

Refuge Europe at its Limits? Limits and Contradictions of the Political and Moral Ideal – Conference report

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For the first time in over sixty years Germany has seen the rise of a far-right party to the *Bundestag*, drastically reshaping its political landscape. Following the last federal elections, the party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) has become the third largest political force in the German Parliament, establishing itself as a new parliamentary opposition to Angela Merkel's CDU and, consequently, shifting party balances and impacting on the process of coalition formation. An outcome that can possibly steer the country towards new directions, impacting border and immigration policies. The altering of political landscapes, however, is not restricted to Germany, with far-right political parties surging and/or gaining momentum in several countries throughout Europe, such as the *Front National*, in France, and the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, in Austria.

The upsurge of nationalist movements follows an intense increase of people seeking refuge in Europe over the past few years, a situation that has raised public controversies regarding the possibility of integration, the permeability of Europe's border, as well as security concerns. To question whether "refuge Europe" is at its limits, thus, leads to no easy paths. And it was precisely with this debate that the [German Anthropological Association](#) opened its biennial conference, which took place at the *Freie Universität Berlin* between October 4th and 7th, 2017. The plenary session "[Refuge Europe at its limits? Limits and Contradictions of Political and Moral Ideal](#)" was organized and chaired by Prof. Olaf Zenker, formerly *Freie Universität Berlin* and now *University of Fribourg*, and composed by Alessandro Monsutti, Professor of Anthropology and Sociology at *The Graduate Institute*, in Geneva; Heath Cabot, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the *University of Pittsburgh*; and Žiga Podgornik-Jakil, PhD candidate at the *Freie Universität Berlin*. As Zenker pointed out during his opening remarks, the discussion was being held merely 10 days after the German federal elections, in a context where European liberal rights contrast with a strict border regime, and the so-called "[welcome culture](#)" is facing the challenges of right-wing surges.

In this context of contrasts and political uncertainties, to analyze the interplay between policies, rights, and refuge related mobilities can offer a better understanding of the motion presented at the plenary session. Prof. Monsutti, who researches Afghan refugees and asylum seekers in Europe, set up the discussion by adding a variable to this interplay, framing mobility as a political act enmeshed in a situation of high global inequality. He noted that despite not being a recent phenomena, mobility has now assumed a different shape as it occurs in a world described by him as the most unequal in history. Monsutti grounded his argument on the Oxfam's report "An economy for the 99%", according to which 1% of the world's population owns more than the rest 99%—with 8 individuals owning as much as 50%. Furthermore, the report estimates that about 7.6 trillion dollars of individual wealth is being held offshore. Against this background of global inequality, Monsutti shared that Afghanistan, which has 43,6% of its

population under 14 years old and 64,8% under 24, has been constantly ranked for the last eight years among the four least peaceful countries in the world, with the overall poorest score.

If, following Monsutti's argument, inequality is closely linked with mobility, it is not surprising to see Afghanistan as one of the nationalities with most asylum applications approved in Europe—sharing the rank with Syria, Eritrea, Iraq, and Iran. But whereas Monsutti used this data to build a framework to his argument that mobility is a political act that has to be understood as a historical trend in association with inequality issues, to illustrate the argument he transitioned from the macro to the microperspective, exploring the everyday lives of people who had actually performed such mobilities. To accomplish this transition, Monsutti laid out three fieldwork vignettes that explore common moments experienced by his interlocutors upon arrival in Europe and, by doing so, ended up emphasizing the moral dimension of this process.

The three vignettes—which took place in Lesbos and Patras; Friuli; and Calais—are aligned in a way that explores what can be described as a moral trajectory. A trajectory of denial, disapproval, and reaction. Monsutti argued that initially, at the time of the three individuals' arrival, reigns a logic of denial. A logic that is grounded on the experiences of Afghan asylum seekers shortly after their arrival in Europe, on their transitions among temporary shelters and practices of identification. Experiences that create the perception that “Europe is yet to come”; that they have not yet arrived at their destination. Europe, after all, is supposedly perceived as “the place where people are respected.” Monsutti explained that this logic of denial is followed by a moral judgment based on a sense of disapproval or, perhaps, frustration. A frustration with what they have encountered; with their treatment in Europe. To exemplify this aspect, Monsutti shared a situation where one of his interlocutors commented on his hospitality by stating that he was not an European, for he behaved “like an Afghan.” It is only after this logic of denial and a certain sense of disapproval and moral judgement that they end up [re]acting, becoming once again a social actor.

