

**Extractive humanitarianism:**

**Participatory confinement and unpaid labour in refugees governmentality**

Abstract: This article advances the notion of “extractive humanitarianism” to designate the role played by data extraction and knowledge extraction operations in refugee governmentality. It argues that extractive operations rely on refugees’ active participation to their own governmentality – what I define as participatory confinement. The piece engages with feminist literature on unpaid labor and shows that participatory confinement implies that refugees perform unpaid labor activities, which are disguised as voluntary work. It moves on by conceptualizing participatory confinement through the lens of the invitation to governmentality. In order to develop this, the article focuses on two modes of participatory confinement: unpaid labor that asylum seekers do as “voluntary” activities and knowledge and data extraction. It concludes by questioning extractive humanitarianism in light of the subtle coercion and invisible exploitation that asylum seekers are exposed to.

**Keywords:** extractive humanitarianism; unpaid labour; refugees; participatory confinement; value

## **Extractive humanitarianism:**

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The movements of illegalized migrants and asylum seekers are highly obstructed, controlled, and contained by European member states. Yet, at the same time, migration governmentality has progressively turned into a prominent source of economic profit for both states and private actors. Over the last three decades the humanitarian business of governing and controlling refugees and asylum seekers has also grown exponentially. However, value production in refugee economies is not narrowed to the direct economic profit made by private actors as part of the so called “migration industry” (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Sorensen, 2013): it is also the outcome of “predatory formations” that extracts value from people on the move, from their conduct, mobility, and behaviors (Andersson, 2018). Moreover, as Jasbir Puar has fleshed out, “biopolitical states weaponize the determination and capacity not to die” and generate value out of that (2021, p. 396). Refugee governmentality, this article argues, is increasingly grounded on extractive dynamics, which encompass “data craving” (Lemberg-Pedersen & Hayoti, 2020) and knowledge extraction and which rely on asylum seekers invisible unpaid labor which are disguised as “voluntary”<sup>1</sup> activities. Here I introduce the expression of *extractive humanitarianism* to draw attention to the centrality played by data and knowledge extraction activities in generating value in refugee economies.

The analytics of extraction enables grasping key practices of unpaid labor and forms of value production in refugee humanitarianism. In fact, following Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, extractive operations are at stake “not only when the operations of capital plunder the materiality of the earth and biosphere, but also when they encounter and draw upon forms and practices of human cooperation and sociality that are external to them” (2019, p. 188). Relatedly, extractive humanitarianism points to the incorporation of refugees

into their own governmentality and control – what I define as *participatory confinement*. Indeed, asylum seekers are not only passive sources of data extraction; rather, they are incessantly interpellated and asked to speak – about their life coping strategies, their journeys, and their use of digital technologies – even if they are often deemed to be deceitful subjects. In so doing, this article contends, refugees are incorporated in modes of *detention from below* which require the active participation of asylum seekers to their own governmentality in order to strengthen both value production and mechanisms of confinement.

Methodologically, the piece draws on on empirical material I have collected in Greece and on analysis of United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) documents and reports related to Jordan and Lebanon. In Greece, I conducted fieldwork in Athens and in Lesbos between 2017 and 2020, doing interviews with UNHCR employees, with local NGOs, and with the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum as well as with asylum seekers. Doing research on extractive humanitarianism might appear as contradictory due to the potential knowledge extraction from people who seek asylum. However, the information collected from refugees is the result of conversations, more than structured interviews; and these have been done exclusively with those who wanted to share their concerns, claims, and experiences specifically related to activities in camps. The selection of UNHCR's documents has been done by prioritizing material on refugees' participation. Centering around the notion of extractive humanitarianism, the paper proceeds in four steps. First, it engages with debates on unpaid labor and, in particular, with feminist scholarship, suggesting to intertwine it with critical migration literature on the labor exploitation of illegalized migrants. Then it moves on by conceptualizing participatory confinement, drawing attention to the subtle forms of coercion this entails and foregrounding how refugees are encouraged to do unpaid labor in the name of their own good. The third and fourth sections focus on unpaid labor activities

that asylum seekers are encouraged to perform as part of two of the UNHCR's digital innovation strategies in Jordan (Humanitarian Chatbots and RefuGIS) and in the Refugee Cash Assistance Programme in Greece. A critique of the border regime, this paper suggests, also entails taking into account modes of coercion and exploitation that usually remain invisible or are not conceptualized in those terms and which might involve the cooptation of migrants into their own governmentality.

