”⁸² Mobile commons have enabled migrants to exploit, traverse, and remain resilient to the challenging realities of international migration.

Dadusc, Grazioli and Martínez (2019) added that as organisational practice, mobile commons can constitute new ways of relating and delimiting boundaries beyond the traditional regime framework of citizenship, in a way that reasserts migrants of their worth as humans and the worth of their labour.⁸³ Mobile commons as a practice, therefore, is a key element of the global MDW movement to resist systemic abuse and assert the value of their contributions to host societies, especially in the Middle East where the social fabric of the region is inherently dependent on MDWs.

Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013) mention that “justice” in migration should be viewed as formulating what is just and what is unjust in the everyday conditions of existence including daily social relations, connections, and conditions. According to Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013) and Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou, and Tsianos (2015), justice will best be achieved through ‘mobile commons,’ a recourse and path for migrants to alleviate the pressures of capitalist exploitation and survive the pressure of otherness designated by their legal (or illegal) status.⁸⁴ The mobile commons understand that migrants operate outside the political, sovereign realm, sometimes transforming the political without ever addressing or confronting its legal and/or social codes. Instead, migrants’ “develop their own codes, their own practices, their logics which are almost imperceptible from the perspective of existing political action,”⁸⁵ a logic that can best situate MDWs acts of everyday resistance in Gulf states. Justice therefore cannot be achieved solely through the mobilisation tactics mentioned in Federici’s (2016) work; it is both overt and covert.⁸⁶ While Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013) allow for unionisation and the like to be at times “indispensable, necessary and crucial for migrants,” they view the development of ‘justice’ as a more “ordinary,” everyday endeavour.⁸⁷

It should be noted, moreover, that covert acts of resistance to the injustices MDWs face are not restricted solely to those without the ability to resist in more overt, public ways. Indeed, should the socio-cultural context in which MDWs find themselves allow public mobilisation, it does not preclude them from engaging in complementary everyday acts of resistance should they see fit. As such, formulating justice for domestic care mobilisation around the world should include the recognition of everyday acts as an exercise in migrant agency. Doing so would not only paint a more complete picture of global MDW mobilisation by including areas like the Middle East, but it also allows for greater recognition of the efforts made by MDWs in the restricted contexts like the Gulf region to actively utilise the mobile commons to reassert themselves and their worth within the confines to which they are subjected.

82 Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013, 190.

83 Dadusc, Grazioli and Martínez, 2019.

84 Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013; Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou, and Tsianos, 2015

85 Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou, and Tsianos, 2015, 39.

86 Federici, 2016

87 Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou, and Tsianos, 2015, 39.



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Ervin Shehu - **An Asylum Seeker's Time between Being a "Refugee" and a "Migrant"** *Migration, Mobility, & Displacement* 6: 43-60

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An Asylum Seeker's Time between Being a "Refugee" and a "Migrant"¹

Ervin Shehu

Ervin Shehu is a PhD research fellow at the University of the Aegean, Department of Social Anthropology and History. He has recently finished a three-year research program on the settlement and unofficial reception policies in Greece related to asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants, primarily from the Middle East and South Asia. His research focuses on the integration of these newcomers into everyday life in Athens, with a particular emphasis on the ways in which co-ethnic religious and social networks facilitate this process through various forms of support provision. Moreover, his research posits the process of reception and hospitality as an reciprocal "gift-giving" practice between "host" (local) and "guest" (foreigner), analyzing this from the points of view of both migrants and stakeholders (i.e. organizations).

Abstract

The aim of this article is to investigate the asylum process based on the experiences of asylum seekers. Two axes of the asylum procedure are examined: a) the interview and b) the decisions produced by the asylum committees on the requests. The text argues that, in order to understand the construction of the category of asylum seekers on the one hand and the institutional practices and forms of their control and management on the other, these two dimensions should be considered together. The interview process is based on the articulation of speech, while the decision constitutes an element of a written text document. Since there is no decision without the interview, the objective is to trace the practices and methods through which the meaning of the text of the decision is produced and the form of the speech narrative that asylum seekers are required to deliver in front of asylum committees. The research took place in Athens, Greece, from January 2018 until July 2019.

Introduction

The present article is part of my PhD research and focuses on two ethnic groups in Athens, namely Afghan and Pakistani asylum seekers. The research has been qualitative and participatory, based on ethnographic methods, narrative approaches and the analysis of official documents. The research took place in Athens, after the EU-Turkey agreement, in a self-organized squat that housed asylum seekers. The research lasted eighteen months, from the beginning of 2018 until the closure of the occupation in

¹ Acknowledgments: This text is based on conversations with asylum seekers in Athens, both in the form of interviews with open-ended questions and through group discussions. For their participation, I would like to thank them very much. The advice of lawyers and social workers who have worked in the asylum committees as case workers was equally helpful and constructive. Finally, I would like to thank Saskia Fischer and JR Karlin for translating from Greek to English as well as professor Evthymios Papataxiarchis in the Department of Social Anthropology and History at the University of the Aegean for his useful advice and comments on the text.

July 2019. My involvement as a volunteer in the field was instrumental in gaining access to primary material. The main interlocutors were two groups of Afghan and Pakistani male asylum seekers living in the occupation, with whom daily contact and connection had been established. Specifically, there were six young men from Pakistan and eight from Afghanistan. During this time, I followed the progress of their asylum application process. Key parts of the material I wrote down during the interview comprised the text of the decision of the asylum committee on the application.

This article (since it does not approach the issue from a legal perspective) avoids focusing on the legal aspects of the asylum procedure and going into specific provisions of the law that determine the policy of the procedure. For asylum seekers, the process of applying for asylum involves many different dimensions with an emphasis on the legal aspect of the process. The broader legal apparatus that concerns asylum seekers, which has developed over the last sixty to seventy years, has become an important component of the legal system (Malkki 1995). Because of their position, asylum seekers are perceived as victims in a state of turmoil who are therefore in need of intervention and “treatment”. On this point, there is a tendency to compare the “refugee” to a situation or body that Turner (1967, 88-111) calls “between and betwixt”ⁱ, between those who are and are not entitled to asylum, which only reinforces their sense of uncertainty (Kristen 2015). It was especially after the signing of the EU-Turkey Statementⁱⁱ in March 2016, that the role of both local (state) and European level migration control and surveillance mechanisms became unambiguous. This was a crucial period for the strategic subsumption of population flows within the asylum process, which contributed to extensive geographical control of people on the move and activated a large corps of volunteers and humanitarian organizations (Papataxiarchis 2016, 2017).

The subject matter here concerns the influence of state policy upon people’s daily lives when they find themselves face to face with employees from the Asylum Service. That is why it is important to analyze and understand how state institutions filter asylum claims in a manner which can lead to the victimization of asylum seekers. Such a spirit governs the Asylum Service’s decisions in the first instance as well as the actions of the civil servants in the Appeals Committees. Thus, the image of the asylum seeker is constructed through the official interview process. The meaning given to their account is central, as is the complex relationship that develops over the course of the interview between the asylum seeker and the case manager. Moreover, an essential factor for the research to consider was the way in which asylum seekers experience the interview in terms of their emotional reactions, their degree of preparedness, the anxieties that haunt them and the conclusions they ultimately draw about the whole process.

In this article, the investigation of the asylum procedure is examined with reference points a) the interview and b) the decisions produced by the asylum committees on the requests. This article supports the position that in order to understand the social construction of the category of asylum seekers and the institutional practices and forms of control and management of them, they should be considered together. The interview process is based on the articulation of speech, while the decision constitutes an element

of a written text document. Since there is no decision without the interview, i.e. without the articulation of speech by the asylum seekers, the objective is to reveal through which practices and methods the meaning of the text of the decision is produced. In addition, we are interested in the form of speech/narratives expressed by asylum seekers, knowing in advance that the environment of the interview is considered by them as unfriendly. Thus, what is being considered for investigation is the way in which a decision is produced, structured and supported, not based on the shape and form of the document, but rather on the evidence-based practices that are invoked through the text for the production of the decision. From this perspective, the document is not perceived as a simple tool of bureaucratic organization, but as "a component of bureaucratic rules, ideologies, knowledge, practices, subjectivities and results" (Hull. S. M 2012).

In Greece, before and after 2015, there have been studies that highlight the importance of documents as forms of control and bureaucratic management of asylum seekers. Specifically, for asylum seekers, legal advice and support were key in preparing them for the interview process. It goes without saying even during periods in which practically no claims to asylum were being granted, claimants were still subjected to the ordeal of bureaucratic processes. In the context of the overall process, the issuance of the asylum card (pink card) was essential (Cabot 2012). However, given that it was neither a residence permit nor an asylum card, in practice, the pink card, which was associated with ambiguity and a state of limbo, served to render asylum seekers' ineligible. Also, for the mobile populations arriving at the Aegean islands en masse from 2015 onwards, the registration and issuance of a simple document was a basic requirement for anyone wishing to leave the island for the mainland. The document (harti), was issued by the port authorities of the islands and was a basic administrative document, although its validity was often disputed by government officials (Rozakou 2017).

This article seeks to contribute to a discussion which, through the analysis of speech and documentation, penetrates into the invisible practices of the asylum process and renders visible the scale of bureaucratic control and management and the construction of the category of asylum seekers. The article does not deal with the humanitarian management of asylum seekers, such as those living in camps. Rather, it focuses on those living within the urban fabric of the city. The first axis of the article engages an anthropological approach through an emic perspective. It analyzes the narratives produced by asylum seekers when they find themselves in front of the asylum committee, and the impacts of the eventual outcome. The second axis is related to the text/decision production process itself and the political weight it carries precisely because it embodies a discourse of management and control – and this is revealed through the analysis of the text of the decisions.

Institutional Policies for the Management of the “Refugee Crisis”

The criteria that define and determine the attainment of refugee status for a person are best understood from a historical point of view. The definition of "refugee" was

established in such a way as to protect those people who left the Eastern bloc, thus setting up a form of international agreement (Karatani 2005). These conditions resulted in the creation of United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) established in December 1950 by the UN General Assembly and which became operational in 1951. The 1951 Convention sets out certain standards for dealing with the issue and for protecting individuals in the countries in which they have settled (Goodwin-Gill 1998, 296). By distinction, a refugee is a person who meets the conditions for recognition as stated in the Convention. The categorization of people on the move as refugees, asylum seekers or immigrants determines the institutional policies and administrative actions that are subsequently pursued in the management of these categories. Thus, the dominant discourse, which is being formed, not only brims with prejudice and xenophobia, which, after all, the exclusionary policies that circumscribe the granting of asylum also entail, but also according to Whittaker (2006, 6) encourages “closed door” policies in relation to population flows. In terms of institutional arrangements, liberal democracies have built complex systems and processes to meet the requirements of case-by-case decisions over whether an asylum seeker meets the criteria for being granted refugee status. Constructing the category of asylum seeker entails precisely this kind of extensive policy formation and action on a practical and theoretical level. There is, indeed, a governing logic that the majority of asylum seekers are taking advantage of the generosity of host countries (Gibney 2004, 10). This fact is indicative of the wider restructuring of state governance in a global context that is characterized by the displacement or dismantling of territorial integrity (Square 2009, 56). The above policies, both at the level of states and the European Union, constitute one side of the coin and control the flow of uprooted or displaced people. The other side is directly linked to border security policies and the implementation of strategies to “filter” refugee/immigrant flows. According to De Genova (2015) the migrants are considered “illegal” once the legislature classifies them as illegal or illegalizes them. From this point of view, a body of illegal immigrants is produced and constructed through the legal discourse. Such a policy had an impact on the transformation of the Italian reception system (Campesi 2018), and apart from the geographical and legal constraints, the prevailing asylum policies form a field characterized by policies of protection and non-freedom at the same time. Seeking protection is considered a voluntary act in a regime that empowers itself to decide and dispose of “refugees” as asylum seeker applicants (De Genova, Garelli and Tazzioli 2018). In particular, European border policies are based on the development of technology for their effective control. Control generates and establishes forms and tactics of visibility that take place within the field of mechanisms and migration management, taking into account visibility as a technique for controlling the migration flows and as a strategy driven by the immigrants themselves, who oscillate between visibility and invisibility (Tazzioli and Waters 2016). The analysis of forms and practices of restriction is directly related to the Hotspots approachⁱⁱⁱ. Tazzioli and Garelli (2018) have analyzed in Greece and Italy the mechanisms for the prevention of immigration flows, the institutional channels of mobility and relocation, as well as the internal forced transportation with which the hotspot system is connected and imposed. In this context, it is important to understand the logic of classifying and labeling migration flows and how these labels are

used as conceptual metaphors. According to Zetter (1991, 2007) the labelling process is key as it is part of policy making. Labelling theory provides a useful tool to observe the bureaucratic procedures and practices that compose refugee identity. According to Stevens (2013) there is a disparity between the "internal protection" provided by nation-states and the "international protection" of the UNHCR's directives, as states interpret their own protection obligations as distinctly divergent from those of humanitarian organizations like the UNHCR. Therefore, what is being implemented is a politics that protects Europe's borders rather than protecting people who are at risk. The service itself according to Jacques (1993, 60-61) is responsible both for satisfying their requests and, simultaneously, suppressing or disqualifying them. According to Stevens (2017) it is this need to appear to comply with international obligations that contributes to the maintenance of an asylum system that at least grants specific rights to a small number of asylum seekers across Europe – as opposed to simply rejecting all applications and fully closing the borders (to refugee, asylum seekers and immigrants).

The Dynamics of the Interview Process

This section concerns the ways in which the image of the asylum seeker is constructed through the interview process. During the interview, the meaning given to asylum seeker's account is central, as is the complex relationship that develops over its course between the asylum seeker and the case manager. During the asylum procedure according to the Ministry of Migration and Asylum in Greece, asylum seekers are called upon to "answer its questions with complete honesty, to submit only true facts in full and not to conceal any information related to their application. The submission of false claims or facts will negatively impact assessment of the application". It is through the particular narrative scheme of their testimonies that the law's relationship with the narrative's form emerges (Vogl 2013), given that the latter must meet certain legal requirements, i.e. be characterized by coherence, reliability and plausibility. When the narrative meets these criteria, it is considered to fall within the realm of legality. However, in Vogl's view, the interview process is not guided by a strictly defined framework or specified set of procedures for assessing the quality of narratives where quality is considered a necessary criterion for determining refugee status. On the contrary, it is through the emergence of a series of random facts that the outcome of the process is ultimately determined. Among these are both the arbitrary twists of the story and the beginning and end points of the narrative that case managers expect to hear (*ibid.*, 65). Given the way in which the Asylum Service's guidelines are formulated, one can conclude that for the asylum seeker, the fact of being called to speak constitutes their only tool and weapon during the interview. Their spoken word is thus bound up with their own protection and depends on the degree of success with which they tell their story. In this way, "speech has become a precondition of recognition, protection and legal status" (Zagor et al., 2014, 10).

In addition, there are other factors that determine the outcome of the interview, such as its interpretation. It is through interpretation that the information an asylum seeker

presents for judgment is channeled. Fear, fatigue and stress may also cause confusion or error in relation to various details such as names, locations and dates. Moreover, according to Good (2011), while refugees are being subjected to detailed analysis and cross-checking, the coherence, plausibility and reliability of their accounts become objects of doubt for the Home Office Presenting Officer (HOPO).^{iv} For example, officials ask questions about events in the hope of undermining specific answers which appear incoherent, thereby calling into question the credibility of what is being said (Good 2011). Moreover, even the approach adopted during preparation for the interview – a task undertaken by lawyers both from and to a lesser extent outside of humanitarian organizations – essentially nullifies the voice of the subjects in their attempt to represent themselves in the interview. It is because they are considered vulnerable and lacking in knowledge about the system's rules of operation that their voices are overshadowed. This practice only serves to intensify their non-participation in the process (Cabot 2016). Consequently, the idea of the asylum seeker as a victimized subject is constructed, meaning a subject who will always exist in a state of emergency, unable to express their own will whatever the circumstances. In regard to the interview, according to accounts by my interviewees, the atmosphere is one that resembles an interrogation process. A power relationship between the two parties, which assigns specific roles to each, does not cease to exist. For asylum seekers, this power relationship, based on the binary opposition between examiner and examined, creates not only feelings of fear and insecurity, but also of mistrust and the suspicion of being discriminated against. This fact shapes the interview in such a way that it is through the active interaction of the two parties that human stories emerge. It is therefore clear that the interview process as a whole (and even in terms of its aesthetics) is marked by confusion precisely because, when asked to present their life stories, many asylum seekers try to behave as they imagine their audience expects them to (Cabot 2013).

Turning now to my primary sources, I will briefly describe how the asylum seekers themselves experience the interview process and what they think about it. I do so by presenting an indicative sample of extracts from our discussions.

Hamid from Afghanistan, married with two children, states, among other things:

I am waiting for the day of the interview. If I get a negative answer I will try to go to another European country. I am very anxious. I can't sleep at night. I'm looking for a good lawyer to prepare me for the day of the interview. They know better than us, and they tell us what to say and what not to say. The important thing is how you tell the story and how believable it is. Everything depends on how you tell your story, how you behave in the room and whether you make a good impression on the official. These things play their role.

Ali, a 44-year-old Pakistani asylum seeker, said:

I was in the interview for four hours. We were all really tired. The atmosphere was cold and not at all friendly. The clerk kept looking me in the eye to see how both my eyes and face reacted. She was staring me in the face and seemed lost in thought. I also kept looking her in the eye without looking down to the right or the left. I had to look determined in what I was saying. I gave quick answers. She kept asking me the same question over and over again. At one point I was asked to take a break and I did not accept. Then she told me that she was tired and we had to take a break. I felt that I was being interrogated.

Kasem, 25, from Afghanistan, recounts:

They ask many tricky questions, that I have to watch out for. I have to beware of these questions, and the problem is that if the interview lasts many hours, then I may get tired and make a mistake. Many of my acquaintances have fallen into a trap. You need to be constantly vigilant and say things precisely. They want a lot of paperwork and that's difficult. I need to find a lawyer to prepare me. I want to be very convincing, to behave properly and a lot depends on how the official sees me. I have to be likeable.

Selim, 19, from Pakistan:

I can't understand why they rejected my application. I had prepared myself very well. I had also gone to a lawyer who had told me what to say and how to say it. The official kept shaking his head as if he agreed with what I was saying, and I felt that I was doing well. They just do not believe us. They think we are lying. They do not understand anything. They do not want to understand...

In such a situation, asylum seekers are faced with two diametrically opposed options: one consists of compliance as a tactic of adaptation to a system that has rejected the applicant, the other leads to withdrawal from the process and subsequent isolation, since adaptation and compliance equate to rejection of oneself and one's past. During the interviews asylum seekers find themselves in a state of insecurity and fear, as there are many who do not know how to tell their story nor what the worker in front of them expects to hear. Even those who have knowledge of the subject and can maneuver more effectively cannot avoid other obstacles along the way. One of these obstacles is the atmosphere that is fraught with elements of interrogation and surveillance - in the name of searching out the truth - through questions that are repeated over time or purposefully tricky. Other stumbling blocks include the aura of suspicion and mistrust, in other words the belief that interviewees vacillate between truth and falsehood; the suspicion that they are actually immigrants and finally, the practice of assessing claims on the spot, through body language and watchful eyes. In addition, the cold atmosphere

of a formal process and the asylum seeker's unfamiliarity with the worker deepen their bewilderment, especially when the discussion turns to personal experiences.

All of the above are key factors that shape narratives, claims and behavior in front of the Decision Authority. As a bureaucratic mechanism, the asylum system considers that the statements of asylum seekers are generally untrue. Case workers frequently charge that the information that comes to light is inaccurate or that it is a long way from the truth. The former conclusion does not only apply to the personal data that are provided but also people's experiences, and such rhetoric concerns the credibility of claims. According to asylum seekers' reports, the whole process is often difficult for them to be understood. Their accounts, as determinant actions, are examined through the central criteria of reliability and plausibility. The evaluations of their stories may produce insufficient knowledge about their socio-cultural backgrounds, and at the same time they may be obliged to explain some of their choices or behaviours, which to the examiner seems illogical or surprising for a "reasonable" person. In addition, a great deal can be literally lost in translation, which generates inconsistencies and a lack of coherence in the narratives. This feeds into a vicious circle: their stories are treated with suspicion, thereby contributing to the culture of mistrust that shapes their narratives (Eastmond 2007) and their evaluation. The above factors are evidence of a technology of power. The ideas of uncertainty, mistrust and deception are attributed to asylum seekers throughout the interview process, thus constructing this category of person and putting them in an unclear position. These features, which are also evident, for example in the UK asylum system, lead asylum seekers to despair and passivity, to deportation and displacement (Griffiths 2012).

The search for truth is the cornerstone of the interview process. This element shapes specific attitudes and possibly also the narratives that get adapted to the requirements of the Authority that is examining the request. Investigation of the claims to truth occurs through the bureaucratic system, which is devoted to the task. According to Fassin's approach (2013), it is not the truth of the asylum system that is at stake, but the truth of the narratives and this is precisely because the role of the bureaucracy is to detect "bogus refugees". From this point of view, the dominant discourse as well as state (European and national) policies associate asylum with the control of immigrant and refugee flows, which fact produces more set practices and behaviors on the part of the administration and officials. These specific practices concern the relationship between case workers and applicants as well as the interactions between them, which obscures the legal dimensions of the issue. Since the process is based on assessments (which are linked to a number of practices and attitudes during the interview) of the internal and external coherence of the subject's story, legal norms cannot be thought of as simply preceding the results, but are rather determined by the perception that has already been formed about the granting of asylum. Despite the fact that it is described in legal terms, the process of granting refugee status can therefore scarcely be characterized as obeying legal reasoning (Dequen 2013). The key factor is the social construction of the asylum seeker, which is based principally on the interaction between the parties, as well as on the overall structure of the process which allows or dictates specific behaviors and

responses on the part of the asylum seeker. For example, if we did not have the formula of repeated question-answer style interviews, perhaps interview subjects would approach their stories differently. In fact, as it stands, the process, which hampers the expression of interviewees' narratives, is enforced in order to comply with official norms.

Decisions on Asylum Applications

In the present section, I focus on the spirit that animates the text of the final decision. While keeping to the same broad subject, I now shift the emphasis to a distinct aspect of the process: namely, the way the decision is composed and structured in combination with the evidence-based data and references that the text invokes for the production of the meaning. This choice is based on a political perspective and engages with broader critical readings in order to assess the processes of knowledge production and power, on the one hand, and the predominance of Euro-centric resources and approaches, on the other.

With regard to the gathering of documents, asylum seekers could contact relatives or friends who already resided in Athens as kinship and cultural networks could always facilitate the collection of documents – however complex and marked by bureaucratic difficulties. In addition, it was possible to have documents translated by official translation agencies, although this was not a requirement as long as the translation was undertaken by the Asylum Service's own interpreter. However, for asylum seekers, having documents translated by official agencies became a kind of obsession in which they related their need for formality in the face of the Asylum Service and from their intense anxiety over proving their claims in the most "official" way possible. A document is therefore also a contributing factor to the way in which society imagines and confronts the state (Hull. S. M 2012). It appears that asylum seekers both comprehend and reproduce the logic whereby their appearance at the interview is bolstered by the presentation of documents, which increases their chances of a positive outcome.

With respect to the decisions, first of all, one needs to clarify the fact that the Asylum Service is not the exclusive product of a specific national state mechanism. It acquires (and reproduces) knowledge and information that European research centers produce about asylum seekers, the situation in their home countries and the specific reasons they state during their interviews. A careful reading of all the decisions in the first and second instances yields a number of interesting observations. Firstly, case managers, in order to substantiate their decisions scientifically and methodically, drew on information and knowledge from diverse sources and manuals, reports and conferences, or from existing court decisions by other Western authorities. For example, in relation to Pakistanis who cited land disputes as reasons for their displacement, case managers referred to the reports of documentation centers in European countries and to those of international organizations. They did not, however, refer to studies or analyses, published in leading journals, by Pakistani researchers who live and work in Pakistan. Such issues would be more clearly and validly analyzed by scholars who belong to the

same cultural environment and who presumably have a better overview of the culture, gravity, meaning and social dimensions of the problem. Within the European scientific community, specific knowledge about “other” peoples is produced and reproduced - in this case about Pakistani asylum seekers and the importance and scope of the problems in their country. Thus, the various kinds of evidence that Pakistani asylum seekers are required to provide in support of their applications, is then evaluated against the partial and situated knowledge produced by European researchers. It seems clear that we are therefore dealing with Western-centric tendencies that feed into the production of this knowledge, where such knowledge is linked to the institutional marginalization of asylum seekers, and possibly to further repercussions as well.

In almost all decisions on international protection that I examined, one of the main sources is the Home Office’s *Country Information and Guidance*, which, through reports published by country of origin, issues guidelines that constitute the data source for case managers in the British asylum system. The reports provide information about the country of origin and at the same time give instructions to caseworkers who are directly involved in the asylum procedure on how to handle specific requests. It is within this framework that the data are examined, and a determination is made about the degree to which the asylum seeker’s claims justify the granting of asylum. In addition, following the guide, the reliability of the information, its accuracy and objectivity are assessed using sources that ensure the validity of the data. It is via the handling of this kind of material, and through processes such as those described above, that government agencies supposedly produce valid and objective knowledge concerning the lives, the conditions and problems that people face, for example, in Pakistan.

The above processes can be analyzed through the prism of the Foucauldian conception of knowledge production as enmeshed with the exercise of power. According to Foucault (1991, 101) power and power relations permeate the whole spectrum of social relations and, in order to become stable and established, they need to produce, accumulate and circulate discourse. This analysis influenced Edward Said, who put the emphasis on the degree and mechanisms by which knowledge, as it is produced and reproduced by the European mind, is essentially a form of power that influences and extends to non-European peoples (Said 1996, 348). The main factor that plays an important role in this domain is academic discourse and intellectual discourse in general, which deals with social life and shapes views on ways of living and political systems, views which are biased, derogatory and irresponsible (Said 1997, 51). Following this reasoning, the Asylum Service and those involved in producing decisions about “other” people who come from the Middle East, South Asia or Africa, judge and weigh the lives of these “others”. They classify them into categories such as refugee, asylum seeker or immigrant; through the lens of research carried out by a distinct, European service which itself constitutes the “eye of power”.

Another interesting element that emerges from a reading of asylum decisions is the way in which the Greek Asylum Service’s decisions are structured in relation to the subject’s own accounts. Here the issue takes on a moral dimension, given that it concerns the

asylum seeker's credibility. Credibility is tied to two factors, and on the basis of this, the Asylum Service may consider that a request lacks the necessary criteria for reliability. According to Thomas (2006) the first concerns internal inconsistencies or contradictions in the history narrated by the applicant while the second relates to external inconsistencies, that is, inconsistencies between actual facts and objective data on the country of origin, which impact the assessment of the plausibility or truth of the claims. Moreover, according to Good (2009) the process is shaped by specific, pre-existing environments, especially when asylum seekers come from a cultural background that is different from that of the service's employees. The cultural gap between the Asylum Service and asylum seekers influences the institution's assessments of the situation in asylum seekers' countries, and this is one of the key factors that reinforces concerns about the accuracy and fairness of decisions. Although asylum seekers are called on to prove the danger and threats that exist in their country, when they are not able to document these with paperwork, decisions depend, as stated earlier, on the assessments of the institutions that produce discourse about the situation in their country. The process of assessing the credibility of asylum claims should not, according to existing legislation, require written proof of the dangers that people have faced in their country of origin. And yet in practice, precisely such types of evidence are frequently demanded, further contributing to the arbitrariness and prejudice that mark the asylum process (Sorgoni 2015).

Conclusions

This article highlights two of the key aspects of the asylum process: on the one hand, the importance and weight of the interview, and on the other hand, the decisions on asylum applications as a text in itself. Analyzing these two elements in combination provides us with fertile ground for understanding the impact they exert and the effects they have on both bureaucratic control and management, as well as the construction of the category of asylum seekers. The managerial role of documents has been analyzed in the past independently of the spoken word, i.e. the interview process. However, their joint examination offers possibilities for a fruitful investigation of the policies of institutional control and management of asylum seekers.

The decision and the interview are two sides of the same coin. The document/decision constitutes the key element, which not only determines the progress of a person's asylum claim but also reflects filtering mechanisms, which are well established and widely applied. Analyzing the meanings produced by the text, we can perceive that the knowledge reproduced about the "others" is biased given the utilization of studies devised by the European scientific establishment, which creates a tendency toward westernization, resulting in the institutional marginalization of asylum seekers. Also, the interview, as a stage in itself, is characterized by a corresponding distrust, which puts the credibility of the asylum seeker's narrative under scrutiny, a fact which shapes specific attitudes and behaviors on the part of the subjects themselves. The asylum seeker, precisely because they are subjected to an evaluation- interrogation,

shapes their attitude and behavior on the basis of the given environment. From this perspective, the dominant discourse links asylum to the control of immigration and refugee flows, which leads the administration to more evidence-based practices and process-oriented behaviors. Rather, the factor that plays a key role is the social construction of the asylum seeker, which is based chiefly on the interactions between the parties. In fact, the methodical sequence of actions followed in the interview robs the asylum seeker of their own narrative and is implemented in order that the "official procedure" is observed (Monnier 1995). The process of interview and the production of documentation are the conditions, within which the category of asylum seekers has been constructed.

