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## Confining by Choking Refugees' Lifetime

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### ABSTRACT

This article argues that refugees' confinement is enforced through a combination of spatial tactics which restrict mobility and modes of governing by choking lifetime. Focusing on the Greek context, it contends that asylum seekers are entrapped in a sort of (in)dependency conundrum: they are expected to be self-reliant, and they are blamed for being pampered, but they are simultaneously disrupted insofar as they do autonomous social reproduction activities and build autonomous spaces of liveability. The piece starts by exploring the nexus between asylum procedure, carceral mechanisms and politics of confinement: it highlights that people who seek asylum in Greece are at risk of being detained or being declared inadmissible to the asylum procedure. It moves on to investigate the (in)dependency conundrum, taking into account the ways in which refugees choked: it shows that asylum seekers are deprived both of socio-economic independence and of humanitarian-financial support. It suggests that to be withheld is also their future and that this should be conceived as a form of injury and debilitation. The final section illustrates how asylum seekers stranded in camps have organised collective struggles to protest the suspension of food and financial support, and to claim right to education and to access to public transport. By starting from precise demands, refugees have articulated expansive claims that exceed minimalistic biopolitics.

In the last three four years, the Greek government strengthened a politics of refugees' encampment by fencing some existing camps, building new ones and by imposing mobility restrictions on asylum seekers to go in and out of the camps. The pandemic has been seized across Europe as an opportunity to further enhance the *confinement continuum* of people seeking asylum in the name of their own protection from the exposure to the virus. Spatial measures enacted for confining asylum seekers and keeping them out of public sight went in parallel with biopolitical tactics apt at stifling their lives (Tazzioli and Stierl 2021). In Greece, NGOs raised alarm at a growing 'hunger crisis' in refugee camps, following the

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implementation of a law in October 2021 which denies food and cash assistance to asylum seekers who had been denied of international protection or whose asylum application has not been registered yet. This measure was adopted while asylum seekers had been left cashless after that UNHCR handed over the Cash Assistance Programme to the Greek government and, for about 4 months, the monthly payment was suspended. Asylum seekers are held in hostage, even without being in detention.

Greek authorities, backed up by the EU, have downsized the refugee population ‘of concern’, turning (some) refugees into illegalised migrants, that is into individuals with almost no socio-economic rights (Schuster 2011). This article analyses how refugees’ confinement is enforced by choking their lifetime. It does so by focusing on the Greek asylum context, where modes of confinement beyond detention are enforced in a systematic way. Against that, refugees have organised collective mobilisations for food, education and mobility. The piece develops a twofold argument. First, it contends that carceral humanitarianism is enacted not only through spatial restrictions and fences but also by choking and withholding refugees’ lifetime, preventing the unfolding of their future (Papoutsi 2021). Their economic and social independency is shrunken and simultaneously, refugees are deprived of humanitarian support. In so doing, the paper foregrounds the nexus between asylum procedures and refugees’ confinement, drawing specific attention to the choking of refugees’ lifetime. Second, it argues that asylum seekers in Greece have articulated expansive and unapologetic claims that laid bare that their lifetime is choked and their future occluded. Their claims are discordant to the state’s narrative, according to which asylum seekers should be self-reliant and grateful for the minimalist humanitarian support they receive (De Genova 2010).

The article combines literature on carceral humanitarianism with critical migration scholarship (Lemberg-Pedersen 2019; Pallister-Wilkins 2017; Tazzioli 2019) that has explored how migrants’ lives are choked and devitalised, while ‘their bodies were rendered “useful” beyond their labour power’ (Andersson 2018, 424; see also Achtnich 2022). The framework of carceral humanitarianism, conceived as the enforcement and justification of carceral mechanisms in the name of people’s protection, foregrounds the mutual entanglements between asylum system, refugees’ confinement and the choking of their lifetime. This literature has investigated processes of value extraction and capitalisation over refugees’ captivity (Coddington, Conlon, and Martin 2020; Martin 2021), the insidious carceral mechanisms at play in refugee camps (Brankamp 2022) and has pointed to the widespread carceral humanitarian logics that is transversal to different institutions (Oliver 2017). Feminist geographers have aptly paid attention to the everyday dimension of refugees’

carcerality and ‘to the continuum between the prison and other social and geographical spaces’ (Cassidy, 2019: 51).

