



Anthropologists and refugees between global hegemony and the subaltern 'other'

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Anthropologists and Refugees between the Middle East and Europe is a special issue of Anthropology of the Contemporary Middle East and Central Eurasia (ACME) that aims to contribute to the anthropological understanding of the so-called 'Summer of Migration', in 2015, when large numbers of asylum seekers arrived in Europe, particularly from Syria and Afghanistan.¹ In addition to this introduction, this issue features three main articles, by Sholeh Shahrokhi, Sabine Bauer-Amin and Ayşecan Terzioğlu, a fieldwork report by Valentina Grillo, and a selection of book reviews relating to the anthropological study of refugees and the Middle East. Overall, this special issue reflects upon some of the major challenges of forced migration today, and the difficulties anthropologists face when engaging with refugees.

Keywords: Refugees, hegemonic/subaltern, europe/middle east, summer of refuge, encounter/integration

Physical mobility versus perceived immobility

Certain refugee situations may lead to a high geographical mobility among the part of an affected population for which displacement becomes an 'option'. However, as refugees are by definition forced to move, this physical mobility often is a result of being 'stuck', and an immobility of experience. Furthermore, the experience of flight and exile is not brought to a close upon the refugees' settlement in a given host country, even in the cases when this move is permanent. Thus, if today the national-humanitarian order of the world and its international treaties and conventions have made possible some measure of physical mobility for refugees, scholars should focus at least as much on the experiences of immobility, displacement and exile (Salazar and Smart 2011; Schiocchet 2017a).

The large numbers of refugees worldwide, and the space-time compression impelled by rapid advancements in transportation technology (Harvey 1990), have

1 The Summer of Migration is also frequently called the 'Summer of Refuge'.

impacted Europe, which in common with the rest of the global North, now receives refugees from outside of its own continent, as opposed to the refugees from within that it produced and harbored until the early 1990s. The refugee crisis in Europe is real, but is one of foreign policy and political responsibility, given that international political and military interventions are the causes of most human displacement in the first place. Yet this is also a crisis of identity, not because refugees are disrupting Europe's homogeneity, as is often thought, but because they are challenging Europe's capacity to live up to its principles, from those underpinning democracy and liberalism to those associated with modernity and civility (Schicchet 2017b). Nevertheless, while the Summer of Migration has turned attention to the plight of refugees in Europe, the overwhelming majority of them are still located in the global South, and particularly in the Middle East (Schicchet 2016). Thus, refugees raise poignant questions both in the global North and the global South, as the contributions to this volume illustrate. Terzioğlu found herself among Syrian refugees in her native Turkey, while Bauer-Amin found herself among Syrian and Iraqi refugees between Vienna and her hometown in Bavaria/Germany. Yet, the refugee question also reached Shahrokhi in the USA, while Grillo had to confront it in Tunisia, where she faced the entailment of her fellow Europeans' policies and activism abroad, as she discovered they interwove with her own research process. Taken together, these contributions emphasize the pervasive nature of the refugee question and evoke the imperative need to understand it in depth. Given that the global North has insistently placed Europe under the spotlight of the refugee crisis, and that most of these refugees come from the Middle East, this volume dwells on this asymmetrical encounter.

Global hegemony and the subaltern

Shahrokhi's 'Life jackets on shore: anthropology, refugees and the politics of belonging in Europe' aims to explore how new bids for citizenship emerge out of contested political claims in the global North, especially those involving newly arrived Middle Eastern refugees. As she reminds us, the rhetoric of anti-immigration and Islamophobia has been shaped by numerous factors, from the latest presidential election in the USA and Brexit, to the rise of ultra-nationalism and, concomitantly, humanitarian-inspired refugee solidarity movements in continental Europe and beyond. In this piece, Shahrokhi seems to suggest that rather than being a historical rupture, immigration, forced or otherwise, can be understood as just one form of contrastive identity among others, as representations of the other have always shaped social identity and diversity. In other words, like every other political and social entity, Europe itself has been constructed by contrast with that which is concurrently defined as not-Europe. The underlying question then is to understand the process through which someone or something becomes European via the exclusion of others.