The two dimensions of bureaucratic control and the experiences of asylum seekers examined here contribute to theoretical frameworks focusing on the analysis of power and governmentality. While Foucault's concept of governmentality certainly extends beyond the sphere of state power, the research in this article displays that we are still able to detect new practices, techniques and methods for the management of asylum seekers that are at the center of the three main pillars of governability, i.e. economy, police and humanitarianism (Fassin, 2011). This theoretical approach offers a critical perspective on the human experience of migration (Walters, 2015) and sufficient insight into the mechanisms of migration control and management.

Endnotes

1 Turner's symbolic analysis refers to the (liminal) state of human existence and focuses on the qualities of an amorphous and hazy period in which people find themselves in a borderline and marginal situation, where they may be isolated, suspended in obscurity indefinitely. In other words, in a period of "betwixt and between", between two situations - not in any particular status, but rather in a condition of non-status.

2. EU-Turkey Statement took place on 18 March 2016. The main goal of the Statement was to reduce in maximum the number of irregular migration from Turkey to the EU. Some of the action points of the Statement foresees that all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands as of 20 March 2016 will be returned to Turkey. Moreover for every Syrian being returned to Turkey from the Greek islands, another Syrian will be resettled to the EU and the Turkey will take any necessary measures to prevent new sea or land routes for irregular migration opening from Turkey to the EU. Once irregular crossing between Turkey and the EU are ending or have substantially reduced, a Voluntary Humanitarian Admission Scheme will be activated. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/> <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-towards-a-new-policy-on-migration/file-eu-turkey-statement-action-plan>

3. The EU-Turkey Statement brought a transformation of the "hotspots" on the Aegean Islands and imposing a geographical restriction on new arrivals to the islands. The initial objective of the "hotspot approach" was to assist Italy and Greece by providing comprehensive and targeted operational support, so that the latter could fulfill their obligations under the EU law and swiftly identify, register and fingerprint incoming migrants, channel asylum seekers into asylum procedures, implement the relocation scheme and conduct return operations. Also, hotspots facilities turned into closed detention centres. People arriving after 20 March 2016 through the Aegean islands, and thus subject to the EU-Turkey Statement, were automatically de facto detained within the premises of the hotspots in order to be readmitted to Turkey in case they did not seek international protection or their applications were rejected. Available at: <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/asylum-procedure/access-procedure-and-registration/reception-and-identification-procedure/>

4. Home Office Presenting Officer (HOPO) refers to civil servants of the United Kingdom of the Ministry of Interior who have the competence to represent that ministry during the adjudication of appeals.

5. Fassin's approach is rooted in the operational level and in the tensions between the Geneva Convention and reality. He notes, however, that the tension has been resolved through a paradoxical consensus: the more limited the number of positive decisions, the more the convention's principles are subject to evaluation. In this way, the truth of asylum is established as a social value which is also rare and positive; while at the same time the credibility of those seeking asylum is tested and questioned.

6. Analyzing the interview process in Switzerland, Monnier perceives the interview room as a theatrical stage on which a drama takes place. Every part of the room has a symbolic meaning while all the members involved in the scene have their own roles and places. The investigation follows a standard procedure, in which claims are recorded until its close. In her view, such a context allows little space for respecting the socio-cultural differences between the parties.

7. The primary sources to which the decisions refer are the reports of: the EASO (Country of Origin Information Report), EASO (European Asylum Support Office), the United Kingdom Border Agency, the UK Home Office, the Central Intelligence Service (The World Factbook), the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation, the US Department of State and Human Rights Watch (World Report).

8. In many European countries, the equivalent to the Home Office is a specific government service that is responsible for immigration, security and order. The authorities in charge of decision-making are called upon to study the cases on an individual basis. They pose questions to determine the validity of the assertions and whether the claims to threat and danger are well-founded or not. See: Home Office, 2017, Country Policy and Information Note - Pakistan: Land Disputes. London, Version 2.0 <https://www.refworld.org/docid/588a0a134.html>.

9. The book *Η Μικροφυσική της Εξουσίας*, is a collection of interviews, discussions and essays by Michel Foucault in which the public house Ypsilon gave the title "The Microphysics of Power".



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https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/european_migration_network/reports/docs/migration-statistics/asylum-migration/2009/gr_20120229_statistics2009_gr_version_final_el.pdf

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https://greece.iom.int/sites/default/files/AVRR%20Annual%20Report%20YEAR%201%20-%20RT.1243%20%28GR%29_0.pdf

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/#>

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Traces and Residues of Migrant Boat Journeys: Reading the 'MV Sun Sea' and 'Komagata Maru'

Jonathan Nash

Jonathan Nash is a PhD candidate of English at the University of Victoria, whose research investigates how refugee spaces like refugee camps, detention centres, and migrant boats are represented and contested in refugee literature and comics. He is humbled and grateful to teach, learn, and research in the place of the Ləkʷəŋən and WS'ANEC' peoples.

Abstract:

Between 2009 and 2010, two Thai ships, the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady, brought 568 Tamil asylum seekers to Canada's West Coast. Border authorities seized the ships and detained their passengers as security threats. For many criticizing this anti-migrant response, the arrivals of these ships echoed that of the Komagata Maru in 1914. This steamship entered the West Coast's Vancouver harbour, but its 376 predominantly Sikh-Punjabi passengers were denied from disembarking as British subjects entering Canada. Scholarship on these incidents often use either the Komagata Maru as a lens for attending to the MV Sun Sea or vice versa. Part of the reason is that shortly after the government had apologized for its response to the Komagata Maru, it was detaining Tamil asylum seekers and arguing for their deportation. In suggesting their link far exceeds a temporal coincidence, this paper explores what makes it possible to think of the MV Sun Sea and Komagata Maru together. It argues that they are interlinked by an economy of affirmation and forgetting in Canadian public and political discourse. Furthermore, this economy frames how these boats are remembered unequally in service of the Canadian nation-state.

Introduction:

Between late 2009 and early 2010, two Thai cargo ships called the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady brought 568 Tamil asylum seekers across the Pacific to the West Coast of Canada. Despite the government's knowledge that the ships were on their way, the passengers on board were not met with a welcoming reception upon entering Canadian waters. Border authorities seized the ships and detained their passengers on the basis that they posed a national security threat. For many scholars and activists criticizing this anti-migrant response, the arrivals of the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady echoed that of the Japanese steamship, the Komagata Maru. In 1914, the steamship entered the West Coast's Vancouver harbour, but its 376 predominantly Sikh-Punjabi passengers

were denied from disembarking as British subjects immigrating to Canada. Both events ended with the federal government of Canada implementing new controls to further restrict immigrants from landing in Canada.

Even with a separation by nearly a century, the arrivals of the Thai cargo ships and the Komagata Maru have become intimately interlinked in migration discourses in Canada. A quick Google search of either or both together will yield dozens of opinion pieces, stories, and articles about their impacts on what belonging means in the Canadian national imaginary and history. Their link presents a unique case in the study of migrant boat histories in the Canadian context because, as Ashley Bradimore and Harald Bauder suggest, “the arrival of ‘boat people’ [to Canada] happens so rarely that by the time a new boat arrives, memories of the previous boat have all but faded from societal memory” (2011, 639). Part of this link emerges from the coincidental arrival of the Tamil asylum seekers during Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s offering of apologies on behalf of the federal government for Canada’s anti-migrant response toward the Komagata Maru. At the same time the federal government was asserting that Canada is a welcoming place for the diversity and strength of future newcomers, it was detaining the asylum seekers and arguing for their deportation. As such, scholarship on these two migrant boat journeys often use either the Komagata Maru as a lens for attending to the MV Sun Sea or vice versa (Hasan et al 2020, Bhandar 2018, & Molnar 2016). In suggesting that their link far exceeds a temporal coincidence, this paper explores what in fact makes it possible to think of these two events together in the first place. How do these two migrant boat journeys from different times cross the trace of each other’s paths? What happens when we bring these migrant boat journeys into the same frame of analysis? It is my argument that not only are they interlinked by an economy of affirmation and forgetting in the public and political discourse about these events, but this economy frames how these boat journeys are remembered unequally in service of the stories the Canadian nation-state tells about itself.

Scholars thinking through particular migrant boat histories, such as that of the Komagata Maru (Dhamoon et al. 2019 & Mawani 2018) or the Vietnamese and Cambodian boat people (Troeng 2015 & Chan 2011), are disentangling these histories from the totalizing perspectives that anchor them. Recent work on the Komagata Maru, for example, is decentering the Canadian centric history of the vessel in order to better understand its links and stories across Pacific trajectories. The landing on Canada’s West Coast is neither the beginning nor the ending of the Komagata Maru’s story. Furthermore, as the editors of *Unmooring The Komagata Maru* write, “the journey of [this Japanese steamship] cannot be contained within a single national perspective, even a pro-Indian perspective” (Dhamoon et al. 2019, 9). The editors rightfully argue that its trajectory is imbricated with not only British imperialism taking place in the South Pacific and the Indian Ocean. It is imbricated with the formation of the Canadian nation-state and its borders and thus most importantly the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous nations from their lands. As they put it, Canada’s “land treaties processes and the persistent forms of regulation of immigration are not isolated decisions but [concomitant] practices of colonial possession” (2020, 9). In the same

edited volume, Nadia Hasan et al. read the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady through the history and reception of the Komagata Maru. They conclude that “colonial networks of power” both “connect” and “wedge” these disparate histories, exceptionalizing those narratives that render the nation-state as tolerant, multicultural, and diverse while marginalizing others (2020, 123). This paper builds on this prior scholarship and theorizing to understand the “unspoken intimacies” (Lowe 2015, 35) and connections between the newcomers represented by the Komagata Maru and the MV Sun Sea. Further, it examines these connections by attending to the migrant boat as cross-textual object that appears across an archive of displacement and holds a multitude of migrant histories and experiences. As such, this paper reads migrant journeys of different times and places alongside the MV Sun Sea and Komagata Maru without imposing a geo-spatial, national, or chronological hierarchy on them.

In both momentous journeys, the Canadian nation-state responded with anti-migrant discourses and enacted radical changes to its immigration policy. While the Komagata Maru has since been commemorated and the subject of two apologies from the Canadian government, Canada’s reception of the MV Sun Sea contradicted its apology and commitment to newcomers. Drawing from Lise Lowe’s theorisation of the liberal nation-state in *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, this paper demonstrates how the Canadian nation-state conceals its anti-migrant responses to affirm its liberal values as a welcoming state for hard-working newcomers and immigrants. Reading the representation of the two migrant boat journeys across Stephen Harper’s apology and later 2011 re-election campaign, this paper also shows how the migrant boat as a cross-textual object reveals the contradictions and incoherencies of the liberal Canadian nation-state. Thus, this paper brings the scholarship of migration to a better understanding of how other economies of representation and discursive productions of migrant objects, other than the migrant body, affect state policy-making and public receptions of precarious migrants.

A Method for Reading Across Canada’s Liberal Economy of Affirmation and Forgetting

I want to think through what Lisa Lowe calls a “liberal economy of affirmation and forgetting” (2015, 3) in relation to the stark distinctions made by the remembrance of the Komagata Maru and the public and governmental reception of the MV Sun Sea in Canada. For Lowe, the modern European and North American nation-state produces a liberal culture, government, and political economy that affirms narratives of freedom and progress from its founding violences of Black slavery, indentured servitude, and the displacement of Indigenous peoples from their lands. Ongoing beneath this progress, however, are new formations of these violences. Put another way, liberal political economies do not so much “contradict colonial rule but rather [accommodate] it” (2015, 15) by forgetting ongoing and historical colonial violences through narratives of progress. This economy advances ideals of universal human rights and individual freedoms while the state exercises its sovereignty through a monopoly on violence (i.e.

the police and the military) that infringe upon these rights and freedoms. Thus, the liberal nation state contains an incoherency that it must conceal to maintain its fictions of progress (Mbembe 2019, Sharpe 2016 & Browne 2015, Agamben 1998). This economy circulates the motifs and language of freedom and equality before the law in liberal narratives, discourses, and images. In doing so, it functions to elide histories and experiences of the founding violence, which is the condition of possibility for these ideals. Moreover, there are a multitude of incoherencies, which manifest differently and unequally, on the one hand, historically through the colonies and the Atlantic Slave Trade and, on the other hand, contemporarily through indefinite migrant detention and a military-carceral industrial complex targeting Black, Brown, and Indigenous bodies globally. These incoherencies are often concealed through appeals to a universal humanism or humanitarian promises of which are rarely fulfilled (Walcott 2018, Puar 2017 & Walia 2013).

Lowe examines this economy within a colonial archive found predominantly in the Euro-American canon of political thought and archives holding government records, correspondences, and documents of colonial empire. She develops a method of “reading across” (2015, 6) to “[unsettle] the discretely bounded objects, methods, and temporal frameworks canonized by a national history invested in isolated origins and independent progressive development” (2015, 6). In reading across, Lowe is able to uncover the shared histories and experiences within the colonial archive that have been forgotten or concealed by the way this archive has been organized. Crucial to Lowe’s method is understanding how the organisation of these colonial archives as well as knowledge production about their objects disconnects and isolates these histories through the very process of archiving and producing knowledge. Put differently, the liberal economy of affirmation and forgetting frames histories in ways that, to borrow the parlance of Judith Butler, construct certain versions of reality and exclude others (2009, xiii), ultimately disavowing the shared histories and experiences of colonialism. By bringing this method to the differently recorded histories of and cultural and public responses toward migrant boat journeys in Canada, we can not only reveal the commons between them but identify how the boat disrupts this economy.

My reading begins, firstly, within Prime Minister Harper’s apology for Canada’s anti-migrant response to the Komagata Maru and the way he framed the MV Sun Sea incident in his re-election campaign as justification for stronger immigration controls. Secondly, this paper explores how Bala’s *The Boat People* surfaces histories and memories of displacement common to Canada to resist what the Canadian nation-state desires to be forgotten. In reading across different cultural and political codifications of boat journeys in Canada, this paper identifies the migrant boat as a cross-textual object that reveals the incoherencies of the narratives affirming Canada as a welcoming place for newcomers while forgetting a long history of anti-migrant policies. In the case of the Komagata Maru and the MV Sun Sea, while they are separated by nearly a century, they arrive at the same place and encounter a nation-state that enacts colonial violence to keep them out. As the anecdote that introduces this paper suggests, the boat brings their histories, discourses, and narratives into proximity. Thus, reading across can engender novel

connections and routes for reading across and recovering a commons shared between different histories of boat journeys.

Furthermore, the migrant boat can be interpreted as a residual artifact in these discourses to better understand not only how liberal economies of affirmation and forgetting function to disconnect these histories but also how these connections across differing times and places endure and resist liberal economies. Indeed, these economies cannot erase or obscure entirely the incoherencies of the liberal nation-state because there always remains a trace or residue of what it desires to forget. And as much as this economy tries to foreclose the unspoken connections between different histories and experiences, their connections nevertheless can remain in the form of residual traces. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the residual as a “a remainder” after something is “subtracted” or taken away (“residual, n.” 2010). If forgetting is a kind of concealment or subtraction, then the residual is the remaining traces of what it tries to forget: the lived histories and experiences of its violences. Here, it is useful to attend to Lowe’s interpretation and modification of literary critic Raymond Williams’s terms “the residual” and “the emergent” (Williams 1977). As Lowe elaborates, while modern liberal nation-states in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made “declarations of independence and emancipation” (Lowe 2015, 19), the paradigms of the Atlantic Slave Trade, Indigenous dispossession, and South Asian indentured servitude persisted in muted or new formations. The residual describes the persistence of these older formations through their “[articulation] by and within” (Lowe 2015, 19) new or emergent formations. Put otherwise, as new formations of colonialism and global capitalism emerge—often under the liberal guise of emancipation and progress—they bear the residual of previous formations. For example, North-American liberal nation-states’ use of police and the industrial carceral complex contain the residual formations of colonial frontiers and slave economies even though they advertise these institutions as protecting and enforcing the law for the benefit of society (Mbembe 2019, Browne 2015, Razack 2002). By reading across with the migrant boat, this paper shows how the experiences and histories of the Komagata Maru are rearticulated through the MV Sun Sea’s and Ocean Lady’s encounters with the border of the Canadian nation-state.

The Landings of the MV Sun Sea and Komagata Maru:

In the summer of 2010, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) seized the MV Sun Sea, a Thai cargo ship bringing 492 Tamil asylum seekers to the West Coast of British Columbia. The previous year, the MV Ocean Lady with 76 Tamil passengers was also seized (Molnar 2016). Like so many other forced migrant boat journeys that trace the history of the Pacific Ocean and Indian Sea, the Tamil migrants had made the impossible decision to leave their homes. They were escaping the catastrophic conclusion of a decades long civil war between the Sri Lanka government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Migrant boat journeys of this kind are not unique to either of Canada’s coasts, but the arrivals of the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady engendered a particularly paranoid response by the Government of Canada as

well as the public. Recognizing these ships as “illegal” and the Tamil migrants as either “queue jumpers” or “terrorists” (Bradimore & Bauder 2011), the Immigration Minister of Canada Jason Kenney mobilised this landing as an opportunity to further securitize Canada’s borders and tighten its immigration policy. He introduced Bill C-4, “The Preventing Human Smugglers from Abusing Canada’s Immigration System Act,” which grossly extended the minister’s power to detain refugees for up to 12 months. This bill was highly criticized, and it contradicted not only Canada’s signed commitments to the UNCHR but its own Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Matas 2011, 52). With these extraordinary legal powers, the government subjected passengers to “prolonged detention, intensive interrogation and energetic efforts to exclude them from the refugee process” (“Sun Sea” 2015, 1). In some instances, the government contested asylum cases outright “if they succeeded in entering the refugee process” (“Sun Sea” 2015, 1). Overall, the arrival of the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady sparked an anti-migrant response from the Government of Canada, which renewed a troubled narrative about Canada as a “nation of immigrants with a proud history and tradition of welcoming refugees” (Kenney qtd in Colin 2011, par. 4) and what it means to possess Canadian citizenship.

Despite the government’s extreme measures toward the Tamil refugees, barely two years prior in 2008 Prime Minister Harper offered a hallow apology to the South Asian and Sikh communities of British Columbia’s lower mainland for Canada’s similar anti-migrant response toward the Komagata Maru in 1914. His apology celebrated the contributions newcomers had and continue to have on the success and diversity of Canada. It also envisioned the nation as a welcoming and tolerant society. In the same place of the West Coast where the Tamil passengers landed, nearly a hundred years before, 364 Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu passengers were seeking immigration to the Dominion of Canada as British subjects. They believed their citizenship of British empire would grant them free passage to Canada. However, branded as criminals and vagrants by politicians and popular media (Roy 2017, 121), upon their arrival in Vancouver the British Columbian government barred the passengers from disembarking the ship. For a month, the passengers under the leadership of Gurdit Singh resisted the governments attempts to have the ship removed and tried to have their claims to rightful entry into Canada heard by the legal system. With no access to resources, the Komagata Maru was eventually forced to leave and was escorted out of the harbour where it would end its journey in Kolkata, India (Johnston 2006). The incident was formative for Canada, expanding its self-governing powers and creating new legal distinctions in British empire “between settler colonies and colonies of exploitation” (Almy 2014, 305). Yet, this is not what the incident is often remembered for. Instead, it is narrated as a testament to South Asian resilience and the progress and multiculturalism of the Canadian nation-state through both commemoration and apology discourses (Kwak 2019 & McElhinny 2016).

The responses by the Government of Canada to the arrival of the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady articulate residual anti-migrant formations within the nation-state, which can be traced back to the Komagata Maru. The government’s response, further to reshaping Canadian immigration law to be even tougher, purposefully did not recognize

the status of the Tamil passengers as refugees. In the making of new laws to protect its sovereign borders and extend its powers against international agreements, it created new legal distinctions between illegal migrants, refugees, and smugglers. This echoes the history of the Komagata Maru in disturbing ways, especially after an apology that celebrated the strength and resilience of newcomers to Canadian society. This conceptualisation of the residual here opens a possible genealogical reading of Canada's liberalism in the context of immigration law. However, it is worth asking how the residual can disrupt, speak back to, or even be reclaimed in order to interrogate both old and contemporary formations of global capitalism and colonialism. The residual is much more than a signifier of a forgotten history or a relic of old liberal formations. It can be a force that ruptures the contradictory logics of modern Euro-American nation-state liberalism. By way of example, we can interrogate the liberal economy animating Harper's 2008 apology towards South Asian communities, coming to a better understanding of how it works to forget the colonial violence in its promotion of Canadian exceptionalism. Moreover, we can think through how "in retrospect" (Lowe 2015, 19) the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady become an unexpected and unintended residual within the discourse of Harper's apology. It is part of my argument that the migrant boat articulates these residues and traces in profound ways.

In his apology, Harper proclaims,

"A lot of [...] promise stems from the confidence, the ideas, and the energies brought here by successive waves of newcomers drawn to our shores by the promise of a new and better life. Canada is renowned the world over for its welcoming embrace of immigrants" (qtd. in Somani 2011, 16).

Harper's contribution to apology discourses in Canada (Gaertner 2020, Coulthard 2014, Somani 2011), an apology which is reiterated by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in Parliament eight years later, circulates the language of Canada as a nation-state that promises freedom to all newcomers. It is important to note how a liberal economy of affirmation and forgetting organizes the logic of Harper's speech. Directed to a small audience of South Asian community members in Surrey, BC, Harper offers a vision for all Canadians going forward:

"I also wish to acknowledge my own colleagues, Nina and Gurmant Grewal, Parliamentary Secretary Jim Abbot, and Minister Jason Kenney for the work they have done to help all Canadians come to terms with this sad chapter in our history. We cannot change the events of the past; we cannot undo the misdeeds committed against those long deceased. But we can bring Canadians together in the present to unite our country, and to set us on a course to accomplish greater things in the future." (qtd in Somani 2011, 16).

In her analysis of Harper's apology, Alia Somani suggests that this speech functions as part of a "state mechanism" to manage "unruly minority subjects" (2011, 2). While I agree, I want to extend this notion to a larger Canadian nation-state mechanism

of managing migrant experiences and histories. With the above excerpt from the transcript of his speech, Harper's words construct Canada as having progressed into a multicultural nation-state. Thus, Harper's speech depends upon a temporal framing that can distinguish between a future-oriented Canada that has progressed from its violent, colonial past while positioning the violence of the Komagata Maru as a distant "historic event." With these "misdeeds" enclosed within a "sad chapter" of Canadian history, Harper's speech engenders an alibi for forgetting the violence of the historic event because there is nothing that can be done 'now.' After closing this chapter, Harper proceeds to emphasise, albeit vaguely, the desire of "unity" and "to build an even stronger Canada." This language of affirmation, then, attempts to persuade its listeners to not focus on injustices—either past or present—and instead focus on a universal project that is Canada. Lastly, the deliberate refusal by Harper to name anything specific about the arrival of the Komagata Maru, such as the people and communities who lived the experience or how it shaped Canadian immigration law, further commits these stories to forgetting.

How does this economy open possibilities for the nation-state to enact policies and laws that, when examined closely, seemingly contradict the values it affirms? Michel Foucault argues in *The Birth of Biopolitics* that freedom is not so much inherent to all persons under the liberal art of governing but rather produced by it. But in producing this freedom, liberal governing must also "arbitrate between the freedom and security of individuals" (2008, 66). Therefore, inasmuch as Harper's apology produces freedom for all newcomers to Canada, this freedom is limited by the necessity to securitize and protect not just the individual within the bounds of the nation-state but the sovereign border itself. This would become apparent when two years after the apology, the Canadian government viewed the passengers of the MV Sun Sea as potential terrorist threats and disavowed the freedom and rights of the passengers to seek a "new life" in Canada. This turn away from promises of freedom and better life, however, relied on the justification that, in the words of Jason Kenney, "We are not going to be a doormat for the dangerous crime of human smuggling" (qtd in Freeze, 2011). An incoherency emerges, then, where the affirmation of freedom, hospitality, and human rights is conjoined with the denial of these very ideals to the Tamil newcomers by declaring the need to safe-guard them from dangerous migrants. The production of Canada as a safe haven for freedom and human rights paradoxically makes way for the capacity to eclipse, erase, or forget these values. Hence, liberalism can always accommodate the colonial legacies from which it claims to emancipate the individual.

The language of Prime Minister Harper's apology would juxtapose images of the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady during his campaign for re-election in 2011. In the same breath that he remarked on the importance of newcomers and immigrants to Canadian identity and society, Harper advanced anti-migrant sentiment in TV ads, party pamphlets, and print media. Harper promised to "welcome new hardworking Canadians" as well as "crackdown" on "crooked" immigration ("Here for Canada" 2011, 34). His immigrant platform was predominantly advertised as securing Canada for law-abiding citizens and immigrants from "human smugglers," evoking those accusations that

labelled the Tamil refugees as “criminals,” “illegals” and “terrorists” (“Here for Canada” 2011, 34). Combating human smuggling became a cornerstone of Harper’s campaign, and after all was said and done, Harper and his Conservative Party of Canada won a majority government. With a newly formed parliament, Harper was able to successfully pass immigration reform through “The Preventing Human Smugglers from Abusing Canada’s Immigration System Act,” and begin to redefine what it meant to arrive in Canada as a precarious migrant or refugee. On the one hand, the success of his platform and its proceeding legislation reinforced the narrative that Canada was a place for “legitimate” or “authenticate” newcomers who had the potential to become “hardworking Canadians” within the gaze of the state. On the other hand, it also entrenched the idea that Canada was no place at all for newcomers who could not prove their authenticity or did not take legitimate means for arriving in Canada.

This either/or dichotomy is produced and maintained by the liberal economy of affirmation and forgetting. In this economy where migrant identities are negotiated through narrative and law, ‘good migrants’ come to represent Canadian values whereas ‘bad migrants’ represent a threat or lack of these values. Take for example a commemoration event for the Komagata Maru that took place after Prime Minister Harper’s apology and campaign. During this event, a participant made a clear and unprompted distinction between the newcomers of the Komagata Maru and the Tamil Asylum seekers of the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady. For the participant, the rejection of the passengers aboard the Komagata Maru by the Canadian Government was a mistake because they represented ‘good migrants’ who would benefit Canada, having served the British empire. The Tamil passengers, on the other hand, represented instead ‘bad migrants’ because they were “terrorists,” and therefore the Government’s response to detain and deport many of the asylum seekers was justified (Hasan et al. 2020). In this dichotomy, not only are the human stories and experiences of the Tamil passengers forgotten by association with ‘bad migrants,’ but the dichotomy conceals the shared histories and experiences of violence when encountering the Canadian nation-state.

Indeed, a century long history of anti-migrant representation and immigration reform that traces back, partially at least, to the Komagata Maru, resonating not only with the fragments of Harper’s apologies but his re-election campaign. Alongside his party’s campaign ads that promised to halt human smuggling, one ad stood out for its use of “an unidentified image of the Komagata Maru” (Hasan et al. 2020, 133). The appearance of the Komagata Maru in the ad demonstrates how the residual reveals the liberal economy of affirmation and forgetting underpinning Harper’s apology and election discourses. They hinged upon a series of unresolvable incoherencies that the migrant boat renders present against a desire to conceal these incoherencies. Even though he apologised for Canada’s response to the Komagata Maru and branded Canada as a pro-migrant and diverse nation, the image of the Komagata Maru returns as an anti-migrant image linked to human smuggling. The takeaway here is that the liberal economy of affirmation and forgetting is not efficient or precise. It is quite the opposite in fact, producing a plethora of ruptures, contradictions, and exceptions between policy, discourse, and history. In this case, it brings together two different encounters through the ongoing

making of the Canadian nation-state, separated by nearly a century. By attending to this discourse and apology, we can see these unspoken connections through the residue of the other and thus their respective narratives are entangled. In this way, the migrant boat surfaces as a transhistorical marker that brings into focus and relation these traces and residues.

“In another time, we were these people”: resisting and refusing national forgetting

Nearly ten years after its landing, the Canadian Border Services Agency contracted the West Coast based company Canadian Maritime Engineering Ltd. to take apart the MV Sun Sea for 4.1 million dollars (Sciarpelletti 2019, par. 3). Learning of its fate, the Canadian Tamil Congress requested from the government a piece of the ship to keep for archival purposes. However, the government refused. With the dismantling of the ship decided, the story of the MV Sun Sea was framed as another sad chapter in history and the “end of an era” (Sciarpelletti 2019, par. 11) in the imaginary of Canadian news media. Both this discourse and the ship’s dismantling continue an overall Canadian prerogative to disappear and forget the voices, experiences, and histories of precarious migrants. Indeed, upon arrival, Canada swiftly hid away from public view via prisons the Tamil asylum seekers. As Carrie Dawson argues, Canada’s prison infrastructure and anti-migrant policy are deliberate in their attempts at making invisible and silent those the Canadian nation-state identifies as illegitimate migrants (Dawson 2016, 128-29). This making silent is further compounded by the difficulties for asylum seekers to speak out about their experiences and stories while simultaneously being tangled up within the legal processes of claiming asylum and lacking access to a platform and receptive audience (Nguyen 2018, 20). In the context of the Tamil asylum seekers in 2010, it has taken upwards of a decade for their asylum claims to be reviewed let alone accepted. These factors point to the ways in which the nation-state actively engineers forgetting through a multitude of strategies, which pose challenges to the documenting, archiving, and memorializing of these stories. What forms can a resistance to or even refusal of forgetting take?