### **Excavating Refugees' Unpaid Labor:**

By introducing the term “wageless life,” Michael Denning (2010) has insisted on the centrality of unwaged labor in our societies and criticized notions such as “wasted life” or “bare life,” as these associate some individuals (such as migrants) with garbage and reinforce the image that they are not a source of capitalization. Denning's point enables disentangling refugees' protracted strandedness and their difficulty to be employed as waged workers from the idea that they are unexploited surplus life. In fact, asylum seekers who are confined in Greece are at the same time sources of capitalization for international agencies as well as for state authorities even if they are unemployed and are not integrated in the job market: they are involved in unpaid labor activities and are sources of data and knowledge extraction. That is, refugees might be “subjects with value” even if destitute on a legal and material level, as Coddington, Conlon, and Martin have observed (2020, p. 10).

In migration literature, scholars have investigated the exploitation of the migrant labor force and the blackmailing that illegalized migrants are exposed to. Illegalized migrant workers are widely employed in the construction sector (Andrijasevic & Sacchetto, 2017), in agriculture (Gambino, 2017) and in the hospitality sector. More recently, scholars have foregrounded the key role played by migrants in supply chains and logistics (Altenried et al.,

2018; Cuppini et al., 2015). Deborah Cowen's book *The Deadly Life of Logistics* (2014) has paved the ground for analyses on migration and logistics.

Migration studies scholars and geographers have explored the production of value and the labor economy at play in migration governance by looking at the profit made by private actors as part of the growing "migration industry" (Andersson, 2014; Castron et al., 2018). The migrant detention business has incessantly proliferated across the globe over the last two decades, as scholars contributing to the carceral geography literature have remarked (Hiemstra & Conlon, 2016; Martin, 2021). Class-related factors influence refugee encampment policies and, relatedly, refugees' labor market (Turner 2015). Humanitarian business are grounded on hierarchies between locally recruited labor and international NGOs officers. As Elisa Pascucci noted, "locally recruited labor is essential for our understanding of 'actually existing' humanitarianism" (2019, p. 3).

The injunction for asylum seekers to take part in surveys and focus groups and to provide detailed information about their life coping strategies is a key tenet of refugee governance. However, it is not exercised in the same way on all asylum seekers and it is in fact enforced through a multiplication of hierarchies among refugees themselves. These are also the result of some asylum seekers refusing to take part in "voluntary" unpaid labor activities or who are less interpellated than others (e.g., usually women less than men). By conceptualizing asylum seekers' "voluntary" activities as unpaid labor I engage with feminist literature which has stressed the importance of moving beyond a "wage-centric understanding of exploitation" and has shown how unpaid labor activities are constitutive of global capitalism (Mezzadri, 2021, p. 1187). Unpaid labor has been notably used by feminist scholars to stress the value extracted from "unwaged house-workers as well as many other unpaid and un-free laborers" (Federici, 2019; see also Mezzadri, 2016). As Veronica Gago (2017) has stressed in her research on popular economies in Argentina, a focus on unwaged

work illuminates the blurred boundaries between formal and informal labor. Unpaid labor has been mainly -- even if not exclusively -- associated with unwaged social reproduction activities. Actually, the “volunteering” activities I take into account in this paper do not concern social reproduction; and yet, it is important to stress that social reproduction activities do also play a key role in the economy of unpaid labor in migration governmentality (Herrera, 2012) .

I suggest that feminist scholarship offers a relevant analytical lens for coming to grips with the invisible work performed by asylum seekers and the value generated through this, as well as with the blurred boundaries between consent and coercion. More precisely, the category of unpaid labor opens up a ground of struggles not narrowed to claims for wages. As Silvia Federici (2010) has remarked, the analytics of unpaid labor renders invisible work and exploitation visible and insists on the importance to to refuse extraction of labor from the individuals. Therefore, the analytical lens of unpaid labor does much more than point to the unwaged labor performed by asylum seekers and claim that they should be remunerated: more radically, it also challenges the social expectations towards asylum seekers as individuals who should behave as active citizens and work for free.