In this sense, Shahrokhi reminds us that Europe has reproduced its own image through hegemonic discourses of history and science that equate Europe with the Enlightenment, modernity, citizenship, democracy and secularism. Yet, Europe never actually existed as a homogenous geopolitical and sociocultural entity, only as a project. Hence, the fragile 'allure of the idea of European unity' and the 'fantasy of consensus' must be protected at all costs. Today, the influx of the long-Orientalized Middle Easterners, especially as refugees, provides a convenient explanation for Europe's lack of cohesion and permeable borders, and – I would add – also for the popular rhetoric of the generic human disputing symbolic space with the particularistic image of the citizen. In both cases, however, refugees do not belong to Europe. At a minimum, they may 'become' Europeans, prompting the 'integration' debate; but just as often they are actively prevented from being included. Regardless, to Shahrokhi, those who somehow enter the continent are 'outsiders within' who conjure up, in one way or another, the idea of Europe itself.

As Shahrokhi contends, on the one hand, conflating refugees and immigrants simplifies the complexities and diversity of experiences, often erasing experiences of trauma, flight and exile. On the other hand, in practice, the experiences of those on the move cannot always be conceptually simplified in terms of flight versus emigration, as experiences of extreme poverty, violence and persecution often merge, and are expressed through narratives that do not legally legitimize asylum. The problem here may be that what Shahrokhi defines as 'the nation-state's promise of modernity', entwined with ideas of urbanity and citizenship as it is, completely defines the refugee today. This promise emerged in a particular European context, in the aftermath of the Second World War, the subsequent 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 protocol that inscribed global displacement into a framework first developed to deal with European refugees. This may simply not be broad enough to account for different experiences of (im)mobility emerging out of the contemporary world's vast diversity and postcolonial political reality. As, Shahrokhi reminds us, the generic 'refugee' emerging out of the generic 'human', as formulated by humanitarianism, through mobilizing strategies such as 'crises' and 'emergencies', distracts us from particular contexts, and consequently from the role of the world's hegemonic order in creating and escalating conflicts and wars in subaltern lands, which are the main causes of human displacement in the world today.

The other within

Most refugees arriving in Europe during the so-called summer of migration settled in Germany. The majority reached this country through the 'Balkan route', which usually involved passing through Austria and Hungary. In 'Volunteering among refugees in Vienna and Bavaria as an ethnographic encounter: exploring borderlands between civic engagement and academia', Sabine Bauer-Amin asserts that, during the summer of 2015, Vienna was a 'bottleneck' in the journey northwards. It was normally the first

entrepôt after a ‘hostile passage through Hungary’, and before the Austro-Bavarian border camps, where refugees were obliged to register as asylum seekers. Landau an der Isar, Bauer-Amin’s native town, was one of the main sites for the establishment of these new refugee camps. However, long before 2015 and the coming of Syrians, Iraqis, Afghans and others, Bavaria, located in Germany between Austria and the Czech Republic, had already been deeply shaped by migration, refugees and ‘national population engineering’. Bauer-Amin’s article thus explores the nuances through which Bavarian history, and experiences of refuge in particular, were re-signified by the ‘encounter’ (Schicocet 2017b) with Middle Eastern refugees during 2015.

According to Bauer-Amin, the patterns of interactions Bavarians had developed over the years with their physical and symbolic borders changed with the re-introduction of border controls in 2015, which in turn, also changed the local community. In the small town of Landau an der Isar, home to around 13,000 people in 2015,² the arrival of thousands of refugees greatly affected social dynamics. Most prominently, local politics reflected the same political shift toward nationalism and inward border protection felt in the rest of Germany, and concurrent attitudes of solidarity toward the refugees. Both positions entailed a resignification of the region’s own past, which played a vital role in this encounter, shaping experiences of flight, citizenship, belonging and more. Each locale has its own context. The experience of refugees must thus be understood and analyzed against this complex patchwork background, granted that the route is often long, audacious and involves diverse contexts. The dynamics between refugees and the sets of encounters constituting the experience of flight, states Bauer-Amin, are not only shaped by the refugees’ arrival, but are also embedded in each local context’s own socio-historical knowledge system, as she shows in Landau an der Isar’s case, evoking what social scientists had already proposed for other social situations (Bourdieu 1977; Sahlins 2010).