Building on this debate, the article pushes it further by stressing that not only carcerality extends beyond the camp and the prison, as scholars have pointed out (Gill et al. 2018; Moran, Turner, and Schliehe 2018) but also, and more specifically, asylum procedures are intertwined with and underpinned by carceral mechanisms, conceived as modes of confinement enforced by choking refugees’ lifetime. By defining carcerality as what locks ‘people’s current and future life choices and possibilities into unequal and unfree capitalist social relations’ (LeBaron and Roberts 2010, 24), it appears that carceral mechanisms are not narrowed to detention nor to spatial immobilisation, and do rather consist of heterogenous spatial-legal mechanisms that enhance the differential debilitating logics of racial capitalism (Athanasίου 2020). That is, asylum seekers are not simply stuck in a protracted waiting time or in a juridical limbo: the obstruction and the withholding of their future deplete them and kept them in a state of protracted dependency, which generates new needs that cannot be satisfied in a condition of induced scarcity. Investigating the intertwining between spatial confinement and the choking of refugees’ lifetime is not (simply) a matter of showing the harm inflicted on asylum seekers: rather, it is a question of exploring how refugees are exposed to what Lisa Marie Cacho has defined ‘social death’ which involves ‘processes of devaluation’ (Cacho 2012, 17). Indeed, even if they obtain international protection, refugees are obstructed from accessing socio-economic rights and from regaining control over their lifetime.

Yet, this does not mean that any leeway for resistance is occluded. To the contrary, refugees often struggle from within a condition of cramped and obstructed agency (Walters and Lüthi 2016): they challenge the ‘minimalist biopolitics’ (Redfield 2005) at play in camps, by refusing both to be passive recipients of humanitarian aid and to be deprived of socio-economic support. This article builds on state documents and NGO reports, statements released by refugees’ communities online, on social media, as well as on material I collected during my fieldwork in Greece, between 2019 and 2022 through participatory observation and interviews I conducted with NGOs, state authorities and refugees in Lesvos, in Athens, and in the refugee camps of Ritsona and Malakasa.<sup>1</sup> The piece proceeds in four steps. The first section focuses on the asylum-confinement nexus, exploring the entanglements between asylum procedures and migrants’ detainability in Greece. It moves on by dealing with governmental tactics apt at choking refugees lives and robbing their lifetime in camps. In the final section, it shows that asylum seekers stranded in camps have organised collective struggles to protest the suspension of food provision and financial support, and to claim right to education and to access to public transports. Analysing spatial confinement with modes of governing by

choking refugees' lifetime jointly it enables, I contend, rethinking a critique of camps and of refugees' carcerality.

### The Asylum-Confinement Nexus

In some refugee camps in Greece, men, women and children without a valid asylum card are not allowed to go out of the camp. This unofficial measure was implemented by camp authorities in autumn 2021, when the protracted and discriminatory *ad hoc* COVID-19 lockdowns came to an end. The *non-exit* measure concerns both asylum seekers whose asylum claim has been rejected, and those who have lodged their application but have not been issued the card, yet: they are kept hostage in the camps and on the islands in particular. Almost at the same time, in November 2021, the Ministry of Migration and Asylum issued a Circular according to which migrants are allowed to claim asylum exclusively in 'designated locations',<sup>2</sup> which are ultimately not specified. After that the Skype pre-registration system for asylum seekers was shut down in autumn 2021, the pre-registration step on the mainland has taken place at police stations, where migrants seek asylum at their own risk, as they can be arrested, detained and deported. Two years earlier, in 2019, the Greek government widened the ground for detaining asylum seekers in order to determine their identity, for preventing abscondence as well as reasons of public order (Oxfam 2021). However, the police-driven approach to asylum is not a novelty in Greece.

Rather, it should be partly read in continuity with the Greek asylum procedures of the last two decades, with the exception of the years 2016–2021, when asylum seekers had to pre-register their asylum claims through a Skype system, that was contested by refugees due to the multiple technical difficulties and the long waiting time.<sup>3</sup> In fact, as documented by NGOs, the inaccessibility to the asylum procedure has a consolidated history, and in some circumstances had been enforced by physically blocking the entrance of asylum offices to people seeking asylum (Pro Asyl 2008). Thus, the current technological and administrative obstacles that migrants face nowadays for lodging an asylum claim in Greece are part of consolidated practices of bureaucratic and physical obstruction. In this respect, the analytics of securitisation (of asylum) does not help in fully capturing the strengthening of the nexus between asylum system, confinement and detainability.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, more than being treated as suspect or dangerous subjects, people who seek asylum in Greece are exposed to the risk of being confined, detained, and deported since the moment when they claim asylum. Greek authorities have been trying to seize down the refugee population and to preventively hamper migrants from becoming asylum seekers.