Asylum seekers’ “voluntary” work is shaped by subtle coercion and generates value in refugee humanitarianism. The analytical lens of unpaid labor enables shedding light on invisible exploitation and value production in the field of asylum (Martin, 2021). Ellie Gore and Genevieve Le Baron (2019) have called for using social reproduction theory on unpaid domestic labor to grapple with women’s unfree labor in commodity supply chains. Situating their analysis within feminist political economy, they draw attention to the blurred and problematic binary opposition between free and unfree labor and highlight that “non- and under-payment of wages, requirements to complete unpaid labor as a condition of

employment, and the lending of money to workers and charging high interest rates” intersect (LeGore & Baron, 2019, p. 569).

Such a theoretical perspective enables putting to work feminist theories on unpaid labor and social reproduction theory beyond the sphere of domestic work. In a similar vein, I suggest looking at the specific moral economy and political technology which are at the core of refugees’ digital unpaid labor. Bridging these two streams of literature – migration scholarship and feminist political economy – this piece conceptualizes labor beyond the direct economic profit extracted from migrants and the exploitation of the migrant labor force by investigating the modes of unpaid labor and hidden labor which are at play in refugee humanitarianism. Relatedly, this article draws attention to the processes of value extraction that are at play in refugee governmentality, with a specific focus on the incorporation of digital and financial tools in refugee camps. The use of technologies by humanitarian and security actors as well as by asylum seekers have given rise to circuits of data sharing and it requires an incessant labor of maintenance of digital infrastructures.

In some contexts, like Greece, Covid-19 has accelerated the digitalization of the asylum system and has contributed to the multiplication of the digital barriers that people who seek asylum need to face. Yet, we should be careful in not fetishizing techno-humanitarianism and its enhancement during Covid-19. In this respect, the Greek context is a case in point, since, first, some of the digital intermediations introduced during the pandemic have been later scrapped – such as the online pre-registration and asylum card renewal process – and, second, most of these were quite low-tech and ordinary technologies – such as the mandatory Skype call pre-registration system in Greece that ended in November 2021. This insight into unpaid labor enables excavating the modes of subtle coercion and invisible exploitation which are at play in refugees’ participation to their own governmentality – what I have defined here as *participatory confinement*.

## **Conceptualizing Participatory Confinement**

“Participatory confinement” designates the active incorporation of asylum seekers into their own governmentality and control. This takes place through refugees’ involvement in diverse unpaid labor activities some of which, as I will show later, involve knowledge production processes which end up strengthening refugees’ protracted confinement. Participatory confinement is grounded on forms of subtle coercion rather than on directly coercive tactics: asylum seekers are nudged to “voluntarily” participate to activities in the name of their own good. The so-called participatory turn is nowadays a consolidated approach in refugee humanitarianism, as it traces back to the early 2000s a few years after it took place first in the development sector (Doná, 2007). But how are the boundaries between consent and coercion blurred in the asylum context? And how does the injunction to participate shape refugees’ conduct?

The participatory turn has been further pushed forward in refugee governmentality also through the systematic incorporation of digital technologies. Asylum seekers have been encouraged to design and find out solutions to their own displacement – what scholars and humanitarian agencies have defined as an approach “by refugees to refugees” (Betts et al., 2020). That is, refugees are not only nudged to provide feedback and information about their experiences as displaced persons; they are also asked to fill in the gaps, to fix the broken system, and not to behave as “passive beneficiaries.” The injunction for asylum seekers to find solutions to their own displacement is part of a broader consolidated humanitarian discourse around refugees’ self-reliance and resilience.

According to the UNHCR (2015), such a mode of intervention enables asylum seekers to explain “the protection risks they face” but also push them “to participate as partners in the design of programmatic responses to issues affecting their lives. It also helps



mobilizing communities to take collective action to enhance their own protection.” That is, not only are asylum seekers directly involved in their own governmentality, they are also expected to actively mobilize and work to fix infrastructural lacks in camps. In this regard, Alex Betts and colleagues contend that it is important to move beyond “a humanitarian system that is still premised upon a strong separation between the provider and the ‘beneficiary’” (2020, p. 74).