Overall, the interplay between politics (at regional, national and international levels), caseworkers, volunteers, activists, supporters and opponents of inclusionary refugee policies, shaped the Summer of Refuge for refugees and non-refugees alike. Complex dynamics between these different social actors and contexts took place simultaneously and interdependently. Bauer-Amin’s article aims to discuss the implications of these transformations as well as problematizing her own commitment to the topic, the refugees, her local home community and academia, both as an engaged German citizen and as an anthropologist. In this sense, Bauer-Amin’s article builds upon anthropology’s already rich tradition in addressing the subjectivity of the researcher and academia as an engaged observer (see, for example, Asad 1973; Clifford 1986; Greenhouse, Mertz and Warren 2002; Marcus and Fisher 1986; Kanaan 1997; Narayan 1993; Messerschmidt 1981; Nordstrom and Robben

2 www.citypopulation.de/php/germany-bayern.php?cityid=09279122 (accessed 27 February 2017).

1995; Sandford and Angel-Ajani 2006; Spradley and McCurdy 1984). However, Bauer-Amin's angle is the opposite to that which most of this literature problematizes. As she found herself mediating between Landau's local community and the newly arrived refugees, she stood for values and perspectives that put her at odds with much of Landau, often including the town's *Helferkreis* (refugee helpers' circle). Thus, she felt confronted less with the perils of being an engaged observer, than with those of being an academic activist and scholastic citizen, fearing that her learnt position as a Middle Eastern expert would jeopardize her belonging to her local community.

Bauer-Amin concludes by reiterating the need to acknowledge situated knowledge, as opposed to presupposing neutrality as a condition of possibility for knowledge production. This seems to be true not only for engaged anthropologists, but also for academic activists. While she understands her article as an effort toward post factum self-ethnography, the article itself could be interpreted as supporting the viewpoint that most ethnographies are as much about the self as they are about the anthropologist's interlocutors. If this is true, then it is only the extent to which one or the other are overtly engaged that defines subgenres.

The stigma

In 'Banality of evil and the normalization of the discriminatory discourses against Syrians in Turkey', Ayşecan Terzioğlu discusses the development of discriminatory discourses and practices against Syrian forced migrants in Turkey, and how they interact with medical discourses and practices on the health of the local Syrian population. Much like Bauer-Amin suggests in her case, Terzioğlu contends that inasmuch as these discourses and practices in Turkey stem from the current political environment, they also relate to historic interactions between Turkey and Arabs, marked as they are especially by the clash between Turkish and Arab nationalisms. In Turkey, this encounter generated negative images of Arabs as 'ignorant, backward and fanatic Islamists', especially among the secular elite, who try to locate Turkey symbolically within contemporary Europe. In the Arab world, Turkey is often viewed as the Ottoman colonizer and persecutor of Arab culture.

Despite the political emphasis, discriminatory discourses about Syrians in Turkey are not only about war and nationhood/nationalism. They encompass language, interpretation of Islam, dress code, etiquette, social skills, values and more, and are often expressed in both interpersonal interactions and the mass media. Incidentally, it may be helpful to think of Terzioğlu's argument stretching beyond Turkey itself, as such a contrastive identity processes are also concealed within the Christian global North. On the one hand, it is necessary to remember that this concealment reveals the global North's mobilization of its own totalizing and othering rhetoric about Muslims and Middle Easterners. On the other hand, however, Terzioğlu shows that such an identity-forming process is not simply a prerogative of the hegemonic

European political tradition, but is in fact a much wider tendency, though in this case it is still postcolonial, given its post-Ottoman character.