This paper now turns to Sharon Bala’s novel *The Boat People* as both an important and instructive example of what speaking back to Canada’s liberal economy of affirmation and forgetting can look like. Focusing on the story of the MV Sun Sea and *Ocean Lady* from the perspective of its passengers, Bala’s novel is critical within the unfolding discourse about boat journeys to Canada in part because at its time of publication in 2018, the voices and experiences of the Tamil passengers were ignored by most accounts. In writing the novel, Bala sifted through a cultural and media archive to “provide a microphone” (2018, 391) to the Tamil asylum seekers and their stories, identities, and voices. “For all the press coverage and opinion pieces, details about the actual people who made the voyage were scant and the bread crumbs I found,” writes Bala, “were [...] sparring and bland” (2018, 392). While *The Boat People* begins with the story of the Tamil asylum seekers’ arrival to the West Coast of Canada, it links this incident to

a much longer history of migration and displacement within the makings of Canadian national belonging. These histories and their stories, however, are not framed through official documentation or state sanctioned narratives. Instead, they emerge through the family storytelling of its central characters: Mahindan, a Tamil asylum seeker; Priya, a second-generation Tamil Canadian; and Grace, a third-generation Japanese Canadian. These characters are intertwined not only by their encounter with the boat in the novel but their own familial histories and memories of displacement and migration by boat to Canada. By threading together their family stories through the image of the boat, Bala engenders novel connections between different histories of migration in order to make sense and articulate the events of the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady when the voices and testimonies of their passengers have been made silent and invisible.

Across the novel, Priya's and Grace's forgotten family stories and memories surface alongside the boat. As she works on Mahindan's case, for example, Priya begins to reconnect with her Tamil roots. While she knew the stories of how her mother and father came to Canada, "Uncle's history was fuzzier" (2018, 224). Curious one Christmas evening, she asks Uncle, "Do you ever miss Sri Lanka [...] since coming to Canada" (2018, 224)? Uncle begins to tell Priya stories about what it was like growing up as a Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. Much like Mahindan and the other asylum seekers, Uncle's story is one of displacement, as he recounts the transformation of Ceylon into Sri Lanka and the rise of Sinhalese supremacy in 1972. Ostracized, her family was forced to leave their homes behind in Colombo and take a boat to the northernmost city, Jaffna. He tells Priya, "That was their plan, you know [...] They wanted us to leave the capital. They were the ones who arranged for the boat. They wanted all the Tamils in one small corner, trapped like animals" (2018, 230). Much later in the novel, Uncle confesses to Priya that "there was more to the story" (2018, 313). Although her parents chose to emigrate to Canada to avoid the burgeoning conflict between the Sinhalese and the LTTE, Uncle stayed behind to join the resistance. He imagined the possibility of an independent Tamil state, but he was not prepared for the violence that would unfold the years following. These memories remain painful for Uncle to reveal and for Priya to learn. Yet, they necessarily complicate the either/or dichotomy 'bad migrants' and 'good migrants' disseminated by the media and the asylum adjudication process. Before her Uncle's story, Priya had been using this logic to navigate her own diaspora identity as well as her clients' stories of displacement.

Similarly for Grace, her usually silent mother Kumi who suffers from Alzheimer's becomes a storyteller after the arrival of the migrant boat. Unlike Priya, however, Grace resists Kumi and her stories for much of the novel. After hearing about how the Canadian nation-state detained the Tamil asylum seekers, Kumi remembers starkly her experiences of internment as Japanese Canadians during WWII alongside her mother and father. She wants to return to her childhood home that was stolen by the Canadian nation-state, and she tries to find the official deeds in Grace's attic to no avail. Grace tells her mother to stop with this new obsession, but Kumi responds, "They took everything from us. Our homes, our jobs, our dignity [...] Our childhoods" (2018, 52). Grace continues to be dismissive toward Kumi and believes that they should be

grateful for what they have now. Nevertheless, Kumi continues to recount their family's history to Grace and her grandkids because she wants them to keep this memory of the family alive. Toward the end of the novel, Kumi's memory and mind fade even further from Alzheimer's, and she is unable to finish these stories. Although we never see Grace change her disposition, Kumi's stories and voice become a residual formation in Grace's own memories after Kumi is gone. While adjudicating the final Tamil asylum claim in the novel, a memory of Kumi's voice says: "in another time, we were these people" (2018, 375).

Kumi's words along with the title of the novel—the boat people—gesture toward a multitude of histories outside its text and thus demonstrates how the migrant boat becomes a cross-textual object that bears the residues and races of many stories of forced displacement. To be sure, the title evokes the pejorative "boat people," a noun commonly associated with the history of the Vietnamese and Cambodian immigrants to North America. This term was used to categorize and differentiate these people in order for the nation-state to avoid recognizing them as refugees within the cultural imaginary, concealing its own responsibilities and duties—namely contributing to the displacement of millions in the region of the South Pacific (Tsamenyi, 1983). In today's parlance, the term has shifted from connoting the ineligible or inadequate to connoting the illegal. Bala resists this pejorative language by opening the words up to include and make present a multitude of experiences and stories, and as such "the boat people" becomes a cacophonous, multiplicitous, and plural image that creates a commons between differing experiences and histories of Pacific journeys.

On August 13, 2020 in front of the BC Legislature, human rights activist and Liberal MP Gary Anandasangaree held a small commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the *MV Sun Sea's* arrival. A little under a hundred people attended, including representatives of the Liberal and NDP parties of Canada and members of the Tamil community. During the event, Tamil asylum seekers shared their stories and their visions of a more just and welcoming future for refugees in Canada. Alongside these voices, some politicians lamented Canada's discriminatory response to the 492 passengers and reiterated the country's commitment to supporting refugees globally. In one such speech, NDP MP Laurel Collins reflected on what this event meant for Canada:

Anniversaries give us an opportunity to pause, to reflect, and to acknowledge—and this is an important moment for us to learn from the stories that we've heard today—to recognize the hardship that asylum seekers face but also to acknowledge the resilience and the value that asylum seekers embody and bring to Canada. Today's also an important moment to pause and to recommit ourselves to learning from our shared history and also most importantly to ensure that we are on the right side of history moving forward [...] Canada must do better. We must do better. ("MV SUN SEA 10th Anniversary...")

Although her short speech was not prefaced as an apology, it nevertheless rearticulates the language and narrative of Prime Minister Harper's apology for the *Komagata Maru* discussed above. Much like Harper's discourse, Collins evokes a notion of a unified

Canada through the pronouns “we” and “us,” progressing from a “shared history” to “move forward” toward seemingly a better future. As I have argued in this paper, these stories of boat journeys and the nation-state’s responses continue to be framed through a liberal economy of affirmation and forgetting, which often conceal, elide, or evade both historical and ongoing state violence. In the case of Collins’ speech, as well intended as her words might be, they borrow from this economy and thus risk displacing the story of the *MV Sun Sea* and its passengers to a distant past in order to affirm a cohesive and progressive narrative about Canada. In stark contrast, one Tamil refugee who continues to make his way through a slow immigration process, Piranavan Thangavel, remarked during the event: “people are still waiting for their permanent residency [...] I don’t know why it takes so long” (“MV SUN SEA 10th Anniversary...”). In an interview with the news paper the *Tamil Guardian*, Thangavel explained further that “I am happy to be here [...] but I can’t move on until I get my permanent residency” (quoted in “10 years later”). In reiterating this notion of moving forward, the Canadian imaginary downplays the ways in which the nation-state continues to implement or uphold violent policy and bureaucratic structures that inhibit many precarious migrants who now call Canada home from “moving on.”



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Lynn Ng - **Migrant Autonomies in Singapore's Migrant Domestic Worker (MDW) Industry** *Migration, Mobility, & Displacement* 6: 78-101

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Migrant Autonomies in Singapore's Migrant Domestic Worker (MDW) Industry¹

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Abstract

My paper uses the case of Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs) in Singapore to argue for a reconceptualization of the mobile commons in which migrant actors are the protagonists of oppressive labor regimes. Based on a scoping review of scholarly research and popular media sources, I pose two key questions about the mobile commons and acts of resistance by MDWs in Singapore and proceed to answer them with my research findings. I suggest that the personal agency embodied in the acts and strategies of MDWs must be understood within an asymmetrical live-in employment relationship that does not automatically allow for digital participation. I am interested in the question: What does the 'mobile commons' for MDWs in Singapore look like? Importantly, recurrent studies show that MDW acts and strategies to cope with oppressive labor regimes are deeply but not exclusively conditioned by the structural factors determined by governments, recruitment agencies, and individual domestic employers. Hence my follow-up question: How do the actions and strategies of MDWs in Singapore complicate and nuance the mobile commons? The state's live-in requirement is the most significant structural factor conditioning the mobility of MDWs, by implication their forms of political practice.

Introduction

Following the abstract's outline, my paper's main constructs are the Autonomies of Migration (AoM) framework, *mobile commons*, and acts of resistance and strategies as they pertain to the political praxis of Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs) in Singapore. Conceptually, my purpose is to offer an alternative picture of the *mobile commons* that has been less well-studied yet deserves more attention, given that technological revolutions in human communication – namely cellphone ownership – among

¹ I am grateful to CAPI for the opportunity to present my paper at the Creating Commons conference. I owe special thanks to Dr Feng Xu and Dr Leslie Butt for their suggestions during the conference, and to two anonymous reviewers for their constructive and generous feedback on this manuscript.

marginalized migrant populations are a core element of their political assertion. Indeed, to a large degree, the *mobile commons* is a metaphor for the central role of mobile phones in facilitating the real-time updates of information and knowledge resources, including firsthand narratives of the “tricks for survival” for migrants on the move in a digital era (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013, p. 190). The case of MDWs in Singapore shows that in a context of live-in employment, the story of resistance goes beyond “All you need is a mobile phone”, as one interviewee based in Greece said to the researcher (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013, p. 178).

It is a compulsory legal requirement for MDWs to live permanently in their employer's residence which is also their workplace. The Singapore government's official hiring rules state that MDWs “can only work for her employer at the residential address declared”, and can only carry out “domestic chores” (MOM, 2022). This live-in condition is the root cause of an asymmetrical power relationship and the ineffectiveness of labor legislation; the terms and conditions of work are negotiated informally at the discretion of employers, and is excluded from the national Employment Act (Ueno, 2010, p. 83). My intention is not to critique or even make irrelevant the idea of a *mobile commons* as illustrated in a European context (e.g. Trimikliniotis et al., 2015), but rather to offer a different landscape, if you will, of the acts and strategies of resistance when its participants are MDWs in individual circumstances of isolation. My findings point to the possible variations of the *mobile commons* – an expression of political assertion and language of resistance by migrant workers – in the context of live-in employment.

My analysis is based on a scoping review of the relevant secondary literature on the conceptual framework of AoM, the *mobile commons*, and empirical research studies on MDWs in Singapore across both academic and popular news circles. The empirical research done to date is extensive in scope and variety but all underscore the overbearing nature of the live-in regime. A bulk of these studies rely on qualitative methodological approaches like in-depth interviews with MDWs and ethnographic observations of employer-employee interactions in the household. The core topic undergirding all these discussions is the asymmetrical power relationship in the hiring arrangement, where domestic employers are given undue rights to set the working conditions, terms of service, and the extent of miscellaneous allowances like rest days, access to food items, and usage of household space (e.g. Schumann and Paul, 2019). For my purposes, I have analysed a list of works that are most relevant to the theme of migrant acts and strategies and creative political practice as they allow us to visualize a unique format of the *mobile commons*. My following analysis incorporates the key themes that emerge repeatedly throughout the works cited, where MDWs are quoted extensively and where analytical conclusions are informed by ethnographic data.

Due to space constraints, I do not fully elaborate on methodology issues. However, it is worth noting that typically, the more seasoned MDWs dominate the participation in research interviews. MDWs who have been residing in Singapore for at least five years are more likely to have stronger connections with community networks, a more assertive digital presence, and better familiarity with labor rights laws. Researchers agree

that it remains difficult to access the worst cases of abuse and isolation, given that a prerequisite for participating in research is usually an off day outside the household (e.g. Ueno, 2010, p. 85). Where interviews are not conducted outside, a researcher's access to MDWs still depends on an employer's approval and in that regard, may overrepresent those living in relatively better conditions.

My main question is: **What does the *mobile commons* for MDWs in Singapore look like?** Importantly, recurrent studies show that MDW practices are deeply but not exclusively conditioned by the structural features defined by individual employers, recruitment agencies, and the state's live-in regime. Phrased in another manner, MDWs do not have as much autonomy as other migrant populations that is commonly implied in the AoM literature due to overbearing policy constraints, for example the live-in requirement. Hence, I ask a follow-up question: **How do the actions and strategies of MDWs in Singapore complicate and nuance the *mobile commons*?** I find that ultimately, the compulsory live-in condition and its asymmetrical power relationship is the most significant structural barrier to the mobility of MDWs, with huge implications for their acts of resistance, political assertion, and *mobile commons*.

AoM, the *mobile commons*, and acts/strategies of resistance

The AoM approach is interested in how migrant workers formulate everyday acts of resistance that assert an equal ownership over those basic human rights and labor entitlements that the citizens of host societies take for granted. For Engin Isin, "To investigate acts of citizenship is to draw attention to acts that may not be considered as political and demonstrate that their enactment does indeed instantiate constituents (which may mean being part of a whole as well as being a member of a constituency)." (Isin, 2008, p. 18). In maintaining an ontological separation between *acts* and *actions*, he further elaborates that while the latter can be conceptualized as observable behavior, acts embody the intentions of the actor in creating "a rupture in the given" (Isin, 2008, p. 25). While the strategies of MDWs likewise aims to assert themselves as rightful political stakeholders, the AoM approach prefers to downplay the regime of citizenship as a point of reference in favour of accounting for the complexities of migrant subjectivity – its own battlefield – that both cooperate and conflict with one another (Mezzadra, 2011, p. 137). This latter approach, a protagonist view of the migrant actor, is more apt for MDWs in Singapore who not only resist the host society's discrimination, but also experience their own relational splits across gender, race, and class with other migrant workers and with fellow MDWs.

The mobile commons is neither private nor public, neither state owned nor part of civil society; rather it exists to the extent that people share it and generate it as they are mobile and when they arrive somewhere.

Papadopoulous & Tsianos (2013, p. 190)

The AoM approach views migration as shaping labor regimes, hence mobility is a creative force that coexists alongside the social, cultural and economic dislocations that 'push' migrants (Papadopoulos et al., 2008, p. 203). Historically, free and uncharted mobility was a livelihood strategy that preceded the instruments of border making and sovereign state formation. The autonomist connotation of AoM does not imply that oppressive state regimes are irrelevant, but rather that migrant acts of resistance aim to assert claims to freedom and unshackled movement. The histories of slave labor and indentured work remind us that the contract system was a capitalist disguise of labor exploitation; the notion of free consent was manipulated to extract maximum productivity from overworked laborers. For time immemorial, the indigenous communities of Asia had been sojourners who practiced circular migration and did not see the issue of settlement as one to be resolved until the cultural racism of European administrators surfaced in border-consolidating policies that governed pan-Asian indentured labor migration (Amrith, 2011).

From an AoM perspective, there are little grounds for assuming that migrants desire and strive towards "political participation in our institutions", or that the state's regulations occupy a significant place in the consciousness of migrant workers (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013, p. 187). Often, migration has more to do with everyday livelihood concerns and coping with family care crises at home or sometimes, escaping abusive marriages and 'problematic' family members (Ueno, 2009, p. 511). Such stresses fueled by contextual circumstances have substantial roles in migrants' lives, and the struggles to sustain household living are at least of equal significance as the structural injustices of oppressive labor regimes. The AoM approach would not advocate assuming that state apparatuses, as regimes of control, occupy a primary or even notable presence in migrant acts of resistance. The starting point of migrant protagonists may be more about aspirations of free movement, and in that regard go beyond the system and its rules of political participation and formal acknowledgement.

AoM is also notable for its attention to those "clandestine aspects of migration", that is the unseen tactics or hidden acts of resistance that chart a world of their own (Nyers, 2015, p. 29). Theorising migration as a perennial custom of human civilization instead of a novel element to the capitalist mode of production, much less an invention of the free market, also means recognising that the constant movement and mobility patterns (across borders) are longstanding traditions ingrained in the natural social order of sustaining communal life. Migrant acts formulate "their own codes, their own practices, their own logics which are almost imperceptible from the perspective of existing political action" which includes strategies that are not primarily directed at the formally established rules of political order (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013, p. 188). Embedded in AoM is an ontology of the *mobile commons*: "the sharing of knowledge and infrastructures of connectivity, affective cooperation, mutual support and care among people on the move" (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013, p. 178).

MDWs in Singapore and the *mobile commons*

Migrant or Foreign Domestic Workers (M/FDWs²) are a significant population in the international labor migration industry, and refer to a female non-citizen holding a work permit solely for domestic work. As of 2020, there are just below 247 500 MDWs residing in Singapore, the bulk of whom hail from Indonesia and the Philippines, with smaller numbers from neighbouring Asian countries like Myanmar, Vietnam, Thailand, and India (Wee et al., 2018, p. 2677). Most research on MDWs in Singapore focus on the styles of ‘deviant’ behavior they display to contest an asymmetrical power relationship and the meanings they assign to these actions. Among the most prominent works are Yeoh and Huang (1998, 1999, 2010), Amrith (2010, 2018), Ueno (2009), Schumann and Paul (2019) and Wee et al (2018) who emphasise the importance of new institutionalist perspectives in understanding the behavior of key stakeholders – the ruling party-state and the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), recruitment agencies, individual domestic employers and MDWs themselves – in the domestic sector.

The Singapore state maintains a highly disciplinary and restrictive regime for MDWs that prohibit them from establishing any form of long-term attachment to the host society. The ruling party-state in office, the People’s Action Party (PAP), maintains a hands-off approach to the domestic sphere which I discuss below as a process of ‘creating differences’ through the mobilization of national identity. The state effectively decentralizes the responsibility of governing MDWs down to individual employers, many of whom have internalized discriminatory discourses of migrant workers and xenophobic attitudes that justify the exclusionary regimes of discipline and regulation. My answers to the two main questions show that MDWs devise their coping strategies based on their knowledge of employers’ prejudices like nationality-based stereotypes and ethnic or racial essentializations. In addition, the acts of resistance that MDWs deploy differs according to public and private settings, attesting to the overbearing nature of the live-in regime that is officially sanctioned by the state’s public/private divide in labor legislation. Their actions complicate our understanding of the mobile commons and point to the limitations on migrant acts of resistance when power asymmetry exists.

After the above introduction of AoM, the mobile commons, and MDWs in Singapore, I proceed in the following sequence. First is an overview of the state’s live-in law that establishes a basic degree of confinement for all MDWs such that it is a primary barrier to their mobility. I also explain other policies that establish an asymmetrical power relationship, like sizable financial obligations for domestic employers who are then responsible for monitoring MDWs like propertied chattels. Thereafter, I discuss the variety of MDWs’ acts of resistance in both public and private settings to show that their mobile commons do not materialize in a coherently identifiable format. My answers to the two main questions are also a contemplation of how this small but significant case of MDWs in Singapore complicate and nuance the mobile commons; I find that

² MDWs and FDWs are used interchangeably in the migration scholarship and labor policy documents. I use the former throughout this paper because the term ‘migrant’ is more appropriate for the AoM framework and the mobile commons, while ‘foreign’ is more commonly used in citizenship studies.

important revisions to the concept are needed in this context. Firstly, for migrant workers in the domestic sector, cellphone ownership is not automatically empowering or emancipatory. Secondly, MDWs themselves contribute to a re-racialization of their non-national counterparts that sometimes hijack the potential for solidarity networks. The central message of AoM remains: using alternative definitions of political protest – including covert, defensive, and non-confrontational strategies – to see anew those apparently insignificant acts of resistance as a unique form of political assertion.

Race histories in Singapore, migrant workers, and the creation of differences

Most of the existing studies show that the state's live-in regime for MDWs and its restrictive regulations on their movement are a primary barrier to their socioeconomic mobility, by implication their access to the means of political assertion and participation. While a full elaboration of the Singapore state's foreign labor policy is beyond my scope, a brief outline of its economic development history and immigration policies for industrialization is needed. Singaporean sociologists note that the government's task of managing an independent and sovereign nation-state was not a voluntary choice but a forced colonial imposition, hence a "fait accompli" that produced the "political category" of "Singaporean" (Chua, 1995, p. 102). British administrators had granted a degree of autonomy to the local leaders in 1959 which proved foundational for the consolidation of the current ruling People's Action Party (PAP). However, the abrupt withdrawal of British troops soon after created huge anxieties over the maintenance of peace and order for a precarious island-state with zero natural resources. Following a short-lived merger with Malaysia, in 1965, Singapore became an unlikely nation left to its own devices in a competitive and realist world order; the need for national identity and patriotic consciousness emerged abruptly (Kong & Yeoh, 2003). Singapore's population was majority Chinese ethnic with a significant minority of Indians, both of which are historical legacies of indentured labor who intermixed with the native Malay inhabitants. The presence of these various ethnic groups was concerning for the government because it complicated the issue of loyalty to the nation; there was no "myth of ancestral heritage" for Singaporean nationalism (Hill & Lian, 1995, p. 31; Teo, 2019).

Eventually, Singaporean nationalism and citizen identity would hinge primarily on a unique sense of economic pride premised on its industrial miracle and international reputation as an Asian superpower. Known as a "typical developmental state", the incumbent PAP took a pragmatic approach to economic growth with industrial blueprints that reoriented its key sectors towards "capital-intensive" (Oishi, 2005, p. 27-28). The government also aggressively promoted the concept of meritocracy in education and career opportunities, which led to exponential increases of female participation in the paid workforce (Yeoh & Huang, 1999). By and large, signs of advanced consumerism and material culture – commonly referred to as standards of living – are regarded as evidence of the government's capability of providing for its people. Part of this lifestyle upgrade was foreign labor policy that allowed the government to utilize cheap labor from

neighbouring source countries for the lower-value primary sectors. The Singaporean workforce dominates in higher-value tertiary industries compared to immigrant-heavy sectors³ which are known as 3Ds: dirty, dangerous, and difficult/demeaning (Musa, 2021). These occupations are shunned by citizens of developed countries and heavily outsourced wherever possible.

“When we look at the migrant workers’ issue, we are not looking at it from the perspective of human rights. We are looking at it on a need basis... Like it or not, we need to sustain and grow an economy that is able to generate an annual per capita [GDP] of US\$35,000. At the end of the day, whatever factors would be able to help us to sustain the growth of the economy for the benefit of our countrymen, for the benefit of our country; we will definitely go for it.”

Yeo Guat Kwang, former Singapore politician (in Han, 2020)

Domestic work fits squarely into the 3D category because cooking, cleaning, washing, and servicing the needs of dependent people at home are activities that are looked down upon; most people would want to outsource these if they have the means to. The rapid influx of MDWs to replace the traditional homemaker roles of Singaporean women is not a sign of genuine gender equality or shifts in social attitudes about the sexual division of labour, but an economic compromise for the domestic economy. The ‘maid’ regime is the capitalist patriarchal state’s way of maximizing the labour productivity of a small population while keeping gender ideologies intact⁴. Singaporean women have the privilege of being part of the professional workforce but ultimately, homemaking is still a woman’s job. The shortage of domestic labor was resolved by MDWs who were supposed to be a temporary solution, but became an irreversible structural feature.

An asymmetrical power relationship in the domestic sector

As the tertiary professionalization of the domestic workforce continues, skills categories are used to construct different visa types in foreign labor policy that symbolise not just a migrant’s economic utility, but also their degree of precarity (Teo, 2019, p. 174). MDWs enter Singapore as unskilled low-wage migrants under the conditions of employment sponsorship, which means their work and residence rights is tied to an employer’s discretion. Employers can terminate their contracts and repatriate them without valid reason, which places MDWs in a lower bargaining position. The government’s hands-off approach to labor politics and human rights violations in the domestic sector is justified with ideologies of the public/private divide; the division of formal and informal

³ Singapore’s foreign labor policy has explicit criteria for the source countries and sex of work permit holders. The construction sector is exclusively male while domestic work is exclusively female. Other sectors like marine shipyard and food processing are unisex but dominated by males.

⁴ The Equal Education Policy, while exceptional for its gender blindness on paper, was not driven by a genuine concern for the status of women as human beings with developmental capacities. Ingrained gender ideologies that attached homemaking responsibilities to females continued to proliferate in public debates, which reinforced false assumptions that any inequalities between the sexes would disappear when women could access the same educational opportunities as men.

spheres of work. As this logic goes, the domestic arena is not amenable to rules and regulations since it is a privatized space and not part of the market. Also, the needs of individual households differ, which means that the work and welfare of MDWs is always an informal affair that is decided on a case by case basis. MDWs are excluded from the Employment Act due to this particular nature of domestic duties, which is between employer and employee (Yeoh & Huang, 1999, p. 1156). By transferring the responsibility for MDWs downwards, the state delegates individual employers as their custodians.

An asymmetrical power relationship is institutionalized in the form of financial obligations for employers at the start of the hiring process. These include a \$5000 security bond, a monthly 'maid levy' (\$200-\$295), and compulsory biannual medical examinations – pregnancy checks and tests for sexually transmissible diseases – that certify physical fitness (Yeoh & Huang, 2010, p. 223). Also, all work permit holders are banned from applying for permanent residency (PR) and citizenship status. MDWs are not allowed to marry citizens and PRs without special permission from the Ministry of Manpower (Yeoh & Chee, 2015). The security bond is forfeited if MDWs contravene any of the stipulated boundaries, such as getting pregnant during their contract term or working in non-domestic settings. These “material disincentives” create relationships of dependence that cause many employers to feel the need for constant surveillance and incessant monitoring of MDWs (Teo & Piper, 2009, p. 152). The state's logic of non-interference in the private sphere gives employers a disproportionate leeway to set the terms of employment; many MDWs endure abusive conditions of “social quarantine” (Teo & Piper, 2009, p. 156). In this context, the strategies that MDWs can access for their acts of resistance and the mobile commons is highly dependent on employers.

Structural features of an asymmetrical power relationship

For MDWs, there is no separation between personal life and work because their workplace and living quarters are infused into one; both can be sites of oppression (Ueno, 2009; Yeoh & Huang, 2010). Civil society organizations have campaigned for stronger enforcements of a weekly rest day, but to date the improvements have been negligible because employer discretion rules (Schumann & Paul, 2019, p. 11). Furthermore, there are still many employers who prefer MDWs who are willing to go without rest days, which is a demand that some recruitment agencies adhere to. These 'maid' agencies are informal institutions that are in charge of the matchmaking process and hence are crucial intermediaries between the state, employers, and MDWs (Wee et al., 2018). Often, they are the first point of contact for prospective employers given that their marketing materials shape peoples' expectations and perceptions of MDWs. The Singapore government still does not classify 'maid' recruitment agencies as a public sector, instead leaving it up to private operators to compete against one another at the expense of MDWs' wellbeing. Recruitment agencies are the dominant migration brokers which disseminate sexist and racist ideas of MDWs by actively participating in the structural oppression of their labor rights and human welfare. The nationalities of workers are

presented as essentialist characteristics to prospective employers; for example, Filipinos are better at English but tend to be ‘too smart, while Indonesians are ‘duller’ but more docile and obedient (Wee et al., 2018, p. 2673). Choosing to hide information about labor rights, like the right to cell phones and rest days, are some ways that recruitment agencies endorse unethical practices.

Some employers forbid off-days due to the perceived risks of ‘bad influence’ and ‘social contamination’, and even worries that external stimulation will trigger “mood swings” (Ueno, 2009, p. 507). Especially during the first two years of employment, recruitment agencies and employers often expunge the idea of giving rest days and justify this as ‘for their own good’ in terms of protecting the “safety” and “security” of otherwise insensible MDWs (Yeoh & Huang, 1998, p. 590). Although the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) has since made some modifications to the contract clauses for MDWs by adding some additional rules for employers to adhere to a reasonable job scope, employers can still get away without recourse because no formal checks are in place (Ueno, 2009, p. 52). As of 2022, employers are supposed to declare to MOM if they require additional services beyond housekeeping – the most common is caregiving for children and the elderly – so that the authorities can make recommendations to better support MDWs by increasing salaries, managing the risks of overwork, and likewise (MOM, 2022). However, because of the privatized nature of domestic work and its apparently un-governable substance, the government is reluctant to turn these recommendations into enforceable rules.