Hence, participatory confinement does not only involve invisible and subtle coercion; it is also about hidden and unpaid labor that asylum seekers are pushed to perform to find a solution to the withdrawal of humanitarianism. As Hanno Brankamp (2022) has fleshed out, “community policing” is a key technology of governance adopted both for legitimizing the refugee empowerment narrative and for dividing the “good refugees” from the unruly ones. Importantly, participatory confinement does not only discipline asylum seekers and involve them into forms of detention from below; the injunction for asylum seekers to participate *for free* in knowledge production processes and in a diverse range of activities in refugee camps *de facto* pushes them to perform unpaid labor.

In *The Undercommons* Fred Moten and Sefano Harney have pointed to the “invitation to governmentality” (2013, p. 54) that subjects are repeatedly exposed to; this is “made by way of transfer of responsibility, and immaterial labor is distinguished from the vitality of life, from its vessel, by the taking up of responsibility, and life is now distinguished by its overt irresponsibility” (2013, p. 54). Elaborating on such a notion, it can be argued that the “invitation to governmentality” refers to the unpaid labor that people do when they are involved in participatory activities to provide feedback about services and they implicitly consent to be objects of extraction for knowledge that is used for further enforcing modes of control and governance. Speaking of an invitation to governmentality enables also sheds light on the multiple forms of interpellation that individuals are the objects of, and on how they are

nudged to participate in the name of their own good; that is, the invitation to governmentality that individuals are exposed to in different contexts, often turns into forms of subtle coercion that entails their direct participation.

The modes of participatory confinement which are at play in refugee humanitarianism can be analyzed in the frame of such an invitation to governmentality that asylum seekers are targeted by. In fact, following Moten and Harney, coercion is not always blatant and direct, nor highly visible and might be predicated upon participatory activities and formal consensus, and this renders it difficult to elaborate a critical discourse about it. If on the one hand the invitation to governmentality is nowadays widespread in different social fields and far beyond refugee governmentality, on the other it is important to highlight a distinctive character of how this is enacted on asylum seekers. Indeed, clear-cut asymmetries between asylum seekers and humanitarian actors sustain the governmentality from below at play in refugee settings (Ticktin, 2016). Together with that, the active involvement of asylum seekers into knowledge production processes does paradoxically reinforce their dependency on humanitarian agencies.

The *peer-to-peer subjection* which informs the invitation to the governmentality discourse is substantially altered in the refugee settings; asylum seekers are invited to participate as beneficiaries of aid programmes and are expected to be responsive – as part of a mix of disciplinary injunctions and interpellations to act *as if* they were citizens. In order to come to grips with the asymmetries between asylum seekers and humanitarian actors in refugee humanitarianism – with the former waiting for the outcome of their asylum claim – I suggest framing the invitation to governmentality in terms of participatory confinement. Relatedly, the invitation to governmentality in the asylum context is enforced through the indirect blackmailing of refugees. Indeed, the promise that *if refugees do* participate in

“voluntary” activities, they will benefit, is intertwined with refugees’ fear that *if they do not* take part, they might be negatively affected.

Notably, if on the one hand asylum seekers’ speech is fundamentally discredited as untruthful and during the asylum interviews they are deemed to be deceitful subjects, on the other they are repeatedly asked to speak and to provide detailed information about their life coping strategies (Beneduce, 2015). Asylum seekers and refugees are incessantly asked to provide information and feedback without getting more rights or independence in turn. In fact, if “procedures of participation are also ways of making up people” (Kelty, 2019, p. 16), it can be argued that by participating in “voluntary activities,” asylum seekers are enacted as *para-citizens without rights*.

### **Digital Unpaid Labor Through Data Extraction**

The transformations triggered in refugee humanitarianism through the incorporation of digital technologies have been investigated by a growing academic debate, mainly centered on surveillance and control. Yet, the political economy and the economy of labor of “techno-humanitarianism” (Morozov, 2012) remain quite under-theorized in the literature. By saying this, I do not refer exclusively to the importance of analyses that have investigated the role of private actors and high-tech companies in refugee governance, as part of the “migration industry” (Cranston et al., 2018; Gammeltoft-Hansen & Sorensen, 2013). Here I supplement those analyses by unpacking the digital innovation buzzword from the standpoint of the invisible and unpaid forms of unpaid labor that asylum seekers are nudged to perform in digitalized refugee governance. A focus on digital unpaid labor is relevant not only for studying invisible modes of exploitation but also for grasping the modes of subtle coercion and subjection through which asylum seekers are targeted. In 2017, the UNHCR implemented chatbots in some refugee camps – in Lebanon and in Jordan – presenting these