Writing in Turkey, in 2016, Terzioğlu finds herself affected by the political turmoil that has been shaking the country, without much distance to reflect upon the present. Rather than being only a limitation, this condition, which affects to greater or lesser extent all writers in this special issue, can also be thought as presenting an opportunity to challenge the normalcy of the divide between afflicted disadvantaged interlocutors and unaffected privileged scholars. This divide has been naturalized in the course of science's history, given that science was once written almost exclusively by the privileged of the global North.³ In anthropology, it has been increasingly challenged by the rise of 'native anthropology' since the 1960s.

In this special edition, anthropologists are positioned between hegemony and 'subalternity' (Beverly 1999), not only because anthropology is a discursive tradition located between these two poles, or because the authors themselves are between the global North and the global South, but also because they dare to express how their own emotions are intertwined with their academic writing. Coming from this position, Terzioğlu is particularly interested in understanding not only what has been shaping this Syrian-Turkish encounter in Turkey, but also how the conflicts emerging from it can be countered, so as to address the contextual asymmetry between hegemony and subalternity in practice, thereby bettering the lives of Syrian refugees in Turkey.

Terzioğlu draws inspiration for her 'critical anthropological perspective' mainly from Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1965) and Achille Mbembe's 'Necropolitics' (2003). Inspired by Arendt, she argues against totalizing and othering discourses about the Syrians, which in turn have also essentialized normative ideals about Turkey and the Turks, and explores possibilities for more inclusive and pluralistic discourses that would help mitigate the Syrians' predicament. Aware that the former discourses dispute space with more sympathetic perspectives such as hers, she warns us about their perils and pervasiveness in Turkey. From Mbembe, in turn, she takes the need to understand the existence of such totalizing and othering discourses about Syrians in the medical realm in Turkey as the 'ultimate expression of sovereignty' through 'necropolitics'. For Mbembe, necropolitics is 'the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die' (Mbembe 2003:11), and thus the most extreme form of biopower (Foucault 1997). In line with this argument, Terzioğlu judges it to be necessary to raise awareness about such discriminatory discourses to mitigate their effects in the medical realm in general, and among healthcare providers and NGOs in particular.

3 For more on postcolonial science and technology studies, see (Medina, Marques and Holmes 2004; Harding 2011; Pratt, 1992).

We, the other

In 'Refugees in Tunisia: border perspectives on migration policies', Valentina Grillo offers the reader an intimate portrait of the hazards of her fieldwork in a Tunisian refugee camp, and how an anthropological perspective coupled with tools crafted especially for research among refugees have helped her to cope with these difficulties, and allowed her to see beyond both nationalist and humanitarian rhetoric. In exposing her own fieldwork challenges, Grillo also aims to analyse the complexity of power relations involved in the refugee question in Tunisia, particularly the impact of researchers, activists, European policy, and Tunisian refugee law on the lives of local asylum seekers.

Despite being well trained in Europe to research refugees in the Middle East and North Africa region, after arriving in Tunisia Grillo found her theoretical questioning overshadowed by her methodological challenges. The research notes she presents here are geared towards preparing future fieldworkers who may face similar challenges. The sections recapitulate her research trajectory, each of them dealing with a major challenge she faced. Even though her research was focused on a group of about 60 asylum seekers who remained in the Choucha refugee camp after its closure in 2013, she quickly discovered that her fieldwork interlocutors involved foreign activists, Tunisian state officials and others. Furthermore, for reasons she explains in the article, it transpired that part of her fieldwork took place in Ben Gardene, away from Choucha, in a very different social and political environment. This pushed her not only to develop different approaches to diverse contexts, but also left her with the task of imposing some unity on her research. Like many of her other challenges, this could not have been foreseen before the beginning of her fieldwork.

Among her main challenges was skepticism toward researchers. As the Tunisian state was not welcoming to the country's marginalized, neither was it welcoming of researchers probing the refugee situation. Far from being an exception, my own research among Palestinian refugees in the Middle East, Latin America and Europe suggests that this is in fact generally the rule. Furthermore, in her case, the refugees were also rightfully hesitant and suspicious of her intervention. This evidence also confirms a broader pattern, as I have developed elsewhere (Schiocchet 2014a). Yet, this was not all. Even as Grillo developed a workaround to the state's unwillingness to permit her research, and as trust was developed among her and her refugee interlocutors, another major question erupted: trauma. Not only is trauma a health issue for the refugees themselves, but it also posed an additional methodological threat to her research.