The three vignettes were framed within a language of morality, where broken expectations about Europe are followed by the perception—and disapproval—that they will not be able to count on the same kind of hospitality they were used to in Afghanistan. However, Monsutti said, once they move away from the initial disappointment, they could move into action. By transitioning from macro to micro perspectives, Monsutti was able to first depict a landscape of exclusion to, afterwards, present how mobilities within this landscape are political acts with a profound moral dimension. Commenting on Monsutti's lecture, Heath Cabot emphasized that this sense of disapproval that leads one to think “this cannot be Europe” tells us something about Europe's intricate political context and “deeply struggling margins.” And when it comes to political and economic intricacies at the “margins” of Europe, Greece plays a prominent role. Cabot highlighted that since the financial crisis and subsequent implementation of austerity measures in the country, there was a process of displacement where Greek citizens were stripped of their human and social rights. This process of internal displacement [coincided with Greece establishing itself as one of the main gateways to refuge Europe, after receiving a great number of people seeking refugee status.](#)

In this way, the country has been seen as the point of intersection of two different crises, the

economic and the refugee ones—and whereas the economic crisis is often perceived as affecting mostly Greek citizens, the refugee one exerts an impact on the *others*. This perception is grounded on a long lasting tradition that understands citizenship as opposed to *alienage*; as *us* and *others*, as *inside* and *outside*. However, Cabot stressed that the internal economic crisis has been encapsulated by—and dealt with through—a language of humanitarianism that has framed Greeks as internal refugees, thus blurring the line that used to demarcate the aforementioned distinctions and, consequently, preparing the grounds for a new form of citizenship at Europe's margins. Since 2015, Cabot has been carrying out fieldwork on social solidarity clinics and pharmacies in Greece, where medical care and medicines are offered to people unable to access either public or private health care. In this context of austerity, these clinics and pharmacies are essential to the redistribution of essential medical resources—and it was from this experience on the interplay of austerity and resource distribution that Cabot ended up framing both crisis as facets of one larger process of precarization of social rights.

However different the originating conditions of these two forms of dislocation—or, following Monsutti's argument, mobility—are, they have both been dealt with as humanitarian crises embedded in a loss of social and human rights, thus enabling the emergence of a humanitarian citizenship that crisscrosses the boundaries of inside and outside, citizens and aliens. Therefore, Cabot underlined the importance of analyzing both crises as parallels in a continuum of precarity where humanitarianism, although possibly sounding positive, often comes at the expense of rights. Despite their different ethnographic foci, both Monsutti and Cabot aimed at emphasizing the importance of acknowledging the mobility and displacement of people seeking refuge in Europe through an interplay of insidious and unbalanced economic and political contexts, either through the perspective of inequality or precarity.

If the use of humanitarian language has once been reserved to those outside of Europe or the global north, its expansion into the Greek context of austerity has created internal zones of humanitarianism where previously assumed distinctions have come into question. And while Monsutti focused on inequality and Cabot, on precarity—adding a dimension of internal displacement to the plenary's question—, Podgornik-Jakil drew from his fieldwork on emergency shelters for refugees in Berlin, as well as from his background as an activist, to highlight the importance of resistance in a context where precarious accommodations have led to a sense of injustice. As Podgornik-Jakil pointed out, official statistics show that 1.091.894 people entered Germany in 2015 and, in 2016, the number decreased to 692.552. Since 2015, less than 45.000 asylum seekers have stayed in Berlin. In order to accommodate them in the city, they were housed in 152 collective facilities, of which 99 were emergency shelters—such as sport and congress halls, hangars and even the now defunct Tempelhof Airport. In March 2017, however, all emergency shelters located in sport halls were permanently closed—and it was precisely in 10 of such shelters that Podgornik-Jakil has conducted his fieldwork between 2015 and early 2017.