as a new interface of communication between asylum seekers and humanitarian actors. The use of chatbots is justified by their flexibility which allows “for iteration and adaptation in response to feedback” (UNHCR, 2017?). More than aspiring at full automation in humanitarian contexts, artificial intelligence is used for extracting knowledge from refugees in a systematic way and for nudging them to provide feedback by reacting and responding to specific questions.

In this case, the knowledge extracted from asylum seekers is users’ knowledge; or better, it is knowledge extracted from them as users of chatbots and digital platforms. As the UNHCR stresses: “through engagement with refugees via digital platforms, humanitarian responders can provide not only relaying critical lifesaving information to refugees, but also establish a dialogue in which refugees can provide their insights, feedback and priorities” (UNHCR, 2017). The UNHCR's initiative builds on the World Food Programme (WFP) Mobile Vulnerability Assessment Mapping project. As part of that project, the WFP developed chatbots in 2016 with the purposes of mapping the needs of their beneficiaries. The WFP chatbot is set to providing relevant information about, for instance, food prices or food distribution programmes; at the same, it also extracts specific data from users, as it asks them to say their location, specify gender and nationality, and other personal information. The fact that asylum seekers interact with humanitarian actors via the chatbots does not mean that they are coerced to do to that. On the one hand, it is important to highlight the limited leeway that asylum seekers often have. Indeed, using the chatbots might be the only way to communicate with NGOs in the camp and, therefore, to receive the necessary information.

Yet, on the other, even if we cannot speak of coercion, by taking part in that digital activity based on extractive operations, asylum seekers are incorporated into their own governmentality. In fact, participatory confinement does not necessarily imply coercive mechanisms of persuasion, even if the very boundaries between individual consensus and

indirect pressure to make use of some technologies and digital interfaces are often blurred. Rather, participatory confinement concerns the effects of asylum seekers' involvement in "voluntary" activities or in digital activities that are used as interfaces of communication, and entails a systematic extraction of both personal data and of the feedback and information that asylum seekers provide.

In 2019 the UNHCR's Innovation Service launched a participatory digital mapmaking project for refugees in the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan. The participatory digital mapping project RefuGIS, tested by the UNHCR in Zaatari constitutes a second case in point of activities based on asylum seekers' digital unpaid labor and that enforces participatory confinement. The project is presented by the UN agency as "the first UNHCR project to empower refugees to use mapping technology," that is by giving refugees "the tools to use mapping for improved decision-making" (UNHCR, 2020).

As part of this project, refugees are nudged to gather information and map the camp in order for the UNHCR to understand the infrastructural problems of the camp as well as refugees' needs. It is worth noting that RefuGIS has been tested in Zaatari, a camp which has become widely known for the technologies implemented in the daily operations of humanitarian actors. In fact, in Zaatari asylum seekers and refugees are identified through an iris-scan system, and the iris code is then used as a sort of embodied virtual prepaid card; indeed, asylum seekers can buy products in the camp by paying with their eyes, since the iris code is connected with UNHCR's Cash Assistance Programme through which they receive monthly financial support. However, technology is also used, as the RefuGis project demonstrates, for coopting refugees into their own confinement and to produce knowledge regarding their life coping strategies. Digital mapmaking programmes have been designed with the official purpose of involving asylum seekers in their own governmentality – by showing, through the map, the infrastructural problems to fix in the camp – such as lack of

water, electricity supplies, or internet connectivity – and by enhancing “their skills including cartography; data visualization, collection, and analysis; and computer programming” (UNHCR, 2020).