The most updated version of the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (EFMA), which outlines basic employer responsibilities like giving a weekly rest day, has been critiqued for its vague language and lack of effectiveness. After all, recruitment agencies are in charge of drawing up contracts for MDWs; the whole affair goes unregulated under the state’s hands-off approach to the private sphere that sees the home as unsuitable for the implementation of standardized employment practices (Yeoh et al., 2020, p. 848). The negotiation of employment conditions is then a wholly marketized process that is left to recruitment agencies⁵ that work in favor of employers, sometimes even allowing an employment arrangement to start without having both parties sign an agreement of mutual consent (Devasahayam, 2010, p. 54).

For many MDWs, the first arena of political assertion is their employer’s home where they start negotiating for a rest day. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that

5 Since 2004, as part of the new licensing requirements, labor officials must visit recruitment agencies to observe their orientation/training programs for MDWs and labor rights induction for employers before they are given the approval to draft contracts. A demerit point system was introduced in 2006 for unethical agencies which were threatened with the loss of their operating rights. However, it is extremely difficult for MDWs to benefit from these clauses because they are only activated when a formal complaint is lodged; many MDWs do not have the time, energy, and resources to kickstart the process.

Singapore society continues to devalue and marginalize MDWs⁶ despite their real contributions to sustaining a society. Sexist attitudes and gender discrimination affects MDWs most adversely but also constrains many middle-class female professionals who despite their higher socioeconomic privilege, are not exempt from the obligations of domestic servitude. Indeed, the ongoing pandemic regulations for MDWs are worsening an already asymmetrical employment relationship. The recent MOM advisories were aimed at rebounding Singapore's economy to pre-pandemic production capacities, and showed little regard for MDWs as human beings with a range of emotional and social needs. On top of the existing financial costs for hiring MDWs, the additional expenses that employers must provide during COVID-19 will increase the likelihood of abuse and exploitation in private. As MOM's website indicates, all incoming MDWs are subject to the same travel and quarantine restrictions as other travellers. Employers are responsible for making these arrangements and must do so after their application to hire is approved by MOM, a process that is now more costly.

As of the time of writing, all MDWs must take their first COVID-19 test upon arrival and the second test towards the end of their Stay-Home Notice (SHN) – at an approved state facility (hotels and motels) or their employer's residence depending on the port of departure – which lasts up to 14 days (MOM, 2021a). The COVID-19 tests costs \$320 while a two-week SHN comes to around \$2000, which must be paid upfront by the employer even if the MDW does not enter Singapore as planned. MDWs must also have a cell phone registered with a local phone number, internet connection, and WhatsApp for communication purposes. Employers must also purchase medical insurance with a minimum of \$10 000 coverage in case the worker contracts COVID-19 or shows symptoms. MOM only issues the work permits for MDWs after the quarantine is completed safely. Government officials from the health and labour ministries contact MDWs at regular intervals to ensure they follow quarantine rules. Ironically, due to COVID-19, it is now compulsory for all MDWs to own cell phones. However, as explained in the sections below, MDWs are situated in a live-in regime that is ripe with the potential for power abuses. There is no way of knowing whether cell phone usage is empowering or even enjoyable for MDWs when they move in with their employer.

What does the mobile commons for MDWs in Singapore look like?

It is important to reiterate that MDWs do not enjoy a clear separation of personal and professional life; the separation of home and work has little meaning when the domestic sphere is the site of employment. The political arenas that MDWs chart to assert their acts of resistance stem from their collective efforts to navigate away from unethical recruitment agencies, exploitative employers, and the regimes of overwork.

⁶ During March to April 2020, COVID-19 infection rates in Singapore's industrial dormitories – where predominantly male construction workers reside – were at their peak. Public outrage over the deplorable living conditions was palpable and intense. In contrast, the lack of attention on MDWs shows that the home is still not thought of as workplace. The hygiene of domestic employers no doubt benefits the health of MDWs, but the ongoing regulations – for example, easier termination and transfers between households – only worsen their existing vulnerability in an asymmetrical power relationship.

They organize information into common resource pools and shared databases that allow MDWs to partake in informal gatherings at the park, e.g. Sunday picnics in the middle of Lucky Plaza or along the riverfront are one of the most commonly sighted (Ueno, 2009). These social circles allow MDWs to maintain communications with existing networks and create new relations with other migrant workers, and most importantly get a much-needed reprieve. Where MDWs have regular access to rest days, their presence is notable in the city centre where many mom-and-pop shops catering to Filipinos in particular have sprung up. However, if MDWs do not get days off, the only way to understand their acts of resistance is from clandestine tactics at home, like how and when they approach their employers for difficult conversations and their bargaining strategies when negotiating for better conditions. Overall, the structural features of the live-in regime establish an institutional disadvantage for MDWs, so their acts of resistance are directed at coping with its negative implications; the lack of labor policy changes should not stop us from appreciating migrant autonomies and the mobile commons in whichever manner it arises (Lindquist et al., 2012, p. 9).

The state is an important orchestrator of the asymmetrical power relationship in the domestic arena, but the migrant acts of resistance in this setting does not directly engage with oppressive labor regimes (Lindquist et al., 2012, p. 13). In a context of live-in employment, the acts of resistance that MDWs deploy are very often directed primarily at the household's dynamics and alleviating the negative repercussions of unreasonable employers' demands; coping with the adverse secondary offshoots of an institutionalized domestic confinement rather than with state authorities and government officials themselves (e.g. Ueno, 2009, 2010). The fact is that domestic employers wield such power over MDWs that their entitlement to rest days – typically once a week on Sundays – is not a given although most recruitment agencies nowadays must include this clause in their contracts (MOM, 2012). Numerous studies find that it is indeed a normative and widely accepted practice among employers to confiscate the passports of MDWs together with their work permit cards to prevent them from “running away” (Devasahayam, 2010, p. 51). Overall, researchers' observations of the hiring process show that both recruitment agencies and employers do not have a robust concept of workers' rights that must include healthcare benefits, limits on maximum working hours, and adequate rest time (Yeoh et al., 2020). Society's unconscious bias of MDWs, as seen in both economic and labor policy, is that they are purely a class of disposable laborers with unlimited working capacities to be exploited, while their emotional and social needs as human beings do not enter the picture.

It is important to acknowledge that digital connectivity aside, MDWs have had remarkable success establishing a public physical presence in enclaves within the central business district. They contest dominant notions of their outsider status in public spaces by travelling around in friendship circles and behaving somewhat ‘boisterously’, which “reflect a style of resistance” that contradicts the host society's expectations of MDWs as seeking “compliance and subservience” (Yeoh & Huang, 1998, p. 598). Some MDWs also choose their off days to dress in distinctively fashionable and flamboyant attires that contrast starkly with the standard ‘maid attire’ of plain shorts and conservative Bermuda

pants; this act is a way of showing “self-respect” and reminding oneself that employers do not have total control over their everyday decisions (Yeoh & Huang, 1998, p. 597). Such readily observable acts of resistance – displays of friendship solidarity and migrant communities – in public are not a new affair, and have existed since over two decades ago (Yeoh & Huang, 1998, 2010). Many MDWs especially Filipinos are proud of ‘migrant enclaves’ like Lucky Plaza and Far East Plaza in Orchard Central which are known as ‘Little Manila’ in the local parlance; the collective presence of racialized migrant groups temporarily disrupts the social order because MDWs become the dominant group in that space. Singaporeans living in the central business region have complained about overcrowding by migrant workers and have requested that security personnel direct them elsewhere, but MDWs “persist in habitual acts of re-colonizing space” (Yeoh & Huang, 1998, p. 598). Based on research interviews, MDWs justify these acts as a rejection of the host society’s representation of migrants as an external contagion, and instead assert their right to the city and belonging in public space through “little tactics of the habitant” (Yeoh & Huang, 1998, p. 599). When MDWs get together outside the domestic arena, wherever they meet also becomes a zone of migrant socialization and bonding; they gossip, mock, and ridicule employers to vent off steam in a therapeutic unleashing of pent-up negativity.

In terms of the *mobile commons* framework, the affordability of and accessibility to cell phones still has a significant role in improving MDWs access to the knowledge databases which are updated in real-time by their counterparts, such as Facebook groups for MDWs (Platt et al., 2014). However, the asymmetrical power relationship continues to put MDWs in a lower bargaining position and gives them multiple hurdles – access to rest days being a primary one – to overcome before digital participation has benefits. In that regard, an analogy of public (visible) and private (hidden) transcripts for MDWs’ acts of resistance and political assertion is relevant because they “perform the public transcript of deference” while asserting a “hidden transcript of deference” when outside the earshot of employers (Schumann & Paul, 2019, p. 5). In a live-in situation where prolonged confinement is the norm, mobile connections made possible through cellphone usage are used to organize small-scale and informal gatherings – not confrontational events like street protests – that mean a lot to their emotional and social health. Ultimately, however, the issue of whether an off day is granted must first be resolved and hence, research studies typically cannot include the worst cases of isolation. Some projects that use ethnographic methods explore the acts of resistance at home in cases where MDWs do not get rest days.

Many MDWs who are unable to travel outside the domestic confine resort to covert and informal tactics to kickstart the negotiation process for an off day. In the home, scholars observe that MDWs use whatever organizational resources at their disposal to contest their structural vulnerability (Ueno, 2009). Their acts of resistance in this live-in context require an intimate knowledge of their employer’s household dynamics, daily routines, family relationships, lifestyle habits, and social preferences. Interactions between employers and employees in the house are important opportunities for mentioning the rest day, and MDWs capitalize on their employer’s soft spot by crying

while talking about how much they miss their children, or fabricating stories of family emergencies to elicit sympathy (Ueno, 2009, p. 514). These forms and outcomes of bargaining are contingent on the charitable goodwill and whim of employers rather than formal guarantees, although a weekly rest day is supposed to be a default practice. Other issues that MDWs act against are related to unequal and unfair treatment inside the house that creates a loss of personal dignity, such as excessive monitoring, restricted access to food items and being given leftovers. MDWs choose to counteract by making a show of doing chores when employers are present, consuming pricier ingredients in secret, and sometimes pretending to be ignorant of CCTVs installed by employers. These acts may or may not lead to confrontations with employers but are about self-defense and protecting individual dignity (Schumann & Paul, 2019). As a last resort, MDWs may choose to blatantly violate the household's rules to upset their employers so that they would be sent back to recruitment agencies.

These acts of resistance are performed sporadically and unpredictably, and do not have an organized basis, but is still common knowledge – a haphazard *mobile commons* – to many MDWs struggling with oppressive household dynamics. In the home, the concept of “spatial deference” is a useful illustration of the unbalanced power relationship that MDWs learn to operate with (Yeoh & Huang, 2010, p. 222). Because employers wield disproportionate autonomy to spaces around the migrant's body and the allocation of their usage of domestic spaces, for MDWs, the home is more appropriately conceived as a site where (im)mobilities are produced. Employers' statements show that many prefer MDWs with a keen awareness of this “spatial deference”, that is one who “knows her place”, “when and where she is needed”, and most importantly getting that perfect balance between “being present and ready for service” and “making herself scarce” (Yeoh & Huang, 2010, p. 229).

When MDWs are incessantly monitored inside the house, they do not even enjoy an insulated backstage and zone of privacy to recharge and rejuvenate; there is no real opportunity to be by themselves because employers have set up such pervasive systems of intrusive surveillance. In this context, a migrant's personal agency is not about creating policy changes but rather coping with institutional regimes of labor that legalise a “use and discard” philosophy (Schumann & Paul, 2019, p. 515). The rest day is still one of the most crucial barriers to MDWs' rights to public space. A presence in these spaces also serves as an entry point for MDWs to access those *mobile commons* like migrant enclaves and circles of solidarity established by their counterparts (Yeoh & Huang, 1998, p. 595; Yeoh et al., 2020, p. 853).

How do the actions and strategies of MDWs in Singapore complicate and nuance the *mobile commons*?

Numerous research studies attest to the overpowering nature of the live-in condition where domestic employers negate the autonomy of MDWs to the extent that techno-communications are a site of struggle instead of an entitlement, much like the rest

day⁷ (Platt et al., 2016, p. 2211; Wee et al., 2018, p. 2679). The 2008 'Day off Campaign' was a grassroots initiative by civil society organizations to encourage domestic employers to extend at least one weekly rest day (Amrith, 2018, p. 68-69). Effective since 2013, the enforcement of this new legislation remains contingent on employer discretion, plus employers have the option of meting out an extra day's wages in exchange for no rest days; a gaping loophole that worsens an already unequal bargaining power. A 2015 survey of MDWs found that less than 60% were given rest day compensation, while a 2017 study found that some recruitment agencies stated "no rest day contracts" as an employment prerequisite (Schumann & Paul, 2019, p. 1697, 1705). The mobile commons concept rightfully emphasises the exponential growth of communications technologies that have made transnational contact that much more affordable and accessible for marginalized populations. As the authors note, migrant workers transit through internet cafes and use social media platforms to 'make connections' and plan 'routes' (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013, p. 190). These observations likewise ring true for MDWs in Singapore but the emancipatory function of cell phones cannot be assumed in an asymmetrical power relationship.

Cell phones are especially important to MDWs because digital communication allows them to maintain familial and kinship relations, and also receive information about current affairs (Platt et al., 2014, p. 14). Facebook groups like "FDW in Singapore (working conditions forum)" (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1914915078526399>) provide real-time updates about changes in labor regulations, social distancing rules, and Q&A forums with resources about what to do in abusive employment circumstances and the available channels for assistance. NGOs like the Centre for Domestic Employees (CDE) (<https://www.facebook.com/cde.singapore/>) also act as common resource hubs for MDWs to maintain regular connections with one another through virtual music live shows and photo collage challenges. MDWs are also advised to access websites with real-time updates of crowd levels at popular hangouts like Lucky Plaza, and are invited to use free advisory clinics (e.g. banking and money remittance services), skills training, and crafts workshops like cooking and knitting. These common resources are expressions of collective solidarity to the extent that they involve all MDWs in exchanging useful information, sharing hotlines, informal peer counselling, and the creation of safe spaces to vent about unreasonable employers. While many employers nowadays acknowledge that cellphone ownership is a basic human right and necessity for MDWs, the root problem of the domestic's lower bargaining power in the household remains unresolved (Lin & Sun, 2010). In one study of Indonesian MDWs in Singapore, the authors found that maximizing the positive outcomes of mobile phone usage is an 'always ongoing' affair in an unbalanced power geometry tilted in favour of employers; control (by employers) and connection (with loved ones) are two sides of the same coin that are daily negotiated (Platt et al., 2016, p. 2210). Large power differentials sanctioned by the state's live-in regime give employers a clear

⁷ Thanks to the tremendous campaign efforts of migrant worker NGOs, the issue of MDWs' rights to a weekly day off (off day or rest day) became more visible on the public agenda. The 2012-2013 revisions to the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act stipulated that a minimum of one rest day per week is a basic right of MDWs which is crucial to their physical and mental rejuvenation. These guidelines were only recommendations that fell short of ensuring the legal compliance of employers, but was nonetheless a commendable milestone for civil society.

upper hand. In this scenario, the public/private divide is an arena for acts of resistance; MDWs experiment with their interactions with domestic employers to their advantage.

Interviews with MDWs residing in NGO shelters reveal experiences of being locked up involuntarily by employers, getting passports and work permits confiscated, being subject to extensively long working hours with little to no rest days, lack of freedom for religious practice, intensive and pervasive monitoring, and having their means of communication curtailed (Ueno, 2010, p. 83). Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to claim that the benefits of a digital revolution are unclear for MDWs; an employer's preferences of whether and what technologies are accessible is a more significant factor than financial constraints. In one set of interviews with over 60 MDWs, "only a few still showed their concern about cost" and most opted for more expensive voice calls with their loved ones as long as employers were not in the way (Lin & Sun, 2010, p. 190). Many MDWs have no doubt benefitted from ground-breaking shifts in cellphone access and communications technology⁸, but the structures of an asymmetrical hiring relationship complicate their digital participation creating a double-edged sword.

Many MDWs mention that they are expected to be continuously and immediately available to their employers upon receiving their text messages or voice calls; there is little to no separation of personal and work matters in the cellphone usage of MDWs (Platt et al., 2016). When employers were unwilling to grant cellphone usage or only allow restricted screen time, MDWs have found ways to obtain cell phones in secret and use its communication functions in the absence of employers (Ueno, 2010, p. 87). In one study, a group of Filipino sisters arranged for their youngest to pick up a cellphone upon arrival at the airport – her employer had requested that this not be allowed – for communication purposes. When this new employer turned out to be borderline abusive, she conveyed her desire to switch employers by texting "at night when alone in her room" so that her sisters knew to fetch the required documents (Thompson, 2009, p. 373). Other strategies that MDWs deploy to maximize digital communication while minimizing costs is to switch between several prepaid cards depending on which telecommunications provider has the best promotional rates at that time (Thompson, 2009, p. 369). These strategies require a lot of research on the range of data plans and how they compare against one another; knowledge about the best deals for communication services is a common resource pool that MDWs partake in.

Many supposedly illegal practices on paper are condoned by government officials and recruitment agencies alike. Some domestic employers who enlist the latter's services still block access to cellphone usage and rest days for the first two years as a 'test period', while others instruct the agencies to include this clause in the contract (Cheong & Mitchell, 2016, p. 57). The Migrant Workers' Center (MWC) in Singapore launched

8 MDWs who have been in working Singapore for more than a decade attest to this trend in their interviews (Platt et al., 2014, 2016). In the early 1990s, there was virtually no contact with their loved ones unless they were able to access email or more often, employers would agree to post handwritten letters on their behalf. Since then, digital broadband and cellphone plans have increased drastically in scope and variety while their costs are generally manageable for MDWs, albeit typically their most expensive budget item. Daily contact with their loved ones during breaks and late into the night after employers have gone to bed allow MDWs to stay in touch with familial matters and maintain transnational networks.

a smartphone application in 2018 called “Jolly App” in partnership with the national POSB Bank. This digital service for migrant workers offers a wide gamut of services like banking and remittance information, cellphone plans, and affordable transportation options (Dutta & Kaur-Gill, 2018, p. 4072). Access to these resources however still depend on whether employers allow MDWs to use the household’s broadband internet and with what restrictions. In that regard, the construction of the mobile commons can be hijacked by individual cases of isolation where digital communications are not freely available. The assumption that acts of resistance can be organized on digital platforms can be troubled to the extent that cellphone ownership and usage is not a given for some migrant workers, and in the case of MDWs, is not necessarily advantageous or emancipatory. The live-in structures of domestic confinement do not allow the analytical privilege of expecting their political assertion to come through digital empowerment.

Apart from this fragmentation of the digital common, another significant factor underlying the content of mobile commons is a transmutation of racial justifications, or a reconfigured racism if you will, by MDWs themselves in their self-defence when trying to establish their credibility and trustworthiness to prospective employers. In this sense, the mobile commons have a dual connotation of positive and negative implications, given that the types of collective knowledge and forms of shared social codes may be beneficial to some members while oppressive for others; for example, racial stereotypes of Filipinos and Indonesians (e.g. Ueno, 2010; Wee et al., 2018). Interviews with MDWs show that there is differential treatment of MDWs by nationality – Filipinos have the highest salaries and bargaining power, and are most likely to enjoy the full gamut of labor rights provisions (Lin & Sun, 2010, p. 191) - which hinders solidarity building. Generally, Filipino MDWs have a reputation of being more affirmative and keener on guarding their labor rights, and employers who prefer to hire Filipinas for their higher English fluency often anticipate this as one of the key ‘trade-offs’ (Schumann & Paul 2019, p. 1713). Filipinos are known to be smarter but also more likely to be overly assertive, while Indonesians are typically perceived as docile and timid but lacking in civilized sensibilities like hygiene (Ueno, 2010, p. 95). Indonesian MDWs who are faced with the prospect of living with a Filipino colleague – which often happens when a household hires two MDWs – might use reverse psychology on their employers by offering to leave the household, claiming that the newcomer is likely to be ‘too smart’, dominant and “will order me what to do” (Ueno, 2009, p. 509).

The AoM approach is unique for “its emphasis on the subjectivity of living labor as a constitutive and antagonistic element of the capital relation.” (Mezzadra, 2011, p. 123). The personal agency of MDWs includes the various attitudes of self and other identity – which have the potential to replicate forms of discrimination, not just generating collective solidarity – that converse dialectically with one another to constitute temporary

modes of subjectivity in a capitalist international division of labor⁹. MDWs are acutely aware of their outsider status in labor-receiving destinations and actively contest oppressive labor regimes, yet their acts of resistance also rely on intercultural resources for migrant subjectivities like nationality-based stereotypes, gendered ideologies, and racialized assumptions about other migrant workers.

It is worth noting that domestic servitude, considered a form of social reproduction, has been heavily researched by feminist scholars who take issue with the gender omissions in AoM and its understanding of the mobile commons. This framework remains highly applicable and relatable to migration studies, given that technological advancements in digital communications have indeed revolutionized migrant strategies (Platt et al., 2016). Yet the case of MDWs provides a more grounded consideration of political acts and methods of resistance keeping in mind the public invisibility of domestic work (Andrijasevic, 2009, p. 398). As feminist political economists note, social reproduction (reproductive work) refers to “the creation and recreation of people as cultural and social as well as physical human beings who engage in an array of activities and relationships involved in maintaining people both on a daily basis and intergenerationally.” (Glenn in Kofman, 2012, p. 143). MDWs fulfill exactly these roles for their employers’ families when they service household members with cooking, cleaning, washing, and care work for young and elderly dependants.

Gender biases are ingrained in immigration regimes that specify a female-only sex criterion for domestic work, sometimes alongside invasive medical examinations that take on a sexist connotation. The fieldwork experiences of Johan Lindquist in Lombok island, Indonesia, also finds that the brokerage process is distinctly gendered. While agencies require upfront fees from male migrants before departure, females do not pay at this stage, amplifying their status as commodity to be “protected” by the host destination’s sponsors (Lindquist, 2010, p. 127). Local recruiters said that females were “easier to control than male migrants” since their households that did not give them free mobility; the recruitment process for women typically requires a “letter of permission from either the husband or father” (Lindquist, 2010, p. 130, 124). MDWs in Singapore find themselves compensating for their placement fees with several months of unpaid labor, unlike their male counterparts who incur debts from fellow villagers. It is unsurprising that this preliminary trial period for MDWs is usually followed with an employer’s excessive monitoring down into the daily habits and routines of MDWs. This state of affairs is fairly normalized for many MDWs whose access to cell phones is conditional and not necessarily empowering.

The collective investment into and partaking of shared knowledge networks is crucial for the emergence of the mobile commons which “exist only to the extent that they are commonly produced by all the people in motion who are the only ones who can expand

⁹ Although not the focus of this paper, building on the AoM approach by thinking about contradictory migrant subjectivities is also about thinking through the history of industrial Europe, the colonial and imperial impositions of the capitalist system, and racial capitalism (e.g. Virdee, 2019). The paid labor market, as we know it, comes with ingrained psychological biases of gender and race that historically has valued certain (white male) workers as the epitome of the fully productive worker.

its content and meanings.” (Trimikliniotis et al., 2015, p. 1039). To use the example of care work, the ambivalent and contradictory meanings of care in the narratives of Filipino domestic and institutional workers shows the rifts in solidarity. Some studies find that MDWs who have managed to upskill into non-domestic sectors look down on ‘maids’, associating them with lowly classes that they have broken out of (e.g. Amrith, 2018). Sometimes, negative racial stereotypes based on nationality and cultural differentiations – even if deployed strategically for good reason, like making themselves attractive to potential employers by emphasising the more ‘caring’ nature of Indonesians compared to Filipinos or vice versa – hijack the formation of a coherent community of MDWs (e.g. Ueno, 2010, p. 91).

The personal testimonies of both current and former MDWs, some of whom have managed to transition into higher-skilled care workers with a more ‘respectable’ visa type¹⁰, reveal at least two layers of nuance in attitudes toward care (Huang et al., 2012, p. 203). The most obvious tension exists between the Singapore community population and the Filipino care workers who are not used to how common condescending perspectives of nursing are, given the connotation of professionalism and social respect this job typically enjoys in the Philippines (Amrith, 2010, p. 416). Another more complicated layer of friction also exists within the group of Filipino care workers, namely between those who remain as MDWs and the smaller number who have managed to gain Permanent Residency (PR) status, some even becoming small business owners in their own right. In some cases, Filipino PRs who have ‘upgraded’ themselves into a non-domestic sector distinguish themselves from their co-national counterparts by citing their higher levels of sophistication in contrast to many MDWs who behave too promiscuously with Bangladeshi migrant workers in particular (Amrith, 2010, p. 420). In contrast, MDWs who have been unsuccessful at making this jump find that Filipino PRs – many of whom are remote domestic employers of rural migrant women in their hometowns – behave in arrogant and haughty ways (Amrith, 2018, p. 70-71). Such internal disagreements and conflicts among MDWs are driven by a metamorphosis of racism and essentialist stereotypes.

Recruitment agencies pit different nationalities against one another by advertising the workers based on nationalist characteristics; this promotional process constitutes a potent source of friction between MDWs. Research interviews find that Filipinos speak unfavourably of Indonesians, “typically referring to their poor intelligence, odor, and uncivilized manner” (Ueno, 2010, p. 91-92). In addition, MDWs draw on regional differences of urban sensibilities and modern lifestyles to establish a superior sense of domesticity vis-a-vis their rural co-nationals. The existence of separate visa categories that extend greater mobility to non-domestic sectors generates a lot of tension in the ‘Filipino community’, plus Singapore society still has a condescending view of ‘maids’ (Amrith, 2018, p. 72).

¹⁰ Moving into non-domestic sectors is not impossible, but the chance of accessing the required training programs – for clinical occupations as registered nurses (RNs), enrolled nurses (ENs), nursing aides (NAs) and healthcare attendants (HCA) – to qualify for the Singapore nursing certificate depends solely on an employer’s approval. Some MDWs attend community skills workshops for eldercare, but these are typically volunteer-driven efforts and are not formal channels for MDWs to achieve skills upgrading.

Although MDWs have superseded traditional male breadwinner models that assume the dependent status of women¹¹, they continue to draw on conventions of femininity and masculinity in their narratives.

Whether positive or negative, these modes of differential inclusion (unwritten knowledge and informal social codes) in the migrant community are likewise a component of a mobile commons based on the “customary knowledge born out of the socialites of migrants themselves and others who support them.” (Trimikliniotis et al., 2015, p. 1040). These include internalized notions of an ideal femininity and good motherhood, which are socially encouraged norms of patriarchy that can be endorsed by numerous MDWs (Amrith, 2018, p. 78-79). The identity management of labor subjectivity by MDWs is a coping mechanism for the downward class mobility they experience when their professional backgrounds from the home country is not recognized. MDWs draw on internal and external perceptions of nationality, ethnicity, race, and gender in ways that simultaneously validate and transgress these norms, resulting in an inconclusive picture of political assertion that is symptomatic of a protagonist positionality.

Conclusion

Migration theorists note that “Autonomist approaches tend to emphasise the negative and exclusionary dimensions of citizenship” that can use a more diversified framework, because this control bias (a focus on migrant oppression/repression) makes it difficult to appreciate state regimes as productive borders that offer resources for “migrant citizenships” (Nyers, 2015, p. 24). The case of MDWs in Singapore bargaining for rest days shows that the employer to employee interactions constitute the norms of citizenship where authority and intransigence are not mutually exclusive to both parties. From a migrant’s perspective, Singapore’s citizenship regime is not solely about subordination because this viewpoint dismisses a gamut of critical citizenship viewpoints. My answers to the research questions uses the case of MDWs in Singapore to contribute a more nuanced version of the mobile commons. The beneficial role of technological advances and communications technologies is less clear-cut in a context of live-in employment, which complicates the acts and strategies of political assertion that MDWs can present. In addition, although my paper has not focused as much on this second nuance, the internal disagreements and tensions in the MDW community that shape individual labor subjectivities is also a type of informal social structure that undergirds the mobile commons. Overall, the concept is a useful framework for viewing the organization of migrant acts of resistance according to each context, while its empowering function is less clear in the case of MDWs.

The bodies of migrant women are a terrain on which immigration policies differentiate members of the community (inside) and those of an alien existence (outside). How

¹¹ Many migrant mothers are expected to take on both sides of the division between the active (male) productive worker in public and the passive (female) reproductive worker in private. The migration of domestic workers is one policy that combines a primary breadwinner status of women migrants – a reversal of gender roles that happened to many households in the sending destinations of the Gulf region and the Philippines due to the structural adjustment policies of the 1980s – with the reproductive connotations of female bodies laboring in the private sphere.

domestic employers channel the government's model of an obedient Singapore citizen is obvious to MDWs whose everyday strategies must navigate the spatial boundaries set by their employers, recruitment agencies, and state immigration regimes. The live-in requirement of domestic work cannot be underestimated for its stonewalling effects on labor rights receptiveness in privatized spheres, especially since the capitalist patriarchal state maintains an uncompromising stance on the public (productive, manageable and governable) versus private (reproductive, unmanageable and ungovernable) distinction. Important for AoM is a recognition that historically, the issues of mobility and settlement only emerged as problems to be managed within the governance structures of European state-making regimes. The ancient sojourners of pan-Asian and Middle Eastern migration did not see circular mobility – a key component of livelihood strategies – as an unnatural phenomenon, yet their presence was eventually transformed into coolie status in repressive colonial labor regimes (Lindquist, 2010, p. 121). The AoM approach emphasises that from this historical perspective of autonomy, where mobility is a non-issue¹², migrant protagonists must be acknowledged as formidable political actors who possess a lot of agency and creativity.