The people at risk of being preventively illegalised where not only asylum seekers who come via Turkey but also Albanian and North Macedonian

citizens. Due to the growing number of asylum applications lodged by Albanians and North Macedonians, as a way to temporarily remain in Greece legally and get access to financial support, in 2021 Greece added Albania and North Macedonia to the list of 'safe third countries' (European Union Asylum Agency 2022).<sup>5</sup> Such a strategy is indirectly backed up by the European Commission, in line with the new directions stated in the New Pact of Migration and Asylum and with a sheer politics of migration containment enforced on a European level. Yet, in part, it is a response to the pressure imposed both by the EU and by Northern European member states on Greece regarding hosting asylum seekers: by withdrawing humanitarian support and worsening reception conditions, the Greek government shows that the country is not in the position to cope with refugees' presence, and it is not fully safe for them. For this reason, it is key to draw attention to the geopolitical contestations around migration that are unfolding in Greece or that are centred on the Greek context. Indeed, the specific intertwining of asylum procedures and carceral mechanisms in Greece should be read in light of the EU-Turkey Deal and of the designation of Turkey as a 'safe country' on the one side, and of the EU's pressure on Greece to contain migration on the other.

The EU-Turkey Deal, signed in March 2016, enforced geographical restrictions on the migrants who arrive on the Greek islands, as they could not move to the mainland until their asylum claim was processed, and only if they receive a positive outcome (Heck and Hess 2017; Papoutsi et al. 2019). Since March 2020 Turkey has been refusing to accept deportations from Greece; such a standoff has increased the number of asylum seekers whose asylum claim has been rejected. The number of asylum seekers who had been turned into illegalised migrants has increased with the Joint Ministerial Decision (JMD) adopted in June 2021, through which Greece unilaterally designated Turkey a 'third safe country' for people of five nationalities (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia). More concretely, on the basis of the JMD, women, men and children from those five countries can be considered inadmissible to the asylum procedure in Greece.<sup>6</sup> The boomerang effect of the inadmissibility law consisted in an escalating number of rejected refugees on the Greek islands that could not be easily deported.<sup>7</sup> Hence, the law in question has strengthened existing trends that trace back to the EU-Turkey Deal (Syrians) and to even more historically consolidated racialised exclusionary measures (Pakistani). In part, it multiplied the nomenclature which indicates the denial of the refugee status, including 'inadmissibility', 'rejection on merit', and 'rejected through fast procedure'.

In June 2021 the Greek Ministry of Migration Notis Mitarachi sent a letter to the European Commission to respond to the complaints raised by Germany, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Netherlands and Switzerland against Greece for not stopping 'secondary movements' and permitting

a ‘flagrant abuse of refugee travel documents’.<sup>8</sup> Greece was accused not only of letting people escape the country but, more than that, of establishing ‘an illegal infrastructure [...] specifically to enable these secondary movements’. In his answer, Mitarachi stressed that the migrants who travelled from Greece to other countries were authorised to move, as they received the refugee status and, therefore, ‘lawful residents in the European Union’. Migrants become detainable for lodging an asylum application and their detainability persists while they are asylum seekers (Costello and Mouzourakis 2016; De Genova 2020).<sup>9</sup> As explained by Minos Mouzourakis, ‘the Greek International Protection Act<sup>10</sup> broadens the applicability of deprivation of liberty for the purposes of the asylum procedure in several respects’ among which, allowing the detention of those ‘who have applied for asylum at liberty’ and ‘enabling the Greek authorities to detain asylum seekers for the purpose of deciding in a border procedure on their right to enter the territory’ (Mouzourakis 2019).