Actually, at a close glance, RefuGIS’s goal is not only to nudge asylum seekers to generate detailed information useful for humanitarian actors but also to push asylum seekers to take care of camps’ infrastructures, fix failures, and “manage Zaatari’s information themselves and address community issues by making their own spatially based decisions” (UNHCR, 2020). Thus, the digital mapmaking process itself is only one instance of asylum seekers’ incorporation into “voluntary” unpaid labor activities. While the UNHCR’s chatbots consist of digital intermediations between asylum seekers and humanitarian actors, and the former are involved as digital users, RefuGIS fully depends on asylum seekers’ active collaboration in producing a map of the camp where they live. Yet, more than a difference between passive and active involvement, these two modes of participatory confinement shed light on a systematic interpellation of asylum seekers – the UNHCR’s chatbots – and their “voluntary” work for generating a product which is considered of benefit to the refugee community – RefuGis.

### **Participatory Confinement as Knowledge Extraction**

Since 2015, the Greek refugee context has progressively turned into a space of protracted confinement for women, men, and children who seek asylum in Europe. In fact, for the migrants who disembarked on the Greek islands in 2015, Greece was a transit space in their journey to Northern Europe. With the progressive closure of the Balkan Route and with the signature of the EU-Turkey Deal in March in 2016, many migrants remained entrapped on the Greek islands, or have been stranded in refugee camps on the mainland. In the context of such a shift from migrants’ temporary presence to migrants’ protracted confinement, in

2017 the European Commission launched the Refugee Cash Assistance Programme in collaboration with the UNHCR and with the financial actors Prepaid Financial Services, which is based in London. The Programme was in place until September 2021, and as part of it, all asylum seekers in Greece who had lodged their asylum application were eligible for monthly financial support which is uploaded on a prepaid card, sponsored by Mastercard. The prepaid card could be used in local shops or for taking cash at ATM machines – but not for online payments.

Thus, the partial digitalization and financialization of refugee humanitarianism takes place within a space characterized by strengthened humanitarian-security confinement. The fact that digitalized refugee economies are enacted in a context where “islands are produced and remade as carceral spaces” (Mountz, 2020, p. 57) is key for critically engaging with participatory confinement mechanisms. Indeed, as it emerges from the Greek asylum context, participatory confinement concerns both the general strengthening of modes of confinement and of material fences, administrative barriers, and spatial confinement. UNHCR was in charge of distributing the prepaid cards to asylum seekers in refugee camps and hotspots and to verify every month asylum seekers’ eligibility for cash assistance. Like in other refugee contexts in the world, the UNHCR also conducts post-distribution monitoring activities. The UN refugee agency defines these as a set of activities “to collect and understand refugees’ feedback on the assistance provided by humanitarian agencies like UNHCR [...] to identify challenges and constraints experienced, and seek refugees’ feedback on any improvements required to implement similar assistance again in the future” (UNHCR, 2018a, p. 5).

In Greece, post-distribution monitoring activities have been adopted for understanding how asylum seekers use the prepaid cards as well as for extracting information about their life-coping strategies. Asylum seekers who receive the monthly financial support are objects of a mixed interpellation: the UNHCR selects some of the “card beneficiaries”<sup>2</sup>

and asks them to participate in individual interviews, focus groups, or surveys in the frame of post-distribution monitoring activities. The survey is composed of 130 multiple choice questions (UNHCR, 2018b); beyond basic data – such as gender, age range and nationality – this set of questions is apt at grasping detailed information which includes, among others, educational background of each family member, daily life coping strategies, how they spend the money, how much they save, the travel time to get to the shop, and jobs they have done in the black market. The survey is structured around the following main topics: basic needs, food security, health, livelihood, shelter, education, community relations, dignity, and choice (UNHCR, 2018b).

For instance, asylum seekers as card beneficiaries are asked “In what ways has the cash card money increased your sense of safety?,” “which kinds of things make you feel unsafe?,” and “has anyone in your household had to employ any of the following practices in the past month, such as [...] accepting dangerous, risky or exploitative work [...] or asked for money from strangers (begging)?.” In 2018, the UNHCR conducted focus groups with 1436 card beneficiaries in Greece; asylum seekers were addressed as para-customers, that is they were pushed to provide feedback on the Cash Assistance program and, more broadly, to report problems, lacks, and gaps in the camps. According to the report, asylum seekers recommended to “improve information provision,” to directly involve asylum-seekers and refugees, and “with increasing focus towards self-reliance, inclusion, and integration, many participants asked for support through access to the labor market” (UNHCR, 2018b). While asylum seekers are crafted in the UNHCR’s report as para-customers who raise complaints, lay claims, and provide feedback, in practice their demands spin freely. That is, asylum seekers are encouraged to speak and provide information without getting anything back -- in terms of more rights or more service. On the contrary, the use of apps as forced intermediations between asylum seekers and humanitarian actors has multiplied asylum



seekers' obstructions to rights, financial support, and international protection (Aradau, 2022; Tazzioli, 2020).