Following the scholarship's lack of attention to chance encounters and fortuitous moments in migrants' lives, AoM scholars have rightly underscored the revolutionary potential of cell phones in facilitating serendipitous moments of migrant solidarity in highly securitized regimes of in/exclusion (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013, p. 192; Trimikliniotis et al., 2015). These often taken-for-granted technological advances in human communication do not always penetrate past asymmetrical power relationships in the household. However, as isolated as MDWs are, their methods of acting out in domestic confines makes them participants of a fragmented mobile commons that is performed haphazardly. At times, their confinement inspires moments of creativity (e.g. crying over family emergencies) that elicit sympathy from employers in ways that point to those unorganized yet shared forms of coping tactics. At least for MDWs in Singapore, these strategies exploit the weak spots of otherwise unreceptive employers and create temporary moments of victory. Access to digital participation is not guaranteed in live-in employment, but the everyday strategies of MDWs nonetheless offers a nuanced understanding of the mobile commons in migrant politics.

Putting our lens on MDWs allows an appreciation of their creative resourcefulness in shaping acts of resistance without losing sight of the sheer strength that state regimes hold in restraining access to even digital activism. In addition, there are also grievances among MDWs who may not see eye to eye¹³ in competitive labor regimes. The mobile commons framework remains relevant because MDWs are like many other non-live-in migrant populations; their value in the host society is tied to their function in economic policy and their productive capacity as a labor force, nothing more.

12 Many MDWs in Singapore also have extensive overseas experience in other labor-receiving destinations like Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Gulf region. They may go through various regimes of domestic confinement depending on location, but overall, their paths of cyclical migration over the years attests to how circular mobility is still very much a function of livelihood for these migrant women.

13 My paper has focused more on demonstrating the nuances of the mobile commons for MDWs in Singapore whose access to cell phones is not automatically empowering in an asymmetrical power relationship. While I have discussed intra-MDW tensions that complicate the uplifting effects of the mobile commons, the chance to fully elaborate on this angle of analysis must be saved for elsewhere.



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Transformations in Greek Migration Policy after 2015: Securitization Practices and Precarity of Refugees

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Abstract

The European refugee crisis of 2015 unveiled the incapacity of member states to act at a united front. Indeed, the innumerable refugee flows from Asia, mainly Syria, combined with unprecedented numbers of migrants from Africa, have prompted a series of diverse member-state responses, profoundly transforming European migration policy. The underlying procedures that relate to processes, such as the ongoing Revision of the Dublin Regulation, the European Agenda on Migration (2015), the EU-Turkey Deal (2016) and others, have tilted the migration policy apparatus of the EU towards security. This situation has not left Greece intact, as it was the entry point for those trying to reach Europe amidst the refugee crisis, resulting in Greece being transformed from a traditionally transit country, to a host one. A major trend that is observed in the Greek case (as well as in the EU) is that refugees tend to be securitized. This means that refugees have been perceived as a threat from several political elite actors, through the use of speech acts with the referent object being (mainly) societal security. As an outcome, the Greek migration policy has gradually adopted some excessive measures. What are the implications? Preliminary analysis shows that this practice has a direct impact on the precarity of refugees, contradicting an inclusive approach to migration. Hence, the contribution of this study is twofold. First, it seeks to unpack and present the transformation of Greek migration policies, during the post-2015 period. Second, this study, while briefly presenting key-data on the refugee flows, aspires to cast light on the impact the abovementioned existing transformations have on the precarity of refugees.

Keywords: Refugee Crisis, Greek Migration Policy, Transformation, Securitization, Precarity of Refugees

Introduction

The year 2015 was a turning point for the structural identity of the European Union (Papadakis 2021), as the European refugee crisis, which was triggered by the Syrian civil war that started in 2011, surfaced the different positions of the national asylum policies of the EU Member States with the Dublin Regulation (Trauner 2016). Amidst this crisis, Greece became the focus of attention for its role as the main transit point for hundreds of thousands of refugees, who came from mainly Middle Eastern and Asian war zones in order to continue their journey to Central and Northern Europe (Evangelinidis 2016), altering the Greek migration landscape.

At the level of implemented policy, the refugee crisis of 2015 resulted in the adoption of a series of measures, which in the short term aimed at addressing the extraordinary nature of migration flows. At a more medium-term level, Greece's migration policy began to take on a form of "emergency" management in a security continuum context (Dimari 2020). In the long run, despite the fact that the refugee crisis has had an impact on both security policies and integration issues, there is still no coherent picture of Greece's migration policy. This is due to the fact that since the outbreak of the refugee crisis (2015), up to the adoption of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum signed in September 2020, the two different governments that were called to deal with the migration phenomenon (SYRIZA-ANEL and New Democracy), due to lack of political consensus, did not succeed in producing a coherent migration policy. As a result, refugees started experiencing precarity.

Thus, the aim of this article is twofold. First, to examine the transformation of the Greek Migration Policy and its processes, with an emphasis on securitization. Second, to assess the impact this transformation has had on the precarity of refugees. To do so, the focus is on the fragmentation and securitization analysis of the refugee crisis of 2015 to date, offering five key development nodes which are: The European Migration Agenda signed in May 2015, which laid the foundations for the creation of the hot spots; the Closure of the Western Balkan Route and the consequent EU-Turkey Joint Statement of 18 March 2016; the Instrumentalization of the Refugee Issue by Turkey in February 2020; the Corona Virus Pandemic (Covid-19); and the New Pact on Migration and Asylum signed in September 2020.

Methodology

For the purposes of this research, triangulation of data was conducted. In social sciences, triangulation is defined as the combination of research methods aiming at the better analysis and in-depth understanding of the phenomena examined (Papadakis et al, 2016). Data are drawn from a literature review (including regulatory frameworks and policy documents) and secondary quantitative analysis. Assessing the way in which the new migration policy of Greece began to emerge, the authors divide the period of transformation of the Greek Migration Policy into the abovementioned five main nodes.

The argument in relation to the proposed separation lies in the position that the migration reality in the Greek political scene is not a static phenomenon. On the contrary, it is characterized by transformation nodes which have defined both individually and synthetically the process of response of Europe and especially of Greece to the complex and urgent issue of the management of migration. The scientific corpus used for the literature review consists mainly of policy documents and previous national and international research in relation to the five transformation nodes, while it is largely based on official sources of the United Nations, the European Union and Greece.

Secondary quantitative analysis refers to the review of quantitative data already collected either in international and national official databases, or in a previous study, by a different researcher who usually wishes to answer a new research question (Payne and Payne, 2004). The scientific data that is used for the secondary quantitative analysis include studies prepared by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Greek government departments on migration policy, universities, NGOs and research centers, institutions on the issue of migration, such as the European Commission, the European Commission, ECRE and others.

Securitization of Migration and Precarity

The theory of securitization has been formulated by the Copenhagen School of Security Studies (Diskaya 2013). In its primary articulation security was described as a speech act, with securitization constituting a discursive type of act that verbally constructs a threat (McDonald 2008). For Buzan et al. (1998) securitization is the process whereby normal politics surpass the already established rules of the polity and articulates an issue as one that needs a different handling. Summing up, securitization revolves around securitizing actors, referent objects, existential threats, political interests with certain repercussions and under given and specific conditions (Buzan et al, 1998). The Copenhagen School of Security has listed five security sectors: military, political, economic, societal and environmental. As far as migration is concerned it is part of the societal security sector of analysis that deals with issues such as identity and culture (Buzan et al, 1998).

What is the connection of securitization of refugees with precarity though? To answer this question, it would be prudent to define precarity first. Burawoy (2015) defines precarity in relation to insecure work and subsequently insecure livelihood, whereas there are also alternative approaches that link precarity with uncertainty and unpredictability in a broader sense (Ettlinger 2007). According to Vickers et al. (2019, 3), precarity can receive a plethora of forms, and can thus be comprehended as a “process, political practice, performance, tendency, category, structural condition, and state.

It is well established that precarity, both conceptually as well as analytically, is highly interconnected with geographical mobility and broadly with refugee/migrant groups as “distinctively precarious subjects” that, by virtue of their forced mobility, experience several forms of vulnerability (Vickers et al. 2019, 3). According to Menjívar and

Kanstroom (2013) the leading trend as far as contemporary migration research is concerned, centers around the vulnerability that is interrelated with ‘illegality’ and ‘deportability,’ (the tendency to deport refugees) which, in turn, constitute acute securitization processes.

A range of factors are related to migration and can be understood as enhancing precarity. Yet, migration itself is not the only variable in this equation (Vickers et al. 2019). Rather, the framing of newcomers in a certain way and the subsequent measures that are implemented in the context of the realist policy frame, which has as distinctive attributes securitization processes that are informed through practices and discourses, constitute significant variables in the refugee precarity equation.

Despite the fact that the precarity refugees from Asia experience in host states is well documented (Butler 2006 in Greene 2020, 6; Canefe 2018; Alison 2012; Janmyr 2016; Baban et al. 2017; Ilcan et al. 2018), data on the Greek case are scarce (Cabot 2018, 8; Greene 2020), whereas international studies that take into consideration securitization processes in tandem with refugee precarity, are fragmented (Nagy 2018; Williams and Mountz 2018; Bates-Eamer 2019; Harney 2013; Dimari 2021, 12).

In what follows, the authors will track and sketch the processes that have triggered the “peculiar” transformation of the Greek Migration Policy, which has resulted in precarious conditions for refugees currently residing in Greece. But why “peculiar”?

During 2015, over one million people arrived in Europe by sea. The main drivers were the ongoing conflicts in mainly Asian countries such as Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan and poverty, human rights violations and unstable security conditions in countries such as Pakistan, Eritrea, Iran and Somalia (UNHCR, 2020a). The influx into Europe was principally made through the Balkan corridor. The main branch of this corridor starts from Turkey, passes through Greece to Northern Macedonia and from there to Serbia, Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia and finally to Austria, Germany and beyond (Arsenijević et al, 2017).

At the European level, therefore, migration topped the EU agenda in the summer and autumn of 2015 (Papadakis, 2021). The media focused on the situation in Europe's southern borders (Guiraudon, 2018) with an emphasis on Greece, which eventually became a place of reception of huge migratory and refugee flows, mainly due to the lack of a coherent EU migration policy and response. Speaking with numbers, as far as recognized refugees are concerned, in March 2021, there resided 13.495 asylum seekers and refugees in the Greek islands mainly from Asia. In addition, the national reception system of Greece currently hosts approximately 60.000 Asian mainly asylum seekers and refugees (Ministry of Migration and Asylum, 2021a).

Despite Europe’s humanitarian and legal obligations to treat refugees with dignity and to provide safe havens and asylum, in the unprecedented explosion of migration flows into the European Union, with Greece as its main gateway, European countries have found themselves unprepared or unwilling to deal with the influx. What followed was

a series of measures and legislation at the EU level, with the ultimate goal of managing migration flows that, nevertheless, forced Greece to be at the forefront due to its geographical location. A new migration policy began to emerge and take shape in Europe (Arsenijević et al, 2017), which in the case of Greece, began to systematically transform the core of its migration policy leading to mostly fragmented attempts to manage migration in the context of what the authors of this article regard as the five nodes of the transformation of the Greek Migration Policy, namely, the European Migration Agenda signed in May 2015, the EU-Turkey Joint Statement of 18 March 2016, the Instrumentalization of the Refugee Issue by Turkey in February 2020, the arrival of the Corona Virus Pandemic (Covid-19) and the New Pact on Migration and Asylum signed in September 2020, which are discussed in the following section.

The five nodes of the transformation of the post-2015 Greek migration policy and securitization processes: a hand in hand evolution

i. The European Migration Agenda

The EU responded to the refugee crisis by laying the foundations for a holistic approach to the migration issue with the European Migration Agenda, signed in May 2015. The new EU Migration Agenda revolved around the reduction of “illegal” migration, the root causes of illegal and forced displacement in third countries, smugglers and traffickers, return policies, border management, strengthening Frontex, the application of “smart” technology for Europe's task of protecting its citizens through a strong common asylum policy, the implementation of a common policy, the evaluation of the Dublin system and the drafting of a new policy on legal migration that would maximize benefits for countries of origin (Papadopoulos 2016).

Illegality and deportability prominently featured in the EU Migration Agenda, which also introduced “hotspots” that were formally approved by the European Council on 25-26 June 2015 (European Commission 2015a) that aimed, inter alia, to help Member States facing significant pressure from migratory flows, in particular with regard to the identification process (European Parliament 2016), bringing upon what is known in the international literature as the “criminalization” of migration (crimmigration) (Menjívar et al. 2018).

Indeed, the hotspot approach inaugurates a new era for the management of migration at a European level, bringing excess security practices at the heart of policy measures. Indeed, as Tazzioli (2018) has argued, the management of migration through the hotspots implies a redefinition of the very concept of control, interrelated with the very sensitive issue of security. According to Mezzadra and Neilson (2013), control is imposed on the one hand through specific points and time limits for the detection of migrants, while on the other hand the control practice is placed in a wider context of channels and infrastructures to limit migratory flows, thus relating to illegality and deportability concepts and thus leading to precarity for refugees.

ii. The EU-Turkey Joint Statement

The EU-Turkey Statement of 18 March 2016, which is part of the Greece-Turkey Joint Action Plan launched in 2015 (General Secretariat of the Council 2016), refers to the transfer of migrants from Greece and Italy back to Turkey. Turkey hosted at the time about 3.5 million Syrian refugees in its territory, with the vast majority of them living without a residence permit and being "tolerated" under a "temporary protection" regime (EASO 2020). The EU-Turkey Statement bids Turkey to keep refugees in its territory and to prevent them from entering the EU; in return, it receives funding and its proposal to join the EU Member States status is considered much more seriously.

The European Council sought this agreement in order to stop illegal migration from Turkey to the EU. Yet, since its inception it has been particularly complex and difficult to implement, as the EU, for its part, has agreed to resettle one Syrian refugee from Turkey for each refugee returned to Turkey, respectively, while Turkey agreed to take all necessary measures to prevent the creation of new road or land routes for illegal migration between Turkey and the EU (European Council 2016). Turkey did not actually implement the key points - provisions of the 'Deal', especially with regard to the prevention of the creation of new roads (and even facilitation) for illegal migration. As such, this deal, from its outset, was deemed to lead to precarity for refugees.

In order to make the EU-Turkey Statement operational in the country, the then Greek government enacted new laws that were distinctively stricter as far as asylum procedures, detention, deportation and control of the external borders of Greece are concerned. These laws also brought to the fore the issue of the integration of refugees in Greek society (Skleparis 2018). This dysfunctional agreement has created a permanent humanitarian crisis in the Greek islands, which escalated in September 2020 with the complete destruction of the refugee structure of Moria, which was burnt, showcasing the precarity refugees and migrants constantly experience. Its ineffectiveness (Heck and Hess 2017; Rygiel et al 2016) lies primary in its security formulations which allow Turkey to act as it sees fit in order to pursue aspired geopolitical goals, instrumentalizing, inter alia, the inability of the EU to reach political consensus as far as a united front on migration is concerned and impacting on the well being of refugees and migrants.

iii. The Instrumentalization of the Refugee Crisis by Turkey

In February 2020, Turkey commenced to instrumentalize the refugee issue in an attempt to put pressure at the European Union and NATO to back up its military operations in Syria. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, violating the already dysfunctional 2016 agreement, threatened to open the country's borders to Europe. As a result, in just a few days, an estimated 13,000 refugees and migrants found themselves in Evros, trying to enter Europe. The result was thousands of people being trapped between the borders of Greece and Turkey, causing a huge crisis between the two countries and revealing Turkey's intention to use the refugee issue to the benefit of its own geopolitical developments and (maximalist) purposes - plans (Lappas 2020).

This situation took on enormous proportions. Reacting to Turkish pressure, the immediate response of the Greek Government was to successfully securitize the asylum process through a legislative act that referred to the extremely urgent and unforeseen need to address the asymmetric threat to national security (Hellenic Parliament 2020). Greece closed its borders, deployed its army along the border, and warned people gathered at the border not to cross, while announcing brief deportations (Vasilaki 2020).

The Evros February 2020 crisis revealed and basically exposed the inherent deficiencies of the EU deal in real conditions and brought the precarity of refugees at the forefront of official discussions. The fact that Greece was at the forefront during this situation, left it no choice but to act firmly against Turkey which attempted to manipulate the ineffective deal, prompting Greece to adopt a harsher securitized stance towards refugees. In security terms, the Greek stance has shown the severity of the issue and the respective response, which served both as a message to Turkey that the Greek state would not succumb to geopolitical blackmails, and as an overall message to its EU counterparts that the security of the country is of high priority. In sum, this event has been crucial in the Greek migration policy making, as it put Greece in the position to elaborate on a migration policy that would take into consideration, other than the security of the country and the way it would handle newcomers, Turkey's aspirations to manipulate the deal for its own geopolitical agenda.

iv. The Corona Virus Pandemic (Covid-19)

The 2015 refugee crisis in Greece marked the inauguration of a new period of migration policy making. The Greek government faced with two major challenges (Aggelidis et al. 2020), one being the Evros February crisis and the other the pandemic, adopted a policy that up to a point converged these two events in one single hardened policy towards migrants and refugees, leading to precarious conditions for them. The suspension of asylum applications was thus followed by a range of activities during this period that outline the differentiated stance of the Greek government, as regards refugees/migrants in relation to Greek citizens. During the period between 2.3.2020 and 14.4.2020, twelve emergency measures were taken, whether institutionalized or not, in order to deal with the spread of the disease both in detention centers and in Greek hosting facilities overall (Papadatos-Anagnostopoulos et al. 2020).

Out of the above mentioned measures, the 'Agnodiki' Plan is an indicative securitizing measure. On March 18 2020, the government announced a curfew on the islands' Reception and Identifications Centers (RICs), two days before quarantine was imposed on the general population, implementing the 'Agnodiki' plan for crisis management in refugee populations. The measures for the RICs also included a curfew at night, a ban on visits to those who did not work in the structures during the day. It is a partial confinement of thousands of people in overcrowded structures (Aggelidis et al. 2020). The restriction of traffic in the RICs continued with continuous extensions for six months, until at least the middle of September, long after the end of the quarantine

for the general population on April 28, without even a case being detected inside the structures (Aggelidis et al. 2020).

Another notable point of reference is the inclusion of migrants and refugees in Greece's vaccination program. Whereas the first Greek citizen was vaccinated the 27th of December 2020, vaccination in host structures was scheduled to begin in May 2021, as according to the Minister of Migration and Asylum of Greece, detention centers were not facing "the issue of morbidity or the spread of the coronavirus", so staff and residents would be vaccinated "in turn, based on age, as will the general population" (Naftermporiki.gr 2021).

These measures reveal the disposition of the government to be stricter in its refugee handlings, as it practically had no assistance in tackling these situations from its European counterparts. Indeed, the Minister of Migration and Asylum himself admitted that concerning the management of Covid-19 in Greece, the measures taken in camps and for the general refugee population were stricter from the general measures for the Greek citizens (Papadatos-Anagnostopoulos et al 2020).

This approach has evidently exacerbated the precarious position of refugees due to stricter measures taken for them by the Greek polity. In addition, it has shown the determination of Greece to use a more conservative approach on migration, amidst a period when overall uncertainty prevailed.

v. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum

The new Pact on Migration and Asylum is a flagship initiative of the European Commission that provides a fresh start to tackle the complex challenges posed by migration in a globalized context, combining responsibility and solidarity between Member States (Eulive.com 2020).

The new Commission's proposal is based on three pillars: a strong external dimension with countries of origin and transit, more effective management of external borders, stricter and fairer rules for solidarity within the EU (European Commission 2020). According to Peers (2020), the Commission's new Pact on Asylum and Migration does not restart the whole process from scratch. But it is trying to unblock the whole conversation by submitting legislative proposals, focusing on issues of border proceedings and the relocation of asylum seekers. The main points of the New Asylum and Migration Pact are border control, asylum procedures, the extension of Eurodac actions, the Dublin Rules on Asylum Responsibility and more (Peers 2020).

The Greek Government is currently negotiating changes to be inserted in the Pact that would better serve the security of Greece, as a forefront country. The main concern of the government is to make substantial improvements, so that the entire burden is not passed exclusively to the front-line Member States. Greece promotes a number of policies focusing on the country's security, including the reduction of refugee-migration flows, the return of those who are not entitled to international protection and the

practical solidarity with the host countries and in particular on the islands (Hellenic Parliament 2021). Regarding the EU-Turkey Joint Statement, Greece asks for its proper implementation, through a financial mechanism which should be accompanied by a monitoring mechanism that will record new arrivals on a monthly basis from Turkey and returns to Turkey (Hellenic Parliament 2021). The New Pact on Migration and Asylum is expected to inaugurate a new era of migration policy making in the Greek case overall. As the Minister of Migration and Asylum of Greece stated "Open border policy is over" (Capital. gr 2021), thus pointing out that securitization of migration practices in the Greek case will continue to take place.

Precarity of refugees

According to the most recent data from UNHCR (2020b), from 2014 to March 2020, 1.258,051 mainly Asian migrants/refugees entered in Greece. Currently, the national reception system of Greece hosts approximately 60.000 asylum seekers and refugees of Asian origin. Concerning recognized refugees, as of March 2021, there were 13.495 asylum seekers/refugees living in the Greek islands, the overwhelming majority from Asia (Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2021a). In addition, according to the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum (2021b) from 2016 to March 2021, 306.498 people have preregistered for international protection in Greece, whereas for the same period, 327.976 have applied for international protection. The number of refugee status decisions issued from 2016 to March 2021 was 69.237.

Most of these asylum seekers face difficult living conditions and are exposed to a variety of security risks (Amnesty International 2016; UNHCR 2020a). The situation took on frenzy dimensions at the end of August 2020, when a fire broke out at the Moria Reception and Identification Center (RIC) in Lesbos, which back then hosted, alongside with the adjacent informal Olive Grove area, about 12,000 asylum seekers, including about 4,000 children (UNHCR 2020a).

Beyond this event, refugees have been coming across difficult conditions from the onset of their journey to Greece as they have had to deal with the dangerous crossing of national borders. As far as access to social provisions and particularly housing is concerned, there currently resides 11.609 asylum seekers in RICs, 26.679 in overall reception facilities, and 20.956 have been housed through the ESTIA program (Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2021b). In addition, from 16/07/2019 to 29/03/2019 29.410 asylum seekers have registered for the HELIOS program, while 12.051 recognized refugees receive financial aid for house rent (Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2021b). Yet, significant challenges remain, as the mainland's hospitality structures and accommodation facilities are constantly operating at full capacity (Spyratoy 2020).

Concerning access to health care, migrants legally residing in the country have the same rights as Greek citizens, a clear evidence of an existing inclusive approach to the Public Health Policy. However, health services do not seem to cover all their needs, due

to the complexity of the system and the lack of knowledge of available health services (Athanasias 2020). Undocumented migrants are even more vulnerable, as they do not have access to public health facilities, except in emergencies, or when their lives are in danger. Similarly, people who have applied for asylum and are awaiting confirmation of their identity as asylum seekers have access to health only in emergencies (Athanasias 2020). On July 11 2019, a Circular of the Ministry of Labor was issued, according to which, asylum seekers are not entitled to a Greek Social Security Number (SSN), a document until then necessary for access to public health services. However, from 1 April 2020, asylum seekers are able to receive, upon their identification, a Provisional Insurance and Health Coverage Number (PAAYPA), which provides them with free access to basic medical care. However, the absence of sufficient documents or the delay of the necessary vaccinations becomes an occasion to prevent the enrollment of children (Aggelidis et al. 2020). This precarious position was exacerbated throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, as migrant and refugee populations were scheduled to be part of the national vaccination program several months after the commencement of the program for Greek citizens (Naftermporiki.gr 2021).

Regarding access to education, children that seek for asylum are obligated to go to public primary and secondary schools in Greece (ECRE 2020a). Children of 6-15 years can attend school nearby their place of residence, together with Greek children, at schools that are indicated by the Ministry of Education. Thus, an inclusive education policy has been developed for migrant children. Speaking in numbers, at the end of 2019, there were 37,000, migrant children in Greece, 4,686 of them, unaccompanied (ECRE 2020a). Out of the number of children present in Greece, the report estimated that a third (12,800-12,900) of these children, aged from 4 to 17 years old, were enrolled in formal education for the period 2018-2019. In addition, the rate of school attendance has been higher for children that live in apartments and for unaccompanied children (67%), showcasing the precarious conditions for children living at closed camps (ECRE 2020a). According to the same report, in December 2019, 8,000 enrolled in formal education for the period 2019-2020, i.e. 5,000 children less than the previous year (ECRE 2020a).

As far as access to labor is concerned, up to the end of 2019, asylum seekers could get access to the labor market, once they obtained an asylum seekers card (ECRE 2020b). The average time period for this was approximately 44 days in 2019. Yet, access to the labor market is acutely disadvantaged by the economic circumstances currently in Greece, the towering unemployment rate and the disjointed labor market (Papadakis et al. 2021), additional shortcomings posed by the antagonism with Greek-speaking recruits, and organizational impediments they come across when they attempt to acquire vital documents, may lead to undeclared employment with rigorous repercussions pertaining to fundamental social rights (ECRE 2020b). According to ECRE (2020b), these impediments are more acute for applicants that live in open mainland camps and/or informal accommodation. Moreover, asylum seekers continue to come across considerable obstacles as far as opening bank accounts is concerned. At the same time, employers prepared to recruit asylum seekers are dispirited for this reason (ECRE 2020b).

The Greek Council for Refugees has drafted a report that sums up several practices that lead to the precarity of refugees. The report mentions, among others, there is a sort of a ban on the movement of asylum seekers inland, which results in overcrowding and deteriorating living conditions for migrants/refugees that live on the islands. In addition, the report refers to the inadequate hygienic conditions, as well as to unshackled mental health issues, and to shortages of medical staff at reception and identification centers (Greek Council for Refugees, 2019, 40). Another notable finding is that there is limited access to free legal assistance. Last, the report argues that vulnerable groups and people who have been tortured (in their home countries) do not always receive the special care they are entitled to (Greek Council for Refugees 2019).

Conclusions

This article set out to investigate the evolution and transformation of the Greek Migration policy for the period 2015 – 2020. More specifically, the authors, support the view that the evolution and transformation of the Greek Migration Policy goes hand in hand with institutionalized securitization processes that have impacted the precarity of refugees.

The post refugee crisis period was categorized into five nodes, to highlight the non-static character of Greek Migration Policy as an outcome of several crises the Greek state had to deal with. In this context the theory of securitization was employed to examine accompanying securitization processes in the period under examination. Yet, this theory was used from the lens of precarity of refugees to show the pragmatic impact securitization has on refugees, by conducting, in addition, secondary quantitative analysis.

A first reading of the migration policy of Greece for the period 2015-2020, shows a fragmented way of managing migration with a strong tendency of adopting policies that have led to its ‘conservatization’ and to an institutionalized securitization. For Papadakis (2021) the lack of coordination and the deep divisions at the European level played a decisive role in this, but also the problems that the Dublin Regulation creates for Greece, that have essentially transformed it from a transit to a destination country.

The ‘conservatization’ and securitization of the Greek Migration Policy has generated a precarity ‘continuum’ for refugees in a multidimensional way. Refugees in Greece experience social ‘hardship’ in the form of insecure livelihood, uncertainty, dysfunctional access in housing, education and health care provision, which are interrelated with political trends towards institutionalized securitization practices. In fact, it seems that precarity accompanies refugees from the start of their journey, evolves during the same journey and climaxes in Greece, as a host state.

As such, it seems that the state of precarity of refugees has a spiral form, beginning from their physical security and extending to precarity in interactions with other refugees in – mainly – closed camps where living conditions are not decent, to precarity in their interaction with the polity (which takes a realist frame policy stance towards them) and

culminating in their precarity as far as a (limited) part of media and native citizens are concerned, who tend to adopt stereotypic approaches towards them, leading to xenophobia in some cases, exacerbating the spiral of precarity of refugees in an indefinite mode.

These findings show the necessity for the elaboration of a more viable migration policy in the Greek case, given the fact that the five nodes, with all their positive and negative outcomes, have generated enough knowledge capital to elaborate a more sustainable migration policy. In addition, as far as securitization is concerned, the crisis management capital that has been acquired could lead to a positive turn in security policy making. Positive security formulations, in turn, alongside with a more targeted inclusion approach for migrants/refugees that wish to remain in Greece, in tandem with faster bureaucratic processes that will not hinder the access of these groups to welfare provisions, could start reversing the precarity of refugees. The New Pact on Migration, despite its pragmatic security tilting, seems to be a promising start to overcome all the above. But its results remain to be seen, especially taking into account that the Greek Migration Policy is substantially affected by the developments and transformations in the EU Migration Policy.