Thus, although people who seek asylum cannot be officially detained for the exclusive reason of lodging the asylum claim – even if this *de facto* happens – the legal grounds for putting them in jail have expanded. The mutual entanglements between asylum system and modes of confinement, that end up in choking refugees’ lifetime, have been strengthened with Covid-19: asylum seekers’ confinement was justified as a measure for protecting them from the exposure to the virus and, simultaneously, to protect citizens from refugees’ contagion, according to a ‘confine to protect’ principle (Tazzioli and Stierl 2021). The protracted lockdowns in camps should be analysed alongside the multiplication of hybrid sites of detention – which included police stations, harbours, boats and buses. In September 2021, the Greek government inaugurated on the island of Samos the first ‘closed controlled access centre’ (CCAC), fully funded by the European Commission. The opening of the new camp raised media attention because of the technologised surveillance system that Greek authorities have implemented. However, alongside the progressive fencing of the camps, to be less blatant is the nexus between asylum and modes of confinement. Indeed, the confinement continuum is not enforced only through spatial and mobility restrictions: it is interlaced with the detainability and the preventive illegalisation of the women, men and children who seek asylum and with the choking of their lifetime (Burrige et al. 2017; Tazzioli and Garelli 2020).

Although the fencing of refugee camps and the enforcement of entry-exit restrictions reduced in part asylum seekers’ presence outside camps, in practice their movements had not been fully blocked. When I visited the refugee camp of Malakasa in August 2021, the wall under construction surrounding the camp was almost completed and it was built to deter unauthorised migrants from entering the camp. However, refugees were allowed to go in and out the camp: ‘the first lockdown here lasted for six months in a row, but now we can exit the camp without asking for permission; I know that in Lesbos people have

many more restrictions. But going out does not solve the problem of isolation, and impossibility to find a job'.<sup>11</sup> Spatial confinement and tactics apt at choking refugees' lifetime mutually strengthen each other. In this respect, the decrees enforced by the Greek authorities during COVID-19 to restrict refugees' mobility one constitute a case in point: among other measures, the decrees 'restricted to a minimum the necessary movements both inside and outside the centres (that is, camps)<sup>12</sup> and explicitly targeted 'third-country nationals, residents in the Reception and Identification Centers' from moving 'within a corresponding perimeter that will be applied by the Greek police'.<sup>13</sup> Entry-exit from camps was restricted to day-time (usually between 7 am and 7 pm), when only a certain number of asylum seekers who obtained the authorisation were 'given the opportunity to go and meet their needs in the nearest urban centre [...] up to one hundred people per hour are allowed to leave (the camps) in group of less than ten'.<sup>14</sup>

Mobility restrictions are life restrictions: refugees' future is occluded, and the possibilities of acting autonomously and planning also on the short term are highly disrupted. Alongside constraints on freedom of movement, other restrictions were enforced at that time, and some of these are still in place. For instance, in Lesvos, asylum seekers are not allowed to cook in the camp, and obligation to wear a face mask outside remained in place in the premises of the camp (for refugees only), even after it was lifted for everyone else in the country. Those who infringed the COVID-19 rules have been subjected to punitive measures: their authorisation to go out the camp was suspended for one week. Thus, these decrees which imposed arbitrary mobility constraints and disciplinary measures contribute to choke refugees' lifetime. Although geographical impediments were presented as temporary measures to tackle Covid-19, most of them have remained in place, in some cases after just being tweaked or slightly loosened. Temporary 'until further notice' is in fact a distinctive feature of camp governmentality (Peteet 2016). By restricting asylum seekers' access to food, accommodation, and monthly financial support, state authorities have seized down the number of 'persons of concern'.<sup>15</sup> In few months, many people living in camps or in apartments had been left without humanitarian support and cash assistance, and they had been preventively illegalised.<sup>16</sup>

Until summer 2021, women, men and children who were stuck in refugee camps in Greece were not only people waiting for the outcome of their asylum claim: as I could observe during my fieldwork, the refugee camp' population in Lesvos was formed by people whose legal cases were very different from each other. What at a first glance appears as a homogenous camp population is actually constituted by people with different legal statuses, including migrants who had been illegalised by Greek authorities, as their asylum claims have been preventively rejected. If on the one hand camps have increasingly turned into spaces of confinement, on the other for many people seeking asylum they

were the only places where they could stay without being homeless. The monthly cash assistance restarted in January 2022, after that an agreement was signed in November 2021 between the Greek government and Catholic Relief Services.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, during the period in which asylum seekers have been cashless, state authorities have opened a breach for seizing down the number of ‘persons of concern’, excluding those with a first instance rejection and those without an asylum card. By becoming ‘persons not of concern’, refugees have not been fully expelled from camps: they have been divided from the rest of the camp population, as they did not longer receive food and cash assistance. In so doing, hierarchies among refugees have been multiplied and their different legal statuses reverberated into a differential access to humanitarian support and to basic socio-economic rights.