Hence, while on paper the UNHCR crafts asylum seekers as customers and self-entrepreneurs, in reality they become sources of knowledge and data extraction for the agency. What the UNHCR and NGOs label as “feedback/complaint mechanisms” (UNHCR, 2018b), in reality do consist of modes of interpellation and injunctions for asylum seekers to speak. None of these participatory assessment activities – surveys, interviews, and focus groups – are mandatory for asylum seekers, and only some of them are actually contacted via phone by the UNHCR and asked if they are keen to participate. Yet, as I highlighted in the previous section, an analysis of participatory confinement should not be flattened into questions about asylum seekers' consent. As a UNHCR coordinator of the Cash Assistance Programme in Lesvos told me, “we contact asylum seekers, mainly on the basis of their nationality, but we do not put any pressure on them, so they are free to choose whether or not they want to take part to the survey.”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, the relationship between asylum seekers and humanitarian actors is highly asymmetrical, as the former are worried that if they refuse to participate in focus groups and surveys that this might have a negative impact on the applications. At the same time, asylum seekers are targeted by an ambivalent economy of the promise. Indeed, on the one hand they are nudged to take part in these activities with the hope that this might bring some benefit to them. On the other, asylum seekers do not know what might happen if they do not participate and, thus, are worried of the potential negative consequences. The extraction of knowledge and data from asylum seekers and participatory confinement mechanisms should be read through the lens of what Louise Waite and colleagues have defined as “unfreedom continuum” (2015, p. 483) more than of forced labor as such.

Nevertheless, the main point of participatory confinement is not about asylum seekers being forced to take part in surveys and focus groups but, rather, to be nudged to contribute to their own governmentality and their own confinement in the name of their own good. The Greek refugee context sheds light on the peculiar intertwining between refugees' protracted dependency and their repeated interpellation. Asylum seekers are not only spatially confined; they are also kept in a state of protracted dependency on humanitarian aid. At the same time, they are constantly interpellated and pushed to speak and interact with humanitarian agencies; asylum seekers' feedback and information are needed, even if they are deemed to be deceitful and their speech untruthful. That is, the economy of discursivity unfolded in participatory confinement mechanisms is characterized by a call for asylum seekers to speak and interact, as part of pre-established templates, and they are simultaneously discredited as subjects of truth.

Surveys and focus group discussions are quite widespread in the refugee contexts where there are Cash Assistance Programmes in place. Yet, the fact that asylum seekers as card beneficiaries are repeatedly interpellated does not mean that the majority of them accept. As stressed in one of the reports about the Cash Assistance Programmes in Lebanon, there were few card beneficiaries engaged "in consultative processes relating to the cash assistance, including programme monitoring. Whilst highlighting that they are grateful for the assistance, there was a distinct sense of lack of agency among those interviewed, with several reflecting that they are simply passive recipients with no say in things that affect them" (Cash Assistance Learning Programme, 2019). That is, many times asylum seekers refuse to take participatory detention mechanisms – for instance, by not picking up phone calls from the UNHCR and NGOs and by reducing to a minimum their interaction with humanitarian actors.

While international organizations define (some) refugees as “simply passive recipients,” the *will not to speak* should be seen also as refugees’ tactic of refusal and resistance to knowledge and data extraction operations. Usually people who do not want to remain in Greece are less inclined to take part to the UNHCR’s activities and to be engaged in participatory confinement, as confirmed by those asylum seekers I interviewed. Officers at the UNHCR Headquarters stressed to me that “it is not easy to reach the card beneficiaries: many do not answer the phone, others say that they are not interested in the surveys. Yet, luckily some others are more collaborative and become our interlocutors; we cannot offer any compensation, but some understand that their participation will benefit them and the other refugees.”<sup>4</sup> As M., an Iranian asylum seeker based in Athens, points out, “we barely manage to receive a small amount of money through the Cash Assistance Programme; some months’ payment is delayed, and some people do not receive it at all; I have no interest in letting UNHCR know what I use the money for, nor in spending time for communicating with them.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, asylum seekers’ access to digital technologies and debit cards is far from being a smooth affair. During the first three years of the Cash Assistance Programme in Greece, many asylum seekers did not receive the cash for months or their monthly financial support had been systematically delayed. In 2018 and 2019, asylum seekers in Athens organized a few mobilizations to protest the huge delay of monthly payments, and in August 2018, they occupied one of the UNHCR buildings for about one month (Tazzioli, 2019). In fact, one way in which participatory confinement activities are boycotted by asylum seekers is through non-participation and by being turned into “passive recipients.”