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Xue Ma - Temporary Movement, Temporary Jobs: “Flexibility” of Food Delivery Workers in China’s Platform Economy *Migration, Mobility, & Displacement* 6: 120-136

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Temporary Movement, Temporary Jobs: “Flexibility” of Food Delivery Workers in China’s Platform Economy¹

Xue Ma

Xue Ma is a PhD student in anthropology interested in social studies of money and finance. Her research is guided by a fundamental inquiry on money, finance, and inequality.

Abstract

“Working for a platform” has become an alternative way for making a living in urban China. Millions of rural migrant workers in China joined the emerging food-order and food-delivery platforms in the past decade, working as “riders” (qishou, aka food delivery workers). Despite the rise of the platform economy and the massive volume of working opportunities it brings to migrant workers, it has not alleviated the socio-economic inequality of this already-marginalized group. This article examines the notion of “flexibility” of gig work in contemporary China, specifically through studying the riders working for food delivery platforms. By investigating the details of working conditions, the recruiting and hiring system, as well as the notion “flexibility” largely used by migrant workers to justify for their motivations in becoming riders, I argue that the platform economy, such as the food delivery industry in China, governs migrant workers with its algorithm design and subcontracting system. Facing the limited options of a sustaining livelihood, rural migrant workers enter the platform economy with “flexibility” as their rationale to make ends meet. However, when examined within the broader socio-economic context, this notion of “flexibility” obscures the fact that platform capitalism further marginalizes rural migrant workers.

This article investigates how platform capitalism unfolds in China through three aspects of the specific work arrangement in the food delivery industry. Firstly, the socio-technical aspect demonstrates the tensions between algorithm design in on-demand service platforms and the corporeal human labour that makes up for the failure in algorithm calculations. Secondly, the labour relations aspect entails the legal framework and reveals the recruiting loopholes in platform capitalism. And lastly, the broader socio-economic positions of millions of gig workers navigating “flexibility” in the post-socialist Chinese market economy. I argue that these three aspects are constitutive for understanding the

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migrant workers² socio-economic position which has not been improved with the rise of the platform economy in China, but is as precarious as exploitative manufacturing jobs, if not more so. The distinctive characteristic of digital gig work, such as the food delivery in China introduced in this article, creates an illusion of new labour relationship in which the workers work for themselves, and they own total “freedom” in choosing when and where to work. The discourse not only displaces the under-examined labour relations in the platform economy, but also redirects the discussion from the socio-economic conditions migrant workers live in, to a techno-utopian vision of society that creates more job opportunities. This article challenges the notion of “freedom” or “flexibility” in the platform economy through discussions around the exploitative labour conditions of migrant workers enacted by the platform economy system.

Much research on migration in China has dealt with rural to urban migration, the rural migrants in urban spaces searching for a better livelihood (Loyalka 2012; Liu 2015; Sun 2019; Shen 2019). Migrant workers constitute one-third of the urban workforce and many of them have been the primary workers of factory jobs, food services and retailing services, and other blue-collar jobs or self-employed small vendors (Che et al. 2020). Rural migrants make up not only a significant part of the cities in terms of maintaining the cities’ functioning, but also as the fundamental force of China’s economic growth in manufacturing since the 1980s after the Reform and Open policy was implemented. In the most recent decade, factory jobs have been declining as the global economy shifts to conditions in which China no longer has an expanding and prosperous manufacturing industry (Zhuo and Huang 2019).

Meanwhile, the digital economy, especially the platform economy, has arisen. The rapid growth and expansion of smartphones made digital platforms and online ordering a hot spot for market competition today. This trend leads to the continued economic growth for relevant techno-centric industries in China. The platform-economy becomes “a distinct mode of socio-technical intermediary and business arrangement that is incorporated into wider processes of capitalization” (Langley and Leyshon 2017: 11). When looking at a typical Chinese white-collar’s day, mobile apps that support one’s lifestyle include: Bike-share app, ride-hailing app, food-ordering and delivery app, online shopping app, and digital payment platforms... Many of these new platform economy businesses rely on the technological advancement in algorithms, including machine learning, and the optimization and platform of processing real-time big data. By training more and more data that was generated in the using of these app services, the algorithm modifies itself and offers more and more “accurate” estimation of service performance. Often in the advertising narratives of the platform economies, the emphasis lands on “quickness”, “accuracy” and “intelligent technology”. Benefited from the large scale of user amount in contemporary China, businesses that rise from the platform economy gained rapid expansion and success in the market. However, the celebrated outlook on these businesses and its technological advances are not only a story of how

2 The population being studied here, food delivery riders, are mainly constituted by rural migrant workers (more than 70%). See: <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1864/migrant-food-delivery-workers-struggle-to-belong-in-beijing>

technology makes successful business, but it is also a story of how human labour has become the corporeal cost to allow the “progress” in technology. This research builds on such tensions in technology and labour relations in China, specifically through the examination of “flexibility” gig workers such as riders use as a narrative for entering the gig economy. The technical mechanism in the food delivery app(s) demonstrates the brutal reality of how human labour, while constantly getting disciplined by the service demands, adapts and compromises to technology.

Specifically, I will first look into the relationship of algorithms with workers by looking closer at the design and specifics of the delivery app’s algorithm and the impact of this technology on shaping a new form of subjectivity of workers. Second, I will discuss the recruiting system in the food delivery industry and point out the layers of exploitation in its subcontracting system. Lastly, I will focus on the “flexibility” discourses among workers, which hide the underlying inequality of production relations in a platform economy. Drawing from governmentality studies, this research unravels the socio-technical relationship between the platform and human labour, as well as offering a critical look at the concept of “flexibility” in the labour relationship between technology companies and millions of migrant workers working in its system.

Governing through Algorithm

There are about 469 million users of food-delivery platforms in China (as of June 2021, China News). This new urban lifestyle not only illustrates how technology drives everyday lifestyle changes of the urban population, but is also an example of the fast-paced, time-accurate demand of a modern capitalistic society. The process of food ordering and delivery unfolds as follows. A customer places an order for food delivery on the platform, while being notified of the estimated delivery time. A rider gets an order notification after the system processes the placement of the order from the customer and dispatches it to the riders nearby. The rider then clicks “accept the order” and moves to the restaurant to pick up the food. After arriving at the restaurant, the rider will report to the system by clicking “arrived”. A worker at the restaurant informs the rider that the food is ready to be picked up, the rider picks up the food while clicking “picked up” and then moves to the customer’s location. The algorithm-backed dispatching system behind the platform displays the best route and estimated delivery time to the rider. Once the food is given to the customer, the rider clicks “delivered” as the mark of completion for this order in the system. The entire process has time stamps at each step, and customers will be able to see where the delivery worker’s location is once the order is placed.

At first examination, this simplified process seems straightforward with a clear flow of different tasks. When everything goes as the delivery system assumes and predicts, it is a smooth and successful order completion. Yet, in the actual process of doing food delivery work, many unpredictable and unresolvable barriers hinder the delivery performance. As a research report surveying riders shows, the top listed reasons for riders failing to deliver on time are: the time for restaurants to make food ready is longer

than the system assumed; traffic conditions; and weather conditions (The Beijing News 2020). The mismatch of system estimation and worker's actual delivery time shows a lack of concrete consideration about realistic situations. What this mismatching shows is an unequal human-technology relationship, in which the human body has to compromise and work harder to enable the smooth performance of technology. As scholars studying the impact of technology on the labour process indicate, algorithms need to be examined on dissolving its authority to the medium of software platforms (Wells et al. 2020). The basic (simplified) logic behind the algorithm in these on-demand platforms is tied to data, mainly through a positive data feedback loop. To make the algorithm more accurate and "smart", the feedback loop requires more and more training data to be fed back into the algorithm (Van Doorn and Badger 2020: 1483). The core component for the algorithm to function and perform better is to have the data, which come from every single delivery order the riders have completed with their bodies.

Food delivery applications achieve the fast speed and accuracy to provide better services for customers. This is not a simple result of technological advancement, but a gain of corporate profit and reputation at the brutal expense of human labour's sacrifices and compromises. The rise of the platform economy should not be viewed simply as a progress made by technology. A critical stance would view it as a continuation of the hypothetical economic vision about the human world, which assumes every individual as self-interested and maximizing personal utility. This vision is demonstrated through the very design of the dispatching algorithms of the on-demand platforms, which maximizes corporate gain through an individualistic, competitive labour system. Migrant workers have long been taken for granted as cheap labour in this utilitarian calculation of economic gain for corporations.

When riders accept orders and hit the road to deliver food orders, numerous barriers hinder their performance. Traffic hours and road conditions are obvious factors, yet not entirely considered by the algorithm design. Even if a "simple problem" such as traffic control can be taken into account for the estimation of delivery time, the actual road and traffic conditions in the delivery process is always reduced to simpler scenarios in the route design, which is the nature of the computer-based algorithm. Experienced riders often share the tip that a new rider should try to accept orders within the small geographical area the rider is familiar with, to avoid time delays in unfamiliar routes.

This tip is also implied in the design of the algorithm, seen from a report by a leader of the dispatching algorithm team in one of the platform companies (He 2018). The report points out that "the delivery scenarios are very complex, in which weather, road conditions, the riders' skills, and restaurant efficiency in making food etc. are all at play in the delivery efficiency. These significantly increase the randomness and complexity, posing critical challenges to the stability and adaptability of the dispatching algorithms." (He 2018) However, the emphasis on increasing the delivery efficiency is not only about increasing the algorithm design, but also about the riders:

"To get a substantial increase of delivery efficiency, (we) need not only to work hard on the AI dispatching system (order dispatching, route planning,

ETA), but also to increase the 'added' competencies of riders constantly, to make them accomplish [the following]: the more they deliver, the more 'familiar' they are (to the route), the more 'smooth' (their delivery process is), and the 'faster' (they deliver)."

Riders have to be very familiar with the area or region where they work, to become more and more proximate to the estimated time of delivery. The road does not only refer to the public road on the busy streets, but also the roads near the destination which are often inside apartment complexes. Inside these apartment complexes, usually riders are not allowed to ride their scooters. They switch to walking, actually running because oftentimes, the estimated time of delivery is already approaching soon. The GPS direction from the platform doesn't always know the exact way to go to the correct apartment building when it's inside the apartment complex, leaving the workers who have never been there confused and lost, delaying the time of delivery further. This delivery trip could also go into further details, such as waiting for the elevator (delayed during rush hours), or even climbing the stairs if the elevator doesn't work. With the analysis of the infrastructure, it is clear to see that logistics in the entire delivery trip involve more than the obvious necessities. Under the algorithm's "accurate" estimation, delivery workers make sure most of the necessities are available and functional, in case any single factor fails them to deliver the food on time.

In contrast to the carefully designed rigorous algorithm which is claimed to be very accurate and 'smart', the practices of food delivery are filled with unexpected challenges and barriers. As a result, riders have to speed up, go against the traffic flow, break some traffic codes in order to arrive on time. These practices mostly result in an increase in the speed to deliver the food, but it also results in higher risks that sometimes bring severe accidents for riders on the road (Lai 2020). Therefore, riders are constantly catching up with the algorithm's estimates. The human efforts, carried out by the riders here, are the very medium between the digital platform's algorithm and the unpredictable reality, to cover up the failure of the algorithm. Human labour's body makes it possible for an algorithm to generate data about the distance, time and speed which the algorithm has no other way to produce if not relying on each rider's labour. In the perspective of the relationship between labour and the algorithm, an algorithm has the agency to control and discipline labour through its mechanism, to realize the extraction of labour value. The maximization of extracting labour value is part of profit maximization for the platform economy, which views the riders as cheap labour only. The logic of algorithm and technocratic design is magnifying the existing unequal power dynamics between labour and employers, human and algorithm. Riders' or workers' experiences,

rights and benefits are neglected and minimized under this power asymmetry between gig workers| and the giant platform companies³.

For the algorithm design, the more riders work, the more data they generate for the system, which could be used to increase the accuracy of user location, delivery time estimation (He 2018), and order processing. In this sense, riders are simultaneously working as data producers, for data is the new vital asset for algorithm-based platforms. This work of producing data for the company without being compensated is similar to the critiques made in critical data studies: “These people who ‘work but need not be paid’ generate ‘value’ through ‘their production of information’ that is extracted and ‘treated as a resource that can be monetized” (Wark 2019: 54 cited in Park 2020 :916).

Obscured by technology’s objectiveness and neutrality, the calculation process of the algorithm is a Blackbox in which outsiders can only see the performance of delivery speed. Especially given the advancement this platform has been achieving in accurately calculating the delivery time, the algorithms in food delivery dispatching produce an objective fact of its fastness and accuracy. Not mentioned or considered in this neutral framework of the algorithm, is the social and political dynamics enacted by the design of the algorithm. To solve the problems in food delivery dispatch algorithms create a calculative mechanism that measures and quantifies the performance, and then connects the performance to incentivize delivery workers to work more. Several scholars have studied this gamified system of algorithms in convincing riders to log in and keep working (van Doorn and Chen 2021). “Once a particular set of calculative practices are established as legitimate (or true), they tend to become internalized by the subjects they are supposed to govern, thus producing the self-governing subject.” (Introna 2015: 39) With the internalized logic of delivering food orders faster, completing more orders, these riders easily burn out and work towards the limit of one’s limited availability in a day. Governmentality is a particularly useful approach in understanding the algorithmic governance because it “allow(s) us to show how practice becomes problematized, how calculative practices are enacted as technologies of governance...finally, how such domains of knowledge become internalized in order to enact self-governing subjects” (Introna 2015: 17)

Governing through “flexibility”

The flexible arrangement in labour relations seen in platform capitalism is not a new phenomenon, especially in the post-socialist market-oriented employment system in China. “Flexible employment (*linghuo jiuye*)” is an official term used in China’s legal

³ Note: A recent update from one of the major food delivery platforms in China states that the platform company unveils its algorithms on estimated time of delivery (September 12, 2021. http://china.cnr.cn/yaowen/20210912/t20210912_525598982.shtml) and order dispatching (November 6, 2021. https://www.sohu.com/a/499460350_115565). In describing the rationales behind modified algorithm design, the platform claims that they are taking the riders into consideration. For example, changes in the delivery time would be modified in the newly added functions in the system. The new features give more time to riders for delivery by changing the delivery time from a fixed time to a range of time. It also allows riders to make changes to orders as opposed to being penalized for uncompleted or delayed orders (in previous versions of the system).

system of labour relations (Chen 2021: 82). As discussed in the study of temporal work and precarity in China's post-socialist labour market, staffing agencies have operated since the market reforms of the 1980s and the consequential large-scale layoffs in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) (Xu 2013: 145). The flexible employment arrangement deployed by temporary staffing agencies solve the issue of high unemployment for both government and workers, but with different implications: workers laid off from SOEs no longer enjoy the "iron rice bowl" and associated job benefits and social welfare, while the state has accumulated surplus of labour for the market to employ (Xu 2013: 147). Flexibility is both the strategy and consequence of this recruiting arrangement mediated by staffing agencies. Companies benefit from this arrangement by much lower labour costs and minimal job security or benefits, while workers are left by themselves in seeking ways to make a living.

The job market for rural migrant workers is not promising, being unpredictable and having scattered working opportunities and practices (Sun 2019: 53). With platformization, delivery labour work becomes detached from formal employment relationships with the platform company. A few of the most concerned consequences of platform capitalism regarding workers' rights are summarized as follow: "Workers are no longer hired into jobs but merely hired to perform one-off tasks...[In the platform work], gone are sick days, worker compensation, minimum wage coverage, eligibility for Social Security or unemployment insurance, or coverage under the National Labour Relations Act (NLRA) that governs standard employment" (Vallas 2019: 49) This section starts with the exploration on how specifically do platform companies escape its employment obligations with the gig workers, such as riders. The findings show that the primary ways to bypass employment relations are: 1) The on-demand function of the platform; 2) The subcontracting and outsourcing systems. These two channels for platform companies to escape formal employment relations are reflected in the two main types of workers in food delivery industry: the part-time worker (crowdsourcing: *zhong bao*) who can choose their own work time, and full-time worker (designated delivery: *zhuan song*) who is under a subcontracting dispatching company. However, neither of these two types of delivery workers are tied to the company as employees, therefore the corresponding insurance and security are offered at a minimum (such as a simple daily insurance as the only protection).

As a part-time rider, one could choose to work at any time based on personal choice. According to the platform system, the part-time worker sometimes has to compete with other riders to get a delivery order. This competition is mainly a competition based on the internet connection quality and the phone's processing speed itself. A full-time worker will never need to compete with others to get an order and the platform's system will distribute nearby orders to the worker automatically. The full-time workers have to start work at a fixed time, under the supervision of a subcontracting company. The part-time work represents the gig economy's characteristics more because it is based on an individual's own schedule and it fits the on-demand function at the platform.

In the rhetoric of the platform companies, they do not view their relationship to workers as a formal employment relationship. The platform companies, usually tech giants themselves, regard workers as “partners” and independent contractors with self-employed status (Webster 2020: 514). Whether workers are regarded as employees or as independent contractors is the focal point in the debates about labour relations in platform economies. The legal debates make a big difference on how workers should be treated. Take Uber as an example here, researchers Rosenblat and Stark examined a class action lawsuit in California regarding Uber’s relationship to its drivers. In Uber’s legal brief submitted to the lawsuit, Uber asserts that “We make our money from licensing software.... And we happen to have a compensation model that, when they [drivers] use it successfully, we get compensated” (O’Connor et al., 2015:16 as cited in Rosenblat and Stark 2016: 3761). Scholars who studied Uber argue that although Uber self-proclaimed their role as a connective intermediary between drivers and customers, the software mechanism and interface design actually reflect employment structure and hierarchies (between Uber and its drivers) (Rosenblat and Stark 2016: 3761).

As shown above, the part-time riders exemplify the on-demand function of the gig economy, and the impact to employment relationships. Full-time riders working under the subcontracting system is a supplementary aspect for comprehending the platform capitalist nature and impacts on the workers. The main difference between part-time and full-time food delivery work is the level of stress and the corresponding level of income: one could get a higher income doing full-time work but the pressure from the platform and subcontracting company is also much higher. The “full-time” here doesn’t equate to most full-time worker’s labour rights and protection, but just a requirement of the worker’s time fully dedicated to the on-demand platform. Full-time workers apply for the delivery jobs through the official platform but the application eventually gets handled manually through subcontracting companies. The subcontracting companies also actively recruit, train and manage the riders on their own, since this human capital management essentially is their business of making money. The subcontracting or outsourcing companies here become part of the value chain under platform capitalism, further demonstrating the layers of exploitation in the chain of the platform economy.

In the subcontracting system, workers get pre-work training and rigid disciplining on their work performance. Getting one bad review on the platform from a customer would result in a fine of a high amount, which could put the worker’s entire day’s earned income into vain. Many people change from the full-time worker position under the subcontracting company to become part-time workers on their own, simply because they feel the pressure was too high in the former environment. The high cost related to bad reviews for workers not only presents financial costs such as fines, but also the emotional stress under the strict disciplining atmosphere in subcontracting companies.

The subcontracting company usually sets up a delivery station for the area where they maintain business. The manager at the station has a performance matrix to evaluate the rider’s performance in all kinds of dimensions everyday: the frequency of getting orders, the frequency of delivering on-time, and the frequency of getting good or bad reviews

from customers etc. The matrix is connected with the platform so the worker's wage is directly influenced by the performance evaluation. What's more, some stations are strict about delivery workers being polite to customers. Riders have to greet and apologize to customers in the exact way as required: "This is your delivery, sorry for making you wait for so long", "Enjoy your meal!" etc. The requirement of politeness is a result of a "customer-oriented" business strategy, in which the buyers (aka customers) are given the priority and power to comment on services, cancel orders, and negotiate for customer rights (Sun 2019: 54). Through these mechanisms of training and performance evaluation, riders are constantly corrected, punished, and incentivized to perform the work in a certain way so it is not only a service, but also a standardized professional service. Under the monitoring from both the platform and manager of the station, workers strive to gain good performance evaluation in order to avoid the risk of wage deduction. They also try to avoid dealing with the emotional stress which resulted from disputing the bad reviews they found unreasonable. Both the platform design and the performance matrix monitored by the manager of the station end up disciplining the workers' body to act faster, act more "politely", and act towards the priority of business profit.

Subcontracting is an often-used business strategy for companies to escape their employment responsibility. Through outsourcing, the platform company transfers its original task of recruiting, training and being responsible for the workers to a specialized subcontracting company. Ironically, workers wear the uniform from the platform company and yet, are not granted any acknowledged legal tie to the platform company. The subcontracting companies play the role of mediating the frictions between workers and platform companies but at a very limited capacity due to its own scale and business interests.

What matters here in this subcontracting system is the layers of exploitation imposed on migrant workers. The exploitation comes in different forms such as disciplining workers' bodies, scamming migrant workers, and most importantly transferring labour responsibilities through outsourcing. The subcontracting and outsourcing system in a platform economy is also a reflection of the neoliberal order in this economic arrangement. The subcontracting system allows the platform company to escape its employment responsibility towards workers. Workers' rights and protection are minimized to the least possible amount under this arrangement. In addition, the power to negotiate is also minimized for workers while the workers have to rely on the on-demand platform to find gig work and get daily income⁴.

Precarity behind "Flexibility"

Food delivery is becoming one of the most popular jobs for rural migrant workers in urban spaces today. Many workers choose this job because it is more "free" and "flexible". How did this happen for millions of rural migrants in China to take on food

⁴ There have been several small-scale protests organized by grassroots alliances of food delivery riders since 2020. See: <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1006914/can-delivery-drivers-break-their-silence>

delivery work? What is the relationship between platform capitalism and the notion of “flexibility”? What is the reality of survival for migrant workers today? This section aims to understand the various dimensions of the impacts of platform capitalism for migrant worker’s livelihood strategies.

Considering the decrease of factory jobs in China and the ever-expansion of urbanization, what occurred to China’s economic development is a rapid shift to the platform economy (or “Internet Economy” as it is often referred to in China’s economic policy). As China moves up in the GDP-indexed rank of economic impact, the economic structures also shift from one to another (export-oriented to domestic-demand). What remains untold in these economic miracle stories is the precarious reality of rural migrant workers. During the years of economic development, China claimed it achieved poverty alleviation nationally (Zhang 2020), yet the everyday life of rural migrant workers still remains unstable. They are limited in a liminal space when they are away from their rural roots, living in urban space physically, but not belonging, and not benefiting from the urban resources accordingly. Migrant workers were the biggest victims during the financial crisis around 2008, in which 23 million migrant workers suffered from unemployment due to the low need for exporting goods (Cai and Chan 2009 as cited in Che et al. 2020: 2). In 2020, the year when the COVID-19 pandemic hit China first and then globally, rural migrant workers also suffered greatly from unemployment due to the lockdown and economic downturn, much worse than the urban residents (Che et al. 2020). Therefore, job choices for rural migrant workers are very limited today, even in the metropolitan cities.

This is the context in which to understand why migrant workers take on flexible jobs as riders. Despite the unstable and unprotected labour rights in gig work, food delivery work probably is an attractive job for many marginalized rural migrant workers who simply need to make a living. The attractive features of this job are the characteristics of easy-entrance and accessibility, freedom and flexibility, compared to the repetitive fixed-schedule of factory jobs, and the quickness of getting wages to satisfy the rising financial cost of living in a city.

Most riders use the two words “flexible” and “free” to talk about their reasons for choosing this job. Many workers give the narrative that they prefer to work as a rider compared to a factory worker because it offers more freedom, and there is no hierarchical management. In academic discussions, “flexibility” is a description of the cornerstone of the neoliberal agenda “—embodied in mandates for the fluid movements and restructuring of labour, capital, and information” (Freeman 2007). In mobility studies, “flexibility” has been argued as an active strategy utilized by migrants to achieve new citizenship, as both a goal and method for upward social mobility (Liu 1996; Ong 1996). In the narrative of flexibility and freedom, these “neoliberal rationalities of self-enterprise and privatized practice of self-actualization” (Hoffman 2008: 181) is elicited. The kind of neoliberal self, animated in platform capitalism, is a particular conundrum for many rural migrant workers. On the one hand, to work more and according to one’s own flexible schedule is liberating for making the most

earnings out of the available time and resources. On the other hand, the choice rural migrant workers face in a post-manufacturing, internet-business oriented environment is actually very limited, making gig jobs, such as food delivery, the easiest choice for many rural migrants.

In these daily narratives and academic discourses around “flexibility”, a central question to ask is: what does “flexibility” mean and who is it for? Behind the narratives of “flexibility” and “freedom”, a harsh environment of survival is in front of these marginalized migrant workers. Some riders are taking this job as a part-time job only, while having another or multiple temporary jobs in order to make ends meet. Some female riders are doing this job in the gap time when children go to school. And many riders take on this job on friends’ recommendation as a job that is “better” than factory jobs. These examples offer some context behind flexibility in this gig work. What remains to be answered is: is flexibility really a choice? Two researchers, Van Doorn and Badger, went to experience various gig work including the food delivery work across different countries and summarized the limited choices these workers have, “you satisfy the platform’s algorithms and improve your metrics only for as long as this satisfies your needs” (2020: 1484). Therefore, most rural migrant workers do not actually have many available options to choose, but merely choose one that comes the easiest and satisfies the current (financial) need.

“Flexibility” also brings a cost of suffering intense pressure during flexible work. The intense pressures can be physical because of an exhausted body, can also be mental because of the rigid performance evaluation. As a matter of fact, the motivation to change one’s job from food delivery to other jobs is high among riders. Many of them do not view food delivery work as a sustainable one. The pressures from multiple sources in this job make some riders quit the job as a way out, even though they may not have a placement for the next job upon leaving the food delivery work. This is not unique to the food delivery job, but it’s magnified in this industry given the direct competition of speed, efficiency which are all in turn a burden on the riders. In China, migrant workers are constantly switching among temporary jobs in the cities, while the social mobility is harder and harder given the increasing living expenses in urban spaces (Loyalka 2012).

Meanwhile, this flexibility of food delivery labour also means no legal employment contract, no social welfare, and no legal attachment to the corporation the worker works “for”. As Freeman states: “From one vantage point, “flexibility” connotes instability, changes in temporal and spatial frameworks, and an erosion of both economic and social commitments” (2007: 253) In this logic, “flexibility” is not for the workers, but for the platform companies because they are completely free of the employment responsibilities towards riders.

Notably, even though “flexibility” is the major narrative in selecting gig work, such as food delivery, a more fundamental rationale behind this trend is the higher income food delivery work promises. The average monthly income for a full-time rider is more than

the average income for many manufacturing jobs (CCTV News 2021). To understand the rise of gig work and growth of the platform economy, this comparison is important. In searching for ways of making a living, food delivery jobs are widely viewed as a type of promising work that rewards the ones who work more hours. Under this “work more, get paid more” incentive, riders make an average monthly income higher than other blue-collar jobs by working long hours and sacrificing holidays. Therefore, “flexibility” needs to be understood together with the financial incentive in understanding the riders’ rationale in working for the platform as gig workers. In this sense, flexibility as a rationale is moving the attention away from the brutal socio-economic reality migrant workers face in finding a reasonably-paid job. It creates an illusion of ascribing to the decline in manufacturing jobs and the rise in platform jobs as an explanation for why migrant workers today, especially the young ones, prefer and are used to an urban lifestyle. The narrative of flexibility is true in riders’ description for working as a gig worker, but it should not be understood as active choice-making. What lies beyond this narrative is the marginalized position migrant worker occupy in the ever-increasing socio-economic inequality in China today.

Conclusion:

The platform economy has been expanding globally in the rise of information and communications technology. This particular form of business has been growing exponentially in China during the past decade due to population scale, smartphone accessibility and low cost of rider labour. Faster than technological growth is the increased competition among food delivery platform companies, especially the few monopoly companies. In order to gain the dominating position in market share, companies constantly optimize the technology of algorithms, but hidden in the technological growth is the squeezed time, increased risk for riders in every single order they deliver. What I argue in this research is a critical view of the technological growth that favours convenience and efficiency for customers, but less attends to welfare and rights of labour. Behind the narrative of efficiency and convenience is the striving and survival of migrant workers who are marginalized in the story of economic prosperity in China.

Over the years of economic development in China since the 1980s, rural migrant workers from different generations have experienced the ups and downs in the economic circle. However, the repetitive cycle of poverty for migrant workers remains a problem despite the overall economic growth and government’s poverty alleviation measures. The migrant workers’ fate is closely related to their job precarity and meager social safety protections (Che et al. 2020: 2). Platform economy doesn’t alleviate migrant workers’ precarious situation, but further extracts their labour value to gain the maximum profit for corporations. This article has demonstrated this through three aspects:

First, the technology design of algorithms in the platform company of food delivery takes far little consideration of the worker experiences and infrastructure’s condition in food delivery work, which is a significant factor for increased risks involved in this job.

In this unequal relationship between technology and human labour, migrant workers' labour is not only controlled and disciplined by the algorithm, but also acts as a data point fixing the technology errors from the algorithm and improving the algorithm by providing massive amounts of real-time data.

Second, through the subcontracting system in its recruiting structure, the platform economy puts layers of exploitation upon the workers: disciplining the worker's body to perform the job in a machine-like standard, extracting the worker's value by the multiple actors in the recruiting process. The subcontracting system also denotes the removal of responsibility from corporations in the platform economy, while minimizing the wage guarantee, social welfare protection, and eventually job security for the riders.