Despite Choucha being her main research site, it was actually in Ben Gardene that Grillo met another of her major challenges, one that has in fact been overlooked or at least underrepresented in the anthropological research among forced migrants in the global South: the role of foreigners. After President Ben Ali's fall in 2011, there was a surge in the numbers of foreign activists, journalists and caseworkers in Tunisia.

They promoted integration projects and organized demonstrations, petitions, international events and more. They tended to expect that the refugees' predicament would neatly fit their political platforms. Yet, as Grillo reminds us, 'refugees are not European, nor is North Africa Europe'. Consequently, the refugees did not always deem this foreign intervention helpful, especially given that journalists, activists and others did not always take the refugees' own point of view into consideration, as anthropologists are required to do.

Taken together, these challenges framed much of Grillo's fieldwork experience and led her to conclude that it is only through a politically localized perspective, forged in a dialogue with the researcher's interlocutors, that researchers can safely engage forced migrants without harming them in the process. This perception is in line with the normal anthropological approach, but this needs to be further tailored to accommodate work among refugees, for instance with training in how to deal with trauma. Furthermore, the anthropological approach must culminate in a 'border perspective', given the need to understand forced migrants beyond nation-state definitions of citizenship and – I would add – the humanitarian depoliticization and decontextualization of refugees' own plights via its emphasis on a generic humanity, as if humanitarian intervention was beyond the realm of politics (Agier 2012; Fassin, 2012; Feldman and Ticktin 2010; Harrel-Bond 1986, 2005; Malkki 1996; Schiocchet 2014b).

Anthropology and refugees

The sequence of articles composing this special issue reflects the need to move the refugee question from the European confines in which it has mostly been discussed by academicians in recent times, to the Global South, and particularly the Middle East, where it is more acute. As the articles suggest, rather than simply a matter of learning about the other, grasping the refugee question is essential to understanding the relations between the global 'hegemonic us' and its 'subaltern other', and consequently about the pervasiveness of the national-humanitarian order of the world and the postcolonial nature of the present. Anthropologists do not simply represent the voice of the subaltern. Yet, they are also more than simply the voice of the global hegemonic order. They are located somewhere between these terms, in a way often more privileged than their interlocutors.

As Bauer-Amin's article particularly demonstrates, when dealing with refugees 'at home', established boundaries between 'us' and 'them' are seriously challenged, particularly as the refugees strive to become 'us' (at least in terms of citizenship and/or rights), and 'we' (at least rhetorically) strive to integrate them. As Terzioğlu's article in turn suggests, the opposite may be also true when 'the other' becomes essentialized and stigmatized to the point where no integration is possible due to the very oppositional nature of the interaction. Overall, this discussion highlights the symbolic space between the researcher and their interlocutors, and all the contributions lend themselves to a call for the 'border perspective' overtly mentioned in Grillo's research notes.

The fact that anthropology emerged within the realm of European colonialism is widely acknowledged today. However, by the 1960s anthropologists had begun to deconstruct the discipline and to portray the world in what Shahrokhi describes as 'contested political spaces', listening carefully to subaltern subjects. In the so-called post-truth era, when information is widely available yet subjects lack the capacity to process it, instead aggregating bits of information in unkempt chains that legitimize the wildest claims they are already predisposed to have,⁴ anthropology has something to offer. Anthropologists are, to use Shahrokhi's words, 'intellectually equipped and ethically obliged' to – as Bauer-Amin says – 'speak truth to power'. To put this simply, the contributions assembled here demonstrate that anthropology today is a fine tool to uncover and expose power relations between the hegemonic order of the world and the subaltern subject represented by refugees. Above all, as Shahrokhi illustrates, these power relations are embedded in concepts such as 'crisis' and 'emergency' that warrant a thorough critique.

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4 See, for example, Hochschild and Einstein 2015; Muckle n.d.; Luu 2016; Oxford Dictionaries 2016).

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