In Greece, asylum seekers entrapped on the islands or stranded in refugee camps on the mainland often perceive their presence in the country as temporary and they feel being in transit even if they have been stuck there for months or years. Unlike contexts in which subjects envisage some kind of reward -- also at the level of moral compensation -- for taking

up the invitation to governmentality, in the asylum system participatory confinement does not give anything back. Indeed, as mentioned above, in the field of asylum the economy of the promise “do this for your own good” is inflected by an indirect blackmailing of refugees. That is, the promise that *if refugees do* participate in “voluntary” activities, this will be of benefit to them, is intertwined with refugees’ fear *if they do not* take part, they might be negatively affected. Nevertheless, some refugees and asylum seekers reject the invitation to governmentality and silently refuse to collaborate since they do not see any gain or advantage in it; they are asked to speak, spend time, and do unpaid labor without being paid back from either an economic or a legal and social point of view.

## **Conclusion**

In a lecture delivered at the University of Montreal in 1976 Michel Foucault discussed alternatives to the prison, highlighting that as part of these “there is an attempt to make prisoners themselves participate in devising the programmes for their own punishment, through the prisoners’ councils and so on. This is the idea that the individual, singly or collectively, is meant to accept the punitive procedure” (2009, p. 16). Foucault’s critique of the alternatives to prisons and of the participatory rationale foregrounds what in this paper I have defined as “participatory confinement;” and, at the same time, it suggests that a critique of the exclusionary politics of asylum involves interrogating how not to strengthen and legitimize coercive mechanisms by requiring individuals to participate in their own confinement. Through participatory confinement asylum seekers’ conduct is regulated and shaped, and at the same time knowledge is extracted from them. As this paper has shown by introducing the concept of *extractive humanitarianism*, refugee governmentality is grounded on multiple extractive processes.

Extractive humanitarianism relies on asylum seekers' knowledge production and involvement in unpaid labor disguised as "voluntary activities." The unpaid labor that refugees perform and the incessant extraction of data and knowledge from them highlight that value is generated beyond direct profit-making activities and that governmentality is increasingly exercised through an active incorporation of the governed subjects. Refugees, this article has shown, are turned into forced techno-users who are sources of data extraction and who are repeatedly interpellated about their life coping strategies and asked to interact via digital platforms. Such an insight foregrounds invisible forms of refugees' exploitation by conceptualizing "voluntary" activities as unpaid labor.

By mobilizing the prism of extractive humanitarianism, it is possible to excavate modes of value production and subtle coercion through participatory confinement. Alongside the most blatant enactments of border violence, coercion and exploitation are enforced also through parasitic and insidious participatory processes. This analytical lens is not narrowed to refugees. Rather, it enables connecting extractive processes through unpaid labor in refugee humanitarianism with other extractive operations that similarly require individuals' active participation in their own containment and exploitation. In fact, as Silvia Federici (2010) has remarked, the centrality of unpaid labor had been disclosed through the history of women's struggles; a focus on refugees' unpaid labor could be the opportunity to reinvigorate that debate and trace transversal political connections.

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<sup>1</sup> I put "voluntary" in quotation marks throughout the paper to stress the blurred boundaries between refugees' willingness, consent, obligation and mistrust in taking and not taking part to those activities.

<sup>2</sup> This is the expression used by UNHCR to designate asylum seekers who get the monthly financial support as part of the Cash Assistance Programme.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with UNHCR, Athens, July 28 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with UNHCR, Athens July 28, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with M., Athens, August 3, 2018.