Lastly, the "flexibility" as a motivation for workers to join this food delivery work reflects the limited options for migrant workers who have been marginalized until today. It was exactly the "freedom" and "flexibility" discourses in the platform economy that obscure the socio-economic reality rural migrant workers live in. From secure job assignment to autonomous decision making that allows one to elicit the entrepreneurial self, a significant shift in post-socialist China occurs through the narrative of "freedom", especially freedom from state intervention.



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Migrants' integration in Greece and the role of social and solidarity economy

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the 2015 refugee "crisis", the integration of asylum seekers and refugees began to feature in the public debate. The traditional picture of Greece, as a reception and transit but not destination country, has shifted to a fragmented integration framework since the 1990s. This paper critically assesses contemporary integration policies in Greece. On one hand, it argues these integration policies are ones of assimilation. On the other hand, it explores the alternative, inclusive framework being introduced by social and solidarity economy practices. Based on qualitative desk and field research conducted in Greece between 2020 and 2021, it discusses how integration has been intertwined with assimilationist perspectives, analyzes the profile of integration policies, and explores the contributions of alternative practices set out by social and solidarity economy initiatives.

Introduction

The 2015 refugee “crisis” mobilized EU member-states, civil society organizations and individuals in support of migrants¹ coming mostly from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Eritrea². However, attention quickly shifted to the governance of mobility, with the European Agenda on Migration among the first attempts to address this issue³. Despite the burden-sharing mechanisms suggested through the relocation and resettlement processes, EU policies have been focused on preventing migrants from entering the EU and not on their integration into the new environments they have to confront. Xenophobic voices in many European countries have rendered more harsh the national policies devised to deal with migrants’ arrivals, while the “Promotion of our European way of life”, as one of the EU Commission’s top six priorities, suggested an assimilationist view for those “lucky” ones who succeed in entering. The EU perspective closely mirrors Greece’s own approach to migrants’ integration.

1 Although documented, undocumented and forced migrants, asylum seekers and refugees reflect different administrative categories, we refer to migrants in order to highlight the broader processes of migration and integration, while we distinguish between them where and when appropriate. See also Crawley and Skleparis, 2017.

2 https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Annula_Risk_Analysis_2016.pdf

3 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1485255362454&uri=CELEX:52015DC0240>

With Greece in the fifth year of an economic crisis, the 2015 refugee "crisis" found the Greek government negotiating with its creditors regarding a third austerity programme. This, subsequently, led to a national referendum and a new electoral round in September 2015. As such, migration was then sidelined both with regard to the governmental agenda and the public sphere, as domestic politics came to the fore. This was not the case with the grassroots, since the Greek islands witnessed the arrival of countless volunteers and solidarity groups engaged in rescue operations, providing healthcare, food and clothing, and assisting migrants' onward journey towards the northern borders and the Balkan corridor (Oikonomakis, 2018). Once the economic and political issues had stabilized somewhat, governmental attention shifted to migration. Although the Syriza-led government adopted a progressive rhetoric in welcoming and offering hospitality to asylum seekers⁴, its migration-related policies were mostly characterized by the criminalization of solidarity through the identification of rescuer-volunteers with people traffickers⁵ and the approval of the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016. Given that migrants could no longer continue their journey to Northern European countries due to the closure of the Balkan corridor in March 2016, the need for integration policies became urgent.

The international resonance of the refugee "crisis", together with Greece's inability to respond, prompted a number of humanitarian organizations and NGOs to take over the institutional reception of new arrivals. At the grassroots level, solidarity groups mobilized in support of newcomers' rights, while new squats were opened up to facilitate their accommodation (Kotronaki, Serdedakis and Alexandridis, 2022). Nevertheless, the coming to power of the right-wing New Democracy party in 2019 led to still harsher policies relating to migration being applied. A stricter asylum application process⁶ was introduced, new border fences⁷ and prison-like camps⁸ were constructed, and the new government was also accused of implementing illegal pushbacks⁹.

A coherent and proactive approach to integration, meaning a set of institutional processes that assist migrants' smooth economic, social, political, and cultural participation, has never been a priority for the Greek state (Tramountanis, 2022). The largescale integration strategies devised in 2013 and 2019 suggested conflicting approaches and were subject to governmental changes, while the short-term integration programmes that were activated in the aftermath of the refugee "crisis" were accompanied by difficulties in their bureaucratic implementation. In this respect, the rise of numerous social and solidarity economy (SSE) initiatives, which supported vulnerable populations during the 2010 economic and the 2015 refugee "crisis", seem to suggest a more inclusive approach. Based on desk research, the analysis of documents and qualitative interviews between 2020 and 2021 conducted in the context of SSE initiatives in

4 <https://www.cnn.gr/politiki/story/60671/tsipras-apodeixame-oti-exoyme-pleonasma-ithikis-kai-agapis>

5 https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/dikaiosyni/319170_sto-skamni-i-allileggyi-sti-lesbo

6 <http://www.forintegration.eu/pl/the-new-law-on-asylum-in-greece>

7 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/30/greece-plans-to-build-sea-barrier-off-lesbos-to-deter-migrants>

8 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/22/prisons-in-paradise>

9 <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/apr/28/revealed-eu-border-agency-involved-in-hundreds-of-refugee-pushbacks>

Athens regarding their role in the economic and refugee “crisis”, the paper analyzes the way integration has been perceived in Greece and explores how SSE provides alternative visions. As such, this paper first discusses how integration is intertwined with assimilationist perspectives, then goes on to analyze the perspective on integration in Greece, explores the alternative practices promoted by SSE initiatives, and finally concludes with suggestions for future research.

Exploring the assimilationist perspective on integration

The two-way model of integration and its limits

Up until the 1960s, integration was a term used in American sociological studies in opposition to ‘the official black and white segregation practised prior to the civil rights movement in many parts of the US’ (Favell, 2001, 8-9). In that context, ethnic groups in the 1960s and 1970s had demanded ‘multicultural programmes and consequently the integration of (forced) migrants into receiving states’ (Vrečer, 2010, 488-490). By the 1980s, the term began to be employed in the context of migration. In the USA, the arrival of Asian and Hispanic migrant groups in the 1980s and 1990s raised questions regarding ‘cultural accommodation and assimilation’ (Favell, 2001, 8-9). In Western Europe, however, integration was used as an umbrella term to describe ‘the various types of policies and practices’ (Favell, 2001, 4) addressing the circumstances in which migrants and minorities lived.

Integration thus reflected a third way between assimilation and multiculturalism. Assimilation has been criticized for suppressing cultural diversity, while multiculturalism is seen as the remedy. In Canada, the first country to introduce multiculturalism as official state policy in the 1970s, it was designed to protect cultural differences and distribute power and privileges across ethnic groups (Wong and Guo, 2015). In contrast with these extremes, integration recognizes the importance of social bonds within ethnic communities in order to create a safe environment for the newcomers. In addition, these social bonds render migrants better able to build bridges with local communities (McPherson, 2010, 551).

Following the political developments of the 1980s and 1990s, integration has come to dominate public discourse and has become synonymous with the successful settlement of migrants. European governments favoured labour migration, with much of Europe’s economic growth being due to the efforts of migrant workers (Trenz and Triandafyllidou, 2016). The popularity of the term resulted in yet more misuse of the concept, since assimilation or multiculturalism were conceived as forms of integration and not as distinct settlement processes (McPherson, 2010, 550). The twenty-first century brought changes in the international arena and shifted the politics of integration towards more restrictive and assimilationist logics (McPherson, 2010). The political environment after the 9/11 terrorist attacks fostered a heightened islamophobia and

identified migration with a threat, this fearful mood characterizing the western political environment until the 2015 refugee “crisis” (Duru, Hanquinet and Cesur, 2017).

Following a minimal definition, integration points to ‘the inclusion [of individual actors] in already existing social systems’ (Esser, 2004 in Penninx, 2019, 3). In their efforts to provide a more comprehensive view, scholars have defined integration as ‘a generations lasting process of inclusion and acceptance of migrants in the core institutions, relations and statuses of the receiving society’ (Heckmann, 2006 in Penninx, 2019, 3). For Penninx, integration reflects ‘the process of settlement of newcomers in a given society, to the interaction of these newcomers with the host society, and to the social change that follows immigration’ (Penninx, 2019, p.5). For Vrečer, integration is a two-way process which includes ‘(forced) migrants in the receiving society in such a way that allows them to practise the culture of their country of origin in public’, contrary to the one-way assimilation models which require migrants to adapt to the dominant culture (Vrečer, 2010, 488-490). Spencer and Charsley note that integration is a two-way process that concerns both newcomers and the receiving communities; it engages a number of actors since it runs across many social institutions and not only public services; it concerns many interlinked domains, such as economic, social, cultural, identity and the sense of belonging; it can be affected by a plethora of different factors, policy interventions and social networks among them; and it ‘takes place, mostly, at the local level’ (Spencer and Charsley, 2016 in Broadhead, 2020, 8).

Recent scholarship criticizes the traditional conception of national integration models (Saharso, 2019; Schiller and Hackett, 2018). Nevertheless, this neo-colonial approach, whereby migrants should adjust to, and be integrated into the western way of life, is rather evident in European states (Schinkel, 2018, 9-14), and is also reflected in the EU approach regarding the protection of the European way of life. In this respect, integration seems to conceive of the host society as a single, one-dimensional entity to which migrants should strive to belong. As Favell emphatically states, ‘when political actors and policy intellectuals talk about “integration”, they are inevitably thinking about integration into one, single, indivisible (national) “state”, and one, simple, unitary (national) “society”’ (Favell, 2001, 3). This tendency to think of host societies and migrant groups as homogenous wholes, frame migrants’ integration as a problem. More importantly, thus phrased the problem of integration concerns in the main the migrants themselves, despite the larger shares of resources and power that domestic institutions have, rendering them much more decisive for the development of integration processes (Penninx, 2019; Saharso, 2019; Vrečer, 2010).

Although integration reflects a two-way process of mutual adaptation, disproportionate attention is paid to migrants’ integration outcomes compared to ‘how the adaptation of host society may be understood’ (Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore, 2017, 187-188). Put bluntly, non-migrants do not consider themselves subject to integration and they are not measured by the same variables as migrants are (Klarenbeek, 2019, 2). This reflects the fact that the host population is regarded as ‘the norm to which immigrants should aspire’ (Saharso, 2019, 1-2) and provides integration with an individualistic

neoliberal logic. Integration becomes the duty of migrants as individuals, based on the simplistic idea that society is simply the aggregation of its members. Thus, a potential failure of integration is conceived as the failure of individuals and not of the series of social systems, power relations and institutions that shape the social setting (Schinkel, 2018, 3).

Integration through accommodation, employment and social relations

Accommodation and employment are central factors for migrants' integration. Research on migrants' accommodation concerns the processes involved in residential integration or segregation 'in areas dominated by indigenous locals' (Valenta and Bunar, 2010, 466). Residential segregation is often ascribed to economic marginalization, discrimination and voluntary self-segregation (Valenta and Bunar, 2010, 466). In times of increased migratory flows, accommodation schemes are either arranged through public policy frameworks targeting social exclusion or are at the mercy of international short-term funding. The latter has been all too evident in the Greek context during the refugee crisis, with NGOs being the main implementing partners of EU-funded accommodation schemes.

Migrants' employment constitutes another crucial factor, conditioning all other aspects of integration (Harrell-Bond, 1996 in Vrečer, 2010). Lack of employment and lack of rights to access employment, usually correlate with marginalization and deskilling (Vrečer, 2010), and even when migrants manage to overcome institutional barriers and enter the labour market, they often have to settle for low-paid and low-skilled positions. In the case of asylum seekers and refugees, deskilling processes are particularly harsh, since in all likelihood they will lack adequate documentation. Of course, such processes are not independent of the dominant neoliberal logic and the creation of a precariat, characterized by increased flexibility and insecurity.

Lastly, social relations are critical for migrants' integration. Ager and Strang (2008) distinguish social bonds, social bridges and social links as important factors for migrants' social integration. Social bonds refer here to the establishment of connections with 'like-ethnic groups', which allow migrants to maintain their culture (languages, customs, religions) and have a point of reference in the new social settings (Ager and Strang, 2008, 178-179). Social bridges refer to the establishment of relations with other social groups. Small acts of friendliness, such as being greeted by neighbours or participating in local activities, foster social bridges and develop sentiments of belonging to the host society (Ager and Strang, 2008, 179-180). Finally, social links refer to 'the connection between individuals and structures of the state, such as government services' (Ager and Strang, 2008, 181), a process that is impeded by structural barriers. Having sketched out how integration processes may occur in the guise of accommodation, employment and social relations, we turn our attention to the practical application of integration policies in Greece.

The integration landscape in Greece

Migrants' integration has never been a priority for the Greek state. According to Tramountanis' (2022) detailed research, Greece's integration policies can be divided into four periods: 1991-2000, an early phase characterized by repressive measures; 2001-2008, when there were more comprehensive attempts to regulate migration characterized by more positive approaches to integration; 2008-2015, when the economic crisis tended to bring about the de-integration of migrants; and 2016-today, which is characterized by the effects of the refugee "crisis".

Up until 1990, Greece was perceived as a departure country, with Germany, USA, Canada and Australia being considered top destination countries. The dissolution of the Soviet Union triggered the first migratory wave, with migrants arriving in Greece mainly from the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Expats of Greek origin known as *omogeneis*, mostly coming from the border region with Albania and the wider area around Pontos, have been welcomed with specific integration policies (Papataxiarchis, 2006, 63-70). However, the same cannot be said for the rest of the border-crossers. Migrants from Albania, who constituted the majority of newcomers, have been assigned an essentially criminal status, both by mainstream media and state officials. The prevailing assimilationist logic forced newly arrived migrants to undergo baptism as Orthodox Christians and change their names to Greek ones (Papataxiarchis, 2014, 50). This first migration wave was met with arrest and deportation policies, with the state treating migration as a temporary phenomenon.

The beginning of the twenty-first century witnessed the second migration wave, with migrants mostly coming from the MENA region. According to the national population census in 2011, there were around 912,000 migrants living in Greece. Among the non-EU European migrants, the vast majority of them came from Albania (480,851 out of 530,244), while migrants from Pakistan and Georgia made up the largest Asian migrant groups (34,178 and 27,407 respectively out of 138,274)¹⁰. Despite the great number of migrants, the issuing of long-term residence permits was the only available integration policy (Tramountanis, 2022), while the bureaucratic obstacles to applying for or renewing them were manifold and acted as demotivational factors. As such, migrants would seem to have been self-integrated into the Greek reality without any state or market provision.

The 2010 economic crisis, marked as it was by a steep rise in unemployment and by austerity cuts, aggravated the already vulnerable economic plight of migrants. The breakdown of the market negatively affected employees' mobility, with migrants facing increasing difficulties in moving away from low-paid and low-status jobs, while welfare state retrenchment decreased funding opportunities with respect to integration initiatives (Trenz and Triandafyllidou, 2016). Furthermore, the lack of employment has turned many long-term documented migrants to irregular work, since they tend to lack

¹⁰ Tables A.06, <https://www.statistics.gr/el/statistics/-/publication/SAM03/2011>

the social security stamps derived from formal employment, which are prerequisites for renewing their residence permits.

The 2015 refugee "crisis" was a critical point, since almost a million migrants used Greece as an entry point to the EU (Table 1). Initially, Greece was a transit country, with migrants continuing their journey into Northern Europe. However, the closure of the Balkan corridor and the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016, indirectly transformed Greece into a destination country. More specifically, the initial arbitrary nationality-screening at the Slovenian borders reduced mobility and created a chain reaction which was replicated on the Greek-North Macedonian borders and eventually resulted in the closure of the Balkan corridor (Mantanika, 2022). Moreover, according to the abovementioned statement "All new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey into Greek islands as from 20 March 2016 will be returned to Turkey", as those who are not 'applying for asylum or whose application has been found [to be] unfounded or inadmissible', while 'For every Syrian being returned to Turkey from Greek islands, another Syrian will be resettled from Turkey to the EU'¹¹. Migrants were thus in practice trapped in Greece, while those who entered after March 2016 had to remain in the overcrowded and poorly equipped camps on the North Aegean islands until such time as their asylum applications had been scrutinized, a process that might take over two years. In December 2020, the UNHCR estimated that Greece was hosting approximately 119,700 refugees and migrants who had entered after the 2015-2016 refugee crisis, with 19,100 being on the North Aegean islands¹² and greatly exceeding the latter's accommodation capacities.

Table 1. Source: http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179#_ga=2.50999529.1953732923.1620892598-1980877699.1620655236

Institutional approaches to integration

According to the UNHCR, in February 2021 Greece was hosting 91,945 refugees and 80,784 asylum seekers¹³. The vast majority of the former come from Syria (36,013), Afghanistan (15,581) and Iraq (10,455), and the latter predominantly from Afghanistan (29,716), Syria (7,520) and Pakistan (7,138). Despite the relatively low number of asylum seekers and refugees, the Greek state was unable to cater for migrants' integration, with this inability being informed also by a traditional unwillingness to "otherize" newcomers or persons with different customs and values.

As Papataxiarchis (2014; 2006, 30-38) notes, the coercion and assimilation of otherness can be traced back to the very constitution of the Greek state in the nineteenth century. The nationalization processes that followed the acquisition of new territories were combined with the suppression of ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences, and reinforced the idea of a solid and coherent national identity. This in turn promoted an

11 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/>

12 <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/84481>

13 <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/85820>

assimilationist perspective in both institutional policies and everyday social responses throughout modernity, which determined the policies of the Greek state on migration (Ventoura, 2004). Bill 3838 in 2010 and the establishment of local Migrant Integration Councils (SEMs) were an exception. According to Tramountanis (2022), Bill 3838 granted specific categories of legally-residing long-term migrants voting and electoral rights in local elections and allowed children with one non-Greek parent to acquire citizenship at birth, if their parent had been legally residing in Greece for at least five years, or if they themselves had attended a Greek school for six or more years. Moreover, SEMs were responsible for investigating the problems of long-term migrants, raising awareness and promoting their smooth social inclusion. Nevertheless, problems of reduced resources and personnel limited SEMs' success (Tramountanis, 2022). In addition, the law was deemed unconstitutional in 2013, a ruling serving to reinforce the perception that citizenship should be awarded as a "trophy" of successful integration and not as a means for its application. This perception was also in evidence in the 2013 integration strategy and in the 2015 parliamentary discussions on the new citizenship bill¹⁴.

In 2013, the right-wing government of New Democracy introduced the National Strategy for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals. Although the Strategy referred to the protection of human rights and the equal access of all residents to the country's economic, social and political life, it adopted a rather assimilationist perspective: it highlighted migrants' obligations in integrating themselves into Greek society while downplaying the role of the state. Indeed, in this document integration was framed as migrants' incorporation into the dominant economic and social reality of Greece, citizenship remained an end and not a means to successful integration, while throughout the Strategy there were references to the problem of *illegal* migration that needed to be tackled¹⁵. As such, the Strategy was merely adding an institutional stamp of approval to the already existing, albeit hidden assimilationist approach of the state.

Prior to 2016, integration policies were subject to departments within a number of different Ministries, the Ministry of the Interior among them. In the aftermath of the refugee "crisis", the integration of third-country nationals became the responsibility of the newly-created Ministry of Migration Policy, but left the Citizenship Directorate under the Ministry of the Interior (Tramountanis, 2022). Along with the establishment of the Directorate of Social Integration, Migrant' Integration Centres (KEMs) were established as branches of municipal community centres, their purpose being to provide information, to create networks and to offer language courses for legally residing third-country nationals, refugees and registered asylum seekers¹⁶. In addition, the agencies previously known as SEMs were transformed into Migrant and Refugee Integration Councils (SEMPs), without however addressing their structural weaknesses (Tramountanis, 2022).

14 <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/UserFiles/a08fc2dd-61a9-4a83-b09a-09f4c564609d/es20150708.pdf>

15 Pages 86-87 in https://www.ypes.gr/UserFiles/f0ff9297-f516-40ff-a70e-eca84e2ec9b9/ethniki_stratigiki.pdf

16 <https://migration.gov.gr/en/migration-policy/integration/draseis-koinonikis-entaxis-se-ethniko-epipedo/kentra-entaxis-metanaston/>

In 2019 and before the new electoral round, the Syriza government sketched out a new National Strategy for Integration, which aimed to reframe the previous Strategy from a more progressive perspective and also to address the greater integration needs of newcomer migrants. The new Strategy adopted a somewhat multicultural perspective, underlined mutual adaptation and highlighted the crucial role of local municipalities in fostering migrants' integration¹⁷. Nevertheless, and despite their different characteristics, both Strategies seemed to reflect political declarations made at a time when migration dominated public discourse, rather than actually shaping enduring integration policies and putting forward institutional changes. This was also reflected by the decision of New Democracy, directly after taking office in 2019, to merge the Ministry of Migration Policy with the Ministry of Citizen Protection, declaring that migration management should not create insecurity for citizens, only to reconstitute it six months later as the Ministry of Migration and Asylum (Tramountanis, 2022).

Along with a number of other initiatives, such as the Cities Network for Integration¹⁸, the establishment of the Help Desk¹⁹, and the efforts made to officially register experts working as inter-cultural mediators²⁰, the EU-funded Helios²¹ project is probably the most widely-used. Having served around 30,775 refugees²², Helios provides rent subsidies to recognized refugees for 6 to 12 months after they have found an apartment of their own, while they are also obliged to participate in integration courses, which they attend daily, such as language learning and soft skills development. Although positive, these scattered efforts did not reflect a holistic and inclusionary approach to migrants' integration. Moreover, they have been supervised by international and EU funds at a time when Greece was under the spotlight, and their (smooth) continuation is not guaranteed once they have passed under national control²³.

Overall, we can argue that since institutional attention was mostly drawn to reception policies, subsequent steps which could perhaps connect reception to integration have been sidelined (Mantantika, 2022). Employment and accommodation are indicative here. Although both registered asylum seekers and refugees have the right to employment, the former do not have the right to be self-employed or start their own enterprises²⁴. Furthermore, Bill 4636, introduced by the New Democracy government in 2019, suspended the right to employment for asylum seekers for the first six months after their application had been lodged²⁵. The data supplied by IOM and UNHCR

17 <http://www.opengov.gr/immigration/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2019/01/ethniki-stratigiki.pdf>

18 https://greece.iom.int/sites/greece/files/CNI%20NEWSLETTER%20JULY%202020_EL.pdf

19 <https://migration.gov.gr/migration-policy/integration/drasis-koinonikis-entaxis-se-ethniko-epipedo/helpdesk-entaxis-dikaioychon-diethnoys-prostasias/>

20 <https://migration.gov.gr/migration-policy/integration/drasis-koinonikis-entaxis-se-ethniko-epipedo/drasis-diapolitismikis-diamesolavisis/>

21 <https://greece.iom.int/sites/greece/files/HELIOS%20Factsheet%20May%202021%20W1.pdf>

22 36,5% Syrians. 32,8% Afghans and 12,3% Iraqis, with 52,12% of housing contracts concerning the region of Attica and 19,08% the one of Macedonia.

23 Indicative here are the evictions of persons granted international protection from the ESTIA apartments, see <https://www.msf.org/greece-evicts-vulnerable-refugees-leaves-them-streets>

24 For more detailed information with respect to asylum seekers' and refugees' rights to employment and the requisite documentation, see <https://help.unhcr.org/greece/living-in-greece/access-to-employment/>

25 <https://migration.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/%CE%9D.-4636.2019-%CE%A6%CE%95%CE%9A-169.%CE%91.1.11.2019.pdf>

for asylum seekers and refugees residing in camps and shelters set up by the ESTIA programme reflect the broader picture. In particular, asylum seekers and refugees are hard pressed to meet the basic bureaucratic prerequisites for finding employment and accommodation, such as tax identification number, social security number, and bank account (Table 2). Increased unemployment due to the country's economic breakdown, the preference of employers for local employees who are Greek nationals and the bureaucratic obstacles asylum seekers and refugees face when trying to access the labour market often led them to the unofficial market and dependence upon state subsidies (Skleparis, 2018). In addition, many refugee families tend to stay for longer and longer periods in refugee camps due to their inability to pay for independent accommodation (Vlastou-Dimopoulou et al, 2022). In this regard, we suggest that SSE can provide a more holistic and inclusive approach to integration, one that combines labour with social integration.

	CAMPS	ESTIA	
Posts	32 sites 29,757 posts	20,805 posts (55% Attica, 20% central Macedonia)	
Residents	25,676 persons	Asylum Seekers	Refugees
Country of origin	Afghans-45,74%, Syrians-26,31%, Iraqis-10,52%	Afghans-41%, Iraqis-18%, Syrians-17%	Syrians-72%, Afghans-9%, Iraqis-9%
Sex	F-24%, M-33%, Min-43%	F-24%, M-25%, Min-51%	F-23%, M-23%, Min-54%
Social Security Number (AMKA)	74,23%	34% (+20% temporary)	69%
Tax Identification Number (AΦM)	31,46%	28%	43%
OAED (Registered Unemployed)	10,36%	11%	20%
Bank account	-	2%	6%
Education	5202/7408 minors subscribed to schools, 3,13% adults	71% subscribed	83% subscribed

Table 2, Source: For camps https://greece.iom.int/sites/greece/files/_Merged%20Mainland%20Mar_21_compressed.pdf, for ESTIA apartments <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/83982>

Exploring the alternatives of social and solidarity economy

SSE prioritizes social over economic profit and develops close relations with progressive social movements, differentiating itself from private and public sectors alike. SSE consists of a heterogeneous ecosystem of formal and informal initiatives, which advocate for the ethical, environmental and democratic operation of the economy and the inclusion of socially marginalized populations. The institutional approaches involved embrace cooperatives, associations, trade unions and charities, and highlight the fact that SSE improve people's lives by intervening where the state and the market cannot or do not wish to. By contrast, movement-oriented perspectives highlight initiatives which

are usually the product of collective action, advocate for social change and vest SSE with a radical identity (Kavoulakos, 2018).

Although Greece has a rich tradition of agricultural cooperatives starting in the mid-nineteenth century, the real development of the SSE sphere dates from the recent economic crisis. Bill 4019 in 2011 introduced social enterprises into Greece and aimed to link them with the reintegration of social groups excluded from the labour market (Adam and Kavoulakos, 2020). Nevertheless, the actual development of the SSE sphere was mostly realized through the remarkable rise of bottom-up solidarity practices triggered by the politics of austerity.

The structural adjustment programmes imposed by international creditors considerably affected the already-ailing welfare state, sent unemployment rates sky high and consigned large parts of the population to the margins of poverty and social exclusion. In this context, the development of the five-year long anti-austerity protest cycle combined street politics with the provision of solidarity services (Malamidis, 2020). More specifically, the exclusion of almost 3 million people from the public healthcare system led to the development of grassroots social clinics. Set up by doctors and other individuals in solidarity, social clinics provided primary healthcare services and medicines free of charge to everyone in need, answered to the members' own general assembly and organized protests against the closure of public hospitals (Cabot, 2016; Kotronaki and Christou, 2019). Similarly, collective kitchens were organized by squats and political social centres in order to provide daily meals that were low cost or even free of charge (Malamidis, 2020). Additional examples include citizens' initiatives reappropriating urban space (Chatzinakos, 2020), time banks and barter networks involving citizens in the mutual exchange of services, solidarity schools offering free support to schoolkids (Giovanopoulos, Athanasiadis and Dalakoglou, 2019) and worker and consumer cooperatives suggesting horizontal organizational models in the workplace (Amanatidou Tzakou and Gritzas, 2021). All in all, the conjunction of SSE with social movement practices was promoted as a practical, radical democratic and prefigurative alternative to neoliberal governance (Howarth and Roussos, 2022), one that foregrounds the caring aspects of everyday social reproductive activities (Kouki and Chatzidakis, 2021).

The rise of SSE both in institutional and everyday grassroots politics continued unabated in the following years. The legislative framework was updated by the introduction of bill 4430 in 2016 (Adam and Kavoulakos, 2020) and SSE initiatives proliferated still further. By the same token, the advent of the refugee crisis opened a new field in which SSE initiatives could flourish.

Solidarity towards migrants started with rescue operations and the provision of first aid by local and international volunteers, political groups and humanitarian organizations on the Aegean islands and at Greece's northern borders, and continued with the meeting of their accommodation needs in mainland Greece after the closure of the Balkan corridor and the EU-Turkey Statement (Oikonomakis, 2018). At each stage, solidarity was given a different meaning: from the universal right to life itself to the right to free

movement, and from political disobedience to migrants' everyday self-organization (Kotronaki, Serdedakis and Alexandridis, 2022).

Being the key value of SSE, solidarity bridged the economic and the refugee crisis. According to our own desk and field research, a great number of SSE initiatives, which supported the domestic population during the economic crisis, used their experience and turned their attention to the newly arrived migrant populations, while by the same token new ventures were born. Collective kitchens have been serving meals free of charge in the Northern Aegean islands, social clinics for their part have been providing medicines while solidarity groups have been distributing dry clothes during disembarkation (Rozakou, 2016). Along with the provision of information and translation services, similar actions took place also in the ports of Piraeus and Thessaloniki when migrants left the islands, as well as in Idomeni unofficial camp at the Greek-North Macedonian borders, before they continued their onward journey into northern Europe. In their essence, SSE initiatives, together with political groups, unions and NGOs amounted to an unofficial reception system (Mantanika, 2022; della Porta and Steinhilper, 2021; Oikonomakis, 2018).