The living conditions in these emergency shelters were precarious. Podgornik-Jakil quoted one of his interlocutors, who shared: “Food is bad, here we cannot sleep, we cannot learn, no privacy... this place is not for humans.” Such precarious conditions have created several problems for their residents, and their protests over better accommodations were met with incredulity by German and European citizens alike. This situation of precarity has prepared the

grounds for the emergence of a sense of injustice felt by the asylum seekers, whose forms of reaction and resistance clashed with a public perception that they should not only be happy with the accommodation they have received, but also, and furthermore, grateful for it. This perception, Podgornik-Jakil noted, is grounded on what Didier Fassin has termed “humanitarian reason”, that is, a hegemonic discourse that governs the interactions with refugees. If, on the one hand, this discourse instills the image of asylum seekers as suffering bodies that should act with humility towards what they receive, on the other hand, their refusal to fit this image and, instead, resist and protest over better living conditions has led to this clash of expectations.

Podgornik-Jakil’s lecture, entitled “Senses of Injustice in Emergency Shelters for Refugees in Berlin: from everyday forms of resistance towards articulated demands for decent living”, was able to intertwine both Monsutti’s and Cabot’s arguments with his own’s. Whereas the former stressed the importance of inequality and unveiled a dimension of morality, Cabot highlighted how precarity, together with a language of humanitarianism, blurs conceptual distinctions and results in internal displacement. In turn, Podgornik-Jakil’s argument is built precisely from the interplay of precarity, morality, and humanitarianism; as an outcome of such interplay, Podgornik-Jakil was able to expose how a situation of precarious living condition is encapsulated by a humanitarian reason and discourse that picture asylum seekers as ever grateful suffering bodies. Throughout their stay in emergency shelters, asylum seekers in Berlin expressed a frustration with regards to their living conditions. A frustration that has led to the emergence of a sense of injustice—which Monsutti similarly exposed by mentioning the broken expectations of Afghan refugees in Europe.

Instead of providing a definite answer to whether refuge Europe is at its limits, the panelists ended up questioning what refuge Europe actually means. First, if the humanitarian reasoning depicts those seeking refuge in Europe as suffering bodies who should be grateful for their welcoming, their sense of injustice and broken expectations upon arrival challenge the idea of “refuge Europe” itself. Secondly, the extension of this language of humanitarianism into an internal crisis that has stripped European citizens of their social rights winds up leading to questions about where the limits, the margins, of Europe are, for displacement is not only a movement from the outside to the inside, but also one that takes place primarily within. In this sense, in order to understand the limits of refuge Europe it is necessary to understand, and problematize, the inequalities and precariousness that entangle both forms of displacement.

The plenary session was not restricted to participants of the conference, welcoming the general public to attend it as well. Consequently, the subsequent discussion addressed the topic from different angles and perspectives—[oftentimes distant from the anthropological standpoint](#). In fact, the role of anthropologists as “translators” was questioned by one of the attendees. As the panelists argued, it is not about being a translator of a specific situation to a larger audience, but rather about putting things into context from a specific perspective. Another question addressed the long standing position of Anthropology aligning itself with the “weakest link”: who is analyzing the bureaucrats in the context of asylum applications? The reaction to this questions was interesting, for all panelists recognized the importance of doing so while, simultaneously, acknowledging the difficulties of researching state officials and their preference to see the situation from the side of the applicants for asylum. These questions addressed less “Europe refuge”, and more core concerns of Anthropology as a discipline. Who we research, as well as

why and how we do it. However important such questions were, one of the attendees touched upon the far-right discourse that served as the background for the discussion: if they say everyone should have the right to flourish, to prosper, in their own land, isn't there something in this statement that should be addressed? The question intended to try and make sense of a particular discourse that oftentimes triggers controversies and animosities.

Nevertheless, as the panelists suggested, the main aspect would be to understand how senses of injustice lead to forms of resistance. And in this context of precarious reception, political animosity, and frustration with Europe as an idea, one cannot expect integration to occur.

Bio statement

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