The EU-Turkey Statement and the gradual take-over of reception duties by institutional authorities and humanitarian actors led to solidarity practices being applied to the provision of accommodation in urban centers (Oikonomakis, 2018). Given the initial lack of institutional accommodation, Notara 26, City Plaza and other refugee squats in Athens and Thessaloniki promoted a horizontal and inclusionary approach to conviviality, where migrants were not passive beneficiaries but actually involved in the squats' everyday operation (Kotronaki, Serdedakis and Alexandridis, 2022; Oikonomakis, 2018). Collective kitchens met the squatters' daily nutritional requirements, social clinics provided refugees with primary healthcare services and a number of traditional social movement organizations catered for migrants' everyday economic, social and cultural needs (Malamidis, 2020). As such, up until their eviction, first by the government of Syriza and later on by that of New Democracy, refugee squats became important hubs for defending refugees' rights.

Apart from the informal initiatives, in our desk and field research we encountered formal SSE initiatives to promote migrants' social and labour inclusion. Many cooperatives established during the economic crisis have been regularly collecting and distributing clothes and basic goods to asylum seekers, selling products made by them in the camps²⁶, organizing events for migrants and Greek kids, and publishing books written by refugees²⁷. Moreover, newly formed social and workers' cooperatives have tried to engage migrants in their actual operation: the cooperative of Staramaki²⁸ in Northern Greece set out to produce environmental-friendly straws, with its members'

26 <https://www.facebook.com/events/163853138807444/>

27 <https://akybernitesspoliteies.org/shop/martyria/i-pena-mou-den-spaei-ta-synora-einai-pou-tha-spasoun-grammata-ston-kosmo-apo-ti-moria>

28 <https://www.lifo.gr/now/greece/staramakia-10000-oikologika-kalamakia-apo-proin-aner-goys-ellines-kai-prosfyges-sto>

assembly also including newly arrived refugees; the Nan²⁹ cooperative restaurant in Lesbos, which was established jointly by Greek activists and refugees as a response to migrants and local inhabitants' employment needs, promoted a multi-ethnic ethos; the Welcommon³⁰ cooperative hostel in Athens reflected an ambitious effort to promote collective models of social and labour inclusion through the joint efforts of local people and refugees to collectively offer accommodation to vulnerable groups; the Emantes³¹ LGBTQIA+ social cooperative, which was formed by refugees and people in solidarity, offered psychosocial support and distributed food parcels; and Khora³², an association run mostly by international volunteers, provided legal support, a daily collective kitchen, a makers' space and other activities for asylum seekers.

All in all, SSE provides a self-organized response to the needs of asylum seekers and refugees, and acts as a connecting point between reception and migrants' social inclusion. However, we cannot be sure about labour inclusion. Although vibrant, the SSE sphere in Greece reflects only a small portion of the market share, which faces many financial problems, and has not managed yet to guarantee the economic sustainability of its members or to develop economies of scale³³. In this newly-developed field of SSE, according to our research, initiatives that have been launched either jointly or solely by migrants and refugees, or their activities focusing on migrants' inclusion, represent a rather small share. This is also evident from a closer look at the state's archive of SSE initiatives³⁴, which shows that very few out of the more than 2,000 formal SSE registered initiatives across Greece underline migrants' inclusion in their programmatic declarations. Furthermore, the bureaucratic obstacles asylum seekers and refugees face in order to access the labour market, and the increased mobility of migrant populations conflict with long-term commitments and the creation of a trust environment, which stand as prerequisites for the development of collective procedures in SSE initiatives. As such, it seems difficult for the newly developed sphere of SSE in Greece to move from the short-term provision of solidarity-based support to that of participatory long-term planning.

Conclusions

Integration became popular both as an academic concept and a policy instrument. Despite its support for the mutual adjustment of host societies and migrant populations, integration has been criticized for covertly obscuring a hidden culture of assimilation. More specifically, integration implies the dominance of the domestic culture over that of newcomers, perceives society as a homogeneous entity, and places the burden of integration mostly on the shoulders of migrants. Greece does not seem to have escaped

29 <https://www.vice.com/el/article/zm8npx/sto-kalytero-estiatorio-ths-mytillnhhs-ergazontai-prosfyges>

30 <https://welcommon.gr/>

31 <https://www.emantes.com/about-emantes>

32 <https://www.khora-athens.org/about>

33 Among others, see the 2017 report of British Council on SSE in Greece, https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/greece_social_and_solidarity_economy_report_english_british_council_0.pdf

34 <https://kalo.gov.gr/i-grammatia/>

this trend. Starting from the first migratory wave in the 1990s, Greek policies have focused ever since on the prevention of migration rather than the inclusion of migrants. The 2015 refugee “crisis” found Greece in the thick of an economic crisis and this led to institutional attention being directed at the reception of migrants. However, the closure of the Balkan corridor and the EU-Turkey Statement transformed Greece from a transit to a destination country and further underlined the need for integration policies.

Our research shows that subsequent integration initiatives were scattered and piecemeal, with bureaucratic obstacles preventing asylum seekers and refugees from finding employment. In this respect, SSE practices, which flourished during the economic crisis and promoted the social, labour and political reintegration of the domestic population, suggested a more inclusive alternative.

Already from the summer of 2015, political organizations and SSE initiatives combined their efforts and provided the newcomer migrant population with informal welfare services. Through participatory, direct-democratic and collective management processes, SSE initiatives promoted inclusionary models of doing things in common. However, these initiatives had usually been limited to the short-term provision of solidarity, with bureaucratic obstacles and increased mobility of the migrant population preventing long-term planning in terms of labour inclusion.

Here, we do not propose to idealize SSE with respect to migrant integration. On many occasions, SSE has been criticized for reproducing social inequalities and individualism (Gkagkelis, 2021). However, SSE has the potential to transform asylum seekers and refugees from passive subjects of the state and beneficiaries of NGOs to active agents. This inclusionary approach is not based only on the prefigurative practices of SSE, but is informed also by its relationships with social movements and the grassroots. As such, social and labour integration meets political integration and participation in the commons. In this respect, further research on cooperatives, which have been set up by the mutual efforts of Greeks and migrants, promises to enrich migration literature with empirical evidence regarding the inclusionary SSE models and shed light on how social and political participation can be combined with labour inclusion.



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Jessica Ball, Debra Torok, Suwannimit Foundation, Saw Phoe Khwar Lay, Spring Song, M. Htang Dim: "**Serendipity during the pandemic: Taking a community-partnered study about young, forced migrants online**" *Migration, Mobility, & Displacement* 6: 155-165

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Serendipity during the pandemic: Taking a community-partnered study about young, forced migrants online¹

**Jessica Ball, Debra Torok, Suwannimit Foundation, Saw Phoe
Khwar Lay, Spring Song, M. Htang Dim**

Jessica Ball, MPH, PhD, is a professor of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria, Canada. She has worked as a researcher and consultant for international organizations, governments, and community organizations in Asia, North America, and Africa to develop and reform policies affecting the well-being of children, youth and families, and to strengthen local capacity to implement policies. Jessica has published over 140 peer reviewed journal articles, chapters, and three books. Her achievements have been recognized by numerous national and international awards.

Jessica leads a multi-sited, community-partnered research program on the experiences of forced migrant youth. The research has generated and evaluated a new method called Storyboard Peers, combining individual self-reflection, visual expression, and narrative accounts of migration related experiences and peer support. The method is effective for youth-centred data collection and for providing psychosocial support for migrant youth as they re-build their identity, belonging and resilience.

Debra Torok is a doctoral candidate in Clinical-Lifespan Psychology at the University of Victoria, Canada. She has her MSc in Clinical Psychology from the University of Victoria. As part of the Youth Migration Project research team, Debra's research focuses on experiences of forced migrant youth residing in transit in Malaysia and along the Thai-Myanmar border.

Suwannimit Foundation is a migrant-led, migrant-serving, non-profit organization based in Mae Sot, Thailand. Its mission is to enhance social and health services to vulnerable children and families living along the border between Thailand and Myanmar (particularly those in Tak province). It supports the operational capacity and programming impact of its partners and promotes access to services provided by the government of Thailand (www.suwannimit.org). The Suwannimit Foundation partnered with investigators at the University of Victoria to conduct research aimed at understanding the views and experiences of forced migrant youth. A main activity was piloting, evaluating and training others in the use of an innovative, peer-mediated, storyboard narrative method, called Storyboard Peers, to support displaced and refugee youth to generate psychosocial support for one another in contexts where there are few or no mental health or wellness services.

Saw Phoe Khwar Lay was forced to migrate from Myanmar to Thailand when he was 12 years old, as a result of civil war. He completed high school in a migrants school, a Graduate Education Diploma in Chiang Mai and majored in education and psychology post-secondary studies at Asia Pacific University. He currently works with the Suwannimit Foundation as a health program specialist.

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Abstract

This research update describes the transformation of a partnership project between a university-based team in Canada and a migrant-serving community organization in Thailand occasioned by the pandemic. Travel restrictions preventing the Canada-based team from carrying out project activities directly with young, forced migrants provided the impetus to explore an entirely online collaboration over 18 months. This shift flattened what would likely have been a hierarchical role structure, with the Canada-based team members positioned as experts and primary actors in conducting the project. The partners deliberated together about the cultural fit, desirability, feasibility and potential variations of the novel Peer Mediated Story Board Narrative method, which is intended both as a means of data collection and an intervention for migrant youth needing psychosocial support. In consultation with the Canada-based team, the Thailand-based partners undertook participant recruitment and piloted the method with diverse groups of migrant youth living in Myanmar and Thailand, using creative approaches including conducting the method online with groups of youth using smart phones. The serendipitous benefit of moving the partnership online highlights the potential for a more probing, mutually interdependent, less costly collaboration in which partners enter into an ethical space between partners' worlds. In this space, assumptions, core constructs, and methodological fidelity can be challenged, new understandings can be forged and, in the case of this project, a sustainable approach to psychosocial support for forced migrant youth can be co-created.

Introduction

This research note reports on an unanticipated transformation of a community-engaged research study between a Canada-based team and local partners in Thailand. Our study used an innovative, Peer-Mediated Story-Board Narrative (PMSN) method to both explore the experiences of young, forced migrants and to provide psychosocial support. During a presentation of this study at a recent conference organized by the University of Victoria and the University Crete (Ball, 2021), participants expressed surprise that the study had progressed despite the pandemic. This inspired us to describe the process of transitioning the project online and to identify the serendipitous benefits arising from those unexpected circumstances.

A brief project description appeared in the 2020 issue of *Migration, Mobility, and Displacement* (Ball, 2020). Briefly, this ongoing multi-sited project in Malaysia and Thailand explores the use of an arts-based method to hear from migrant youth about

how they perceived and responded to their experiences of migration due to armed conflict and persecution. The project explores the potential for researchers, practitioners, and youth to gain insight about youths' experiences in transit (i.e., temporarily resident in a country where they are seeking asylum), particularly those that are salient, problematic or helpful in diverse circumstances; that is, what is it about forced migration that is most interesting, concerning, and important to forced migrant youth themselves? A goal is to shift from solely investigator or theory-driven constructs and lines of inquiry to those generated by youth themselves, recognizing that these may overlap. In the PMSN method, individual youth are gathered into groups of about five peers, and each is given materials to create a large poster or 'Storyboard' depicting how their migration journey affected their sense of self, belonging, and future aspirations. The group is then convened for one, or sometimes several sessions, when youth offer to show and explain what is depicted on their Storyboard. During peer-mediation, peers ask questions, make comments, provide encouragements, or reflect on aspects that strike them. A trained group facilitator organizes the process and assists as needed. The youth's individual Storyboard Narratives serve as one form of data collection, and the peer mediation, or sharing of individual youth's accounts in small peer groups, serve as another form of data collection. Data collection in Malaysia was completed before the pandemic, involving a Canada-based team travelling to Kuala Lumpur to recruit 55 participants and facilitate the small group process in migrant-serving schools and community organizations. An example of this work is reported by Torok and Ball (2021).

Taking the project online

The Thailand-sited part of this program of research received primary funding in March 2020, just as the world was facing pandemic-related travel restrictions. The partner for this part of the research is Suwannimit Foundation, a migrant-serving, non-government organization (NGO) based in Mae Sot near the Thailand-Myanmar border. When the study was conceived and the partnership was confirmed, the study plan called for project team members from the University of Victoria in Canada to travel twice to Thailand during 2020 to lead small groups of forced migrant youth in the PMSN, partly to collect narrative data about migrant youths' experiences, and partly to assess the potential of the PMSN to generate needed psychosocial support for forced migrant youth in a context where counselling and specialist services are not available. Additional goals were to collaborate with the community partner on the creation of a training manual for the PMSN, and to deliver two workshops to introduce the PMSN method to practitioners at local NGOs, migrant learning centres, and refugee camps.

While collaboration with the Thai partner was planned, the original project plan clearly positioned the Canada-based team in the role of teaching about the PMSN method, directing recruitment of youth who met the study criteria, and facilitating the PMSN small groups. The Thai partner and their associates were positioned as the beneficiary of the training, and as assistants in practical tasks such as event planning, translation, and transcription. The Canada-based team planned to obtain feedback from the Thai

partner on a draft procedures manual, to learn about their service delivery needs and goals, and to assess whether the PMSN was fitting and feasible as a medium for insight-generation and psychosocial support for forced migrant youth. However, it was anticipated that the Canada-based team would be sharing their expertise more than the Thai-based team would be sharing theirs, reflecting a very limited form of partnership typical of many collaborations between partners in the global north and global south and between university and community partners. As governments, universities, and funding agencies halted international travel, the Canadian and Thai partners were faced with a choice to either postpone the project until after the pandemic or find an alternative way to conduct it. In March 2020, we began a new kind of journey in partnered research that transformed and improved the project, by moving our collaboration online.

Interrogating key concepts

As our project got underway in March 2020, the Canada- and Thai-based team members began meeting online for about 90 minutes a session, approximately every three weeks. The primary Thai partner, Suwannimit Foundation, welcomed three practitioners from other local organizations working with forced migrant youth to join these sessions. The Canada-based team had created a draft manual for using the PMSN, and our meetings began by discussing its content as a way of familiarizing everyone with the method. Initial comments by Thai-based partners focused on concrete details about how to deliver the PMSN. These quickly gave way to questions about the meaning of core concepts that the Canada-based team intended as focal points for migrant youth to organize their visual Storyboards and subsequent Story-Board Narratives. Experience in Malaysia had shown that youth were more able to start on their Storyboards if they were given a few key concepts (or outcomes) to reflect upon, rather than a completely open-ended task. Youth were asked how their migration experience affected their identity, sense of belonging, and future aspirations. For the Canada-Thai collaboration, these organizing concepts, initially intended as helpful starting points for self-reflection, have been a focal point of debate and some consternation.

A shared understanding of the meaning and relevance of ‘future aspirations’ was quickly established. The Thai-based team members frequently conduct life skills workshops with migrant youth in which goal-setting and future planning is often a focus. In contrast, while everyone shared an understanding of the abstract meanings of identity and belonging, the Thai partners explained that these notions are not endemic and that most migrant youth were not likely to understand them beyond their most concrete manifestations; for example, one’s identity is stated on an identity card, and one’s belonging is known in terms of membership in a family, organized group, or place of residence in a particular boarding house, refugee camp, or other social setting. They explained that Thai and Myanmar cultures do not foster self-searching or self-disclosure about an individual’s place in the world or how one sees oneself, apart from the way one

is formally defined in society and the roles one occupies in relation to others. We began to discuss the extent, nature, and sources of such cultural differences.

As we established that the initial organizing concepts were not readily understood in an abstract way in Thai or Myanmar cultures, the Canada-based team encouraged the Thai-based team to identify other concepts or organizing questions that were important to them and that were likely to resonate with migrant youth from Myanmar. However, as our meetings continued and our discussions deepened over the course of many online meetings, the Thai-based team became more intrigued with these concepts and more determined to find ways to explain them to prospective PMSN participants. The Canada-based team navigated tensions associated with desires to avoid imposing concepts that were not readily understood or fitting for the research context, while also supporting the Thai-based team with using the initially suggested core concepts to the extent they found them useful.

Sharing Storyboards. Parallel with these discussions, each of the team members created their own Storyboard and presented their Storyboard Narrative during our online sessions. Presenting our Storyboards over the course of an hour online was often a novel, searching and emotional experience for the storyteller. During each Storyboard Narrative, team members practiced peer mediation. This generated useful clarifications and tips for the PMSN manual. We practiced peer group facilitation, including how to establish consent, group consensus about privacy, respect, communication etiquette and safety. Experiencing the method ourselves and exposing ourselves far beyond our professional roles during our online meetings forged relationships of understanding and trust. This stage of our partner engagement also allowed for deeper engagement with the core concepts of identity and belonging, and showcased how the PMSN can facilitate self-insight, psychosocial support, and meaningful data.

Closed versus open-ended procedures

The open-ended nature of the PMSN method was novel for the Thai-based team. The considerable repository of research about migrants in Thailand, shows investigators' preference for structured questionnaires or interviews rather than open-ended procedures such as phenomenological interviews, storytelling, or arts-based methods. The Thai-based team was well-practiced in delivering workshops for migrant youth that asked them to anchor their personal characteristics in provided images such as a particular kind of animal or flower, and to consolidate their life history and depict steps towards their life goals in the form of a timeline. In contrast, using the PMSN, youth are given a blank poster paper or board, basic craft materials, and three or four stimulus questions, and asked to express how their migration journey has affected them using any imagery they wish and, ideally, taking as long as they wish. The open-handed approach to our partnership combined with our relatively unstructured, open-ended PMSN method might have been a first for Thai-based team members but it was well received. The partners invested significantly in thinking about how and with whom the method

could be well suited and useful, and building their skills and confidence in using the method over an 18-month period.

The focus of the PMSN method on inviting youths' personal reflections and insight about how they had responded psychologically to forced migration was challenging in ways the Canada-based team had not anticipated, given how readily the idea of personal Storyboards and sharing personal stories of migration had been received by forced migrant youth in Malaysia. In an earlier phase of the research (Torok & Ball, 2021), forced migrant youth in Malaysia had taken their Story-Boards home to work on them, and had used a wide variety of provided and independently resourced materials to illustrate their experiences. They eagerly shared their stories in small peer groups that met several times and asked if they could continue working on their Storyboards after the project concluded. Most of these youth were from the Middle East and East Africa, whereas migrant youth recruited in Thailand were from Myanmar. The Thai-based team anticipated that an open-ended, arts-based approach aimed at self-insight and self-disclosure would likely challenge migrant youth who had grown up in Myanmar and Thailand. The partners doubted that the psychological concepts of identity, home and belonging would be understood by most youth, explaining that the Thailand and Myanmar school systems do not encourage psychological exploration of the self. They opined that although the psychological exploration required to complete a Storyboard seemed desirable, the youth may not be able to generate sufficient content. They were concerned that youth would be reticent to draw anything freehand, since they were only used to copying provided images. Moreover, for practical reasons, they doubted they could meet with the same group of youth more than once. Finally, they expressed concern that an open-ended process with the potential for youth to plumb the depths of their often traumatizing migration experiences could elicit highly emotional content that the team in Mae Sot felt ill-prepared to handle, noting as well that there is no counselling service or other kind of social service support in the vicinity.

Adapting the method

Responding to these concerns, building team skills for using the method, and adapting the procedure to fit the Thai context has been a journey taken over 18 months. The university-based team welcomed adaptation of the method in ways that were psychologically safe, culturally resonant, and practically feasible. Encouraged by this flexibility, the Thai-based team at Suwannimit Foundation has used the method cautiously, mostly in one-time workshop sessions lasting several hours, with youth from the same organization (e.g., the same school or boarding house) and therefore known to each other. They begin with ice-breaker activities, followed by presentation and explanation of each core concept (identity, belonging, future aspirations) which they ask the youth to write about before thinking about how they will depict their response on their Storyboard. In some gatherings, the team has asked the youth to prepare a timeline of their life, from before they migrated to the present, as a way to organize life events to represent visually on their Storyboard. This structured, supported approach has prevented highly emotional

disclosures by participants, while offering an opportunity for youth to take stock of their life trajectories, key events they see as formative and sources of strength or support in their lives. As well, youth have been able to see, hear, and respond to the migration stories of their peers in ways they may not have heard previously. Previous experience with this method has shown that the peer group context and peer mediation process can enhance youths' empathy for their peers and their sense of being seen and heard in ways that may increase psychosocial support (Torok & Ball, 2021). We also all agreed to refrain from referring to the PMSN procedure as 'arts-based' because of the connotative meaning of art as requiring fine art skills which most youth would protest they do not possess.

In contrast, two of our online meeting participants associated with migrant-serving organizations aligned with Suwannimit Foundation have used the method quite differently. In one instance, the team member gathered a group of migrant Burmese Muslim girls who were experiencing ongoing challenges with their migrant status and family life. As part of informed consent, the girls understood that participation meant that they would meet at least four times together and would be expected not only to share their own story but to listen and engage in peer mediation for other group members' stories. The girls completed the PMSN method over five sessions and asked if they could continue to meet together to continue to benefit from the strong psychosocial support generated by their project participation. The team member concluded that the method has provided a structured way for these girls to share deeply about traumatic events in their lives and ongoing struggles and had provided the non-profit organization a way to assess whether any of these girls were in immediate danger.

Another team member in our online meetings piloted the method online, with five migrant girls, unknown to one another, living in different places in Thailand and one in Myanmar. The project provided funding for each girl to top up their smart phone data plan, enabling them to keep their video on for the duration of four three-hour sessions. During the sessions, the girls shared their Storyboard narrative and engaged very actively in peer mediation. After each session, the Thai-based facilitator and the Canada-based team had a two-hour online debriefing session. This provided support for the facilitator and provided the Canada-based team with insights about youth migration experiences and about another way that the PMSN method can work. These girls also asked if they could continue to meet, and the facilitator has planned for at least one follow-up session. As well, the girls are going to meet with a newly formed group of younger, mixed gender migrant youth, to continue elaborating their own migration reflections and insights, and to hear the stories of migrant peers.

These varied adaptations of the PMSN procedure confirmed the readiness of the Thai-based partners to finding culturally fitting, emotionally manageable, practical approaches to using the method. All of the adaptations fulfill the agreed upon purpose of the grant-funded partnership project. For all of the iterations of the PMSN, the Thai-based team members have provided the Canada-based team with a photograph of

each youth's Storyboard and either a summary or transcript of each youth's Storyboard Narrative, as well as the content of peer mediation.

For the Canada-based team, taking the project online and engaging in a more thoroughly participatory process than we had initially planned has meant being willing to let go of control over precisely how the PMSN method is conducted. For investigators who value fidelity to a prescribed data collection method or manualized counselling intervention, this lack of control could be perturbing. Yet this partnership seems to be doing precisely what was intended – supporting Thai-based migrant serving organizations to find fitting solutions to unmet psychosocial support needs of migrant youth.

Authentic participatory research within our zones of proximal development

Suwannimit Foundation and the other organizations involved in our project have experience with research teams from North America, Europe and Australia. Asked how our partnership work has compared with these prior engagements, the Suwannimit Foundation director expressed that typically research teams visiting Mae Sot tell Foundation staff what to do and their role is to collect data and hand it over to the visiting research team. In comparison, Thai team members have expressed that our partnership has involved more sustained communication and more reciprocal learning, with all team members encouraged to ask questions, give feedback and make suggestions. When discussing descriptors for the project, the director suggested we refer to it as 'participatory action.' Currently, the Thai-team members are continuing to try out the method in various ways with diverse groups of forced migrant youth to further explore the method's potential and to strengthen their capacity to use it after the project has concluded.

Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development comes to mind as a way to understand how both the Thai and Canadian partners intuitively scaffold information about how the project fits and is working within our respective professional lives. In doing so, the partners maintain authentic engagement without imagining we are joining one another's' worlds, challenge each other just a tolerable amount, and incrementally build mutual understanding. While our online meetings are mainly work-focused, they always offer a chance to learn something new and to exchange news about how the pandemic common to all of us has affected our work on opposite sides of the Pacific.

Language proficiencies are another way that information is scaffolded. The Canada-based team members are effectively monolingual in English, while the Thai-based team members are multilingual, typically in Thai, Myanmar, Karen and English. The Canada-based team members typically simplify explanations to ensure comprehensibility for the Thai partners, while the Thai partners clearly have much more they could say if not for the Canadian partners' limited language capacity. Meeting each other in the ethical space that no one owns between knowledge and linguistic systems requires

an intentional give and take and a strong will to succeed in order to achieve mutually valued outcomes.

You'll never believe what happened..... has been a mantra of Jessica Ball's three decade program of community-engaged research. In the research reported here, we again found that a community-engaged collaboration among partners from different cultures and nations took a surprising turn right out of the gate as pandemic restrictions closed many doors.

We are discovering that our project is part of a cultural shift within community-based research (CBR), brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, exploring how to forge meaningful partnerships online (see Hall et al., 2020 for review). CBR scholars similarly tasked with transitioning from in-person to virtual collaborations have reported that doing so has allowed for greater input from partners and enhanced flexibility with the research process (Marzi, 2021; Valdez & Gubrium, 2020). However, scholars also describe challenges particularly in lower resourced contexts, where stable access to internet and familiarity with technological devices may vary and limit the depth of the social relationships formed (Masri & Masannat, 2020; Strong et al., 2020). Forthcoming reports from our research will contribute to this burgeoning literature, expanding on the benefits, challenges, and tensions associated with forging international partnerships online.

As we approach the last few months of our partnership, we view our collaboration as advancing new pathways to a richer, mutually transformative engagement than our original project map had forecasted, and a better outcome in the form of a sustainable, locally fitting method to help meet the psychosocial support needs of forced migrant youth.



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**Filmmaker Ansley Sawyer in conversation with Duncan Chalmers, 3
March 2022 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2_GfI_QdyA**

Migration, Mobility, & Displacement is an online, open-access, peer-reviewed journal. It seeks to publish original and innovative scholarly articles, juried thematic essays from migrant advocacy groups and practitioners, and visual essays that speak to migration, mobility and displacement and that relate in diverse ways to the Asia-Pacific. The journal welcomes submissions from scholars and migrant advocacy groups that are publicly engaged, and who seek to address a range of issues facing migrants, mobile and displaced persons, and especially work which explores injustices and inequalities.

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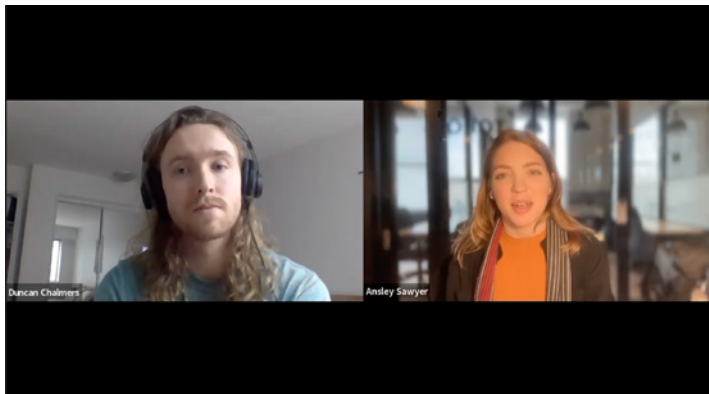
Filmmaker Ansley Sawyer in conversation with Duncan Chalmers

[Link to Interview](#)

Ansley Sawyer is a semi-nomadic film director and producer. A speaker, advocate, and entrepreneur, her docu-vérité work has been featured on Vimeo Staff Picks, BBC, National Geographic, and TEDx. She specializes in run-and-gun filmmaking, producing difficult-to-access human stories around the world. She integrates her sensitivity for documentary production within the world of commercial videography as Founder and Creative Director of her company Freehand Films.

Duncan Chalmers is a former CAPI intern and development professional with a background in community-based education, youth empowerment, and global engagement. Throughout 2017 and 2018, he lived and worked at the Karenni Social Development Center, a small community-based organization that provides human rights-focused training to young Karenni refugees, equipping them with the tools needed to help build a peaceful, democratic society, based on the rule of law. With this, Duncan is a strong advocate for projects that aid in creating more equitable, resilient, and sustainable communities through locally-led approaches.

Former CAPI intern Duncan Chalmers interviews filmmaker Ansley Sawyer about the making of the documentary 'Like We Don't Exist' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dITqa3i9vZM>



[*Lke We Don't Exist*](#)

Today, thousands of people live in refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border, displaced from decades of relentless civil war at the hands of the Burmese military. The Karenni are an ethnically diverse community that has survived the ongoing ethnic violence and mass displacement from their homeland, located historically between Thailand and Myanmar (formerly called Burma). After 70 years of conflict -- the longest ongoing civil war in the world -- the Karenni face an uncertain future as a refugee community along the Thai-Burmese border. <https://vimeo.com/260495758>