### **Governing by Choking refugees’ Lifetime**

Refugees are often turned into economically and socially destitute subjects by state authorities, as scholars have stressed (Allisopp, Sigona, and Phillimore 2014; Mayblin and James 2019). However, governing by shrinking and choking lifetime is not synonymous of making someone destitute: indeed, destitution designates the ‘state of being without money, food, home, or possessions’.<sup>18</sup> As geographers Coddington, Conlon and Martin have pointed out by introducing the concept of ‘destitution economies’, destitution is mobilised by states as a political technology of exclusion and, at the same time, to generate and extract value from refugees (Coddington, Conlon, and Martin 2020). The term ‘destitution’ is inflected by a governmental orientation, in particular in the UK where people who claim asylum need to prove to be economically destitute in order to be eligible for accommodation and financial aid (Crawley, Hemmings, and Price 2011). In this respect, a critical analysis of the border regime entails *not seeing like a state*, that is not corroborating state’s discourse and that, instead, foregrounds the specific biopolitical hold over refugees’ lives. While destitution refers to a status or to a condition – being destitute, that is not being able to afford basic needs – the Greek refugee context shows that migrants are both physically and psychologically injured by being kept hostage in camps with minimal medical and humanitarian support and by being stolen of their lifetime (Khosravi 2018;).

Modes of governing by choking lifetime do not simply reiterate states of destitution: refugees are harmed and hampered from building up infrastructures of liveability and from planning their future (Davies, Isakjee, and Dhesi 2017). The deprivation of socio-economic independence and mobility restrictions are combined with state’s withdrawal of humanitarian support. Refugees in Greece find themselves in an impasse: their dependence on humanitarian and state actors is constantly reproduced although they cannot count on adequate legal, financial and humanitarian support. On the one hand, their

leeway of autonomy is eroded by asylum policies, spatial confinement and tactics that choke their lives; on the other, they cannot rely only on exiguous and selective humanitarian assistance. That is, the nuanced articulation between dependence (from humanitarian aid) and independence exceeds the binary opposition between dependence to the detriment of autonomy, and, vice versa, independence as synonymous of more freedom (Betts and Collier 2015; Betts, Omata, and Sterck 2020).

In the Greek refugee camps, asylum seekers are entrapped in a sort of (in) dependency conundrum: they are blamed for being pampered and are expected to be self-reliant but, actually, they are entrapped in a status of protracted dependency and are hampered from engaging in autonomous social reproduction activities. Thus, in different degrees, refugees' independence is reduced to a minimum, as much as their possibility to rely on humanitarian assistance. This mutually detractive entanglement between decrease in independence and decrease in the possibility to be dependent – on state and humanitarian actors – has become clearly visible when refugees have been left cashless and starving. Nevertheless, it is not only during the state-induced hunger crisis in refugee camps that the *less autonomy – less dependence* has been enforced. Rather, this is at play also on a more ordinary basis, through the bureaucratic conundrums that asylum seekers experience for obtaining the administrative papers needed for accessing socio-economic rights as well as to get a job or open a bank account. The multiple bureaucratic obstacles that asylum seekers encounter should be analysed also in light of the cumbersome state bureaucracy in Greece.

Flagging this up it means highlighting partial continuities between modes of governing by choking that affect citizens and residents and those that target women, men, and children who seek asylum. A critical analysis of refugee governmentality cannot be disjoined from an understanding of state bureaucracies as such. That is, the protracted delays and the bureaucratic conundrums are not a specificity of refugee governmentality but are part of how states operate (Cabot 2014). Yet, I suggest, it is likewise key to underline the specificity of political technologies that turn people who seek asylum into illegalised migrants and that hinder them from getting access to socio-economic rights as well as to the welfare system. On the one side the Greek government expects 'immediate autonomy and self-sufficiency of persons granted international protection' (Refugee Support Aegean 2022, 3) and of those who are waiting for the outcome of their asylum claim; on the other, it obstructs refugees from becoming self-sufficient by multiplying bureaucratic obstacles. In so doing, refugees' lives are choked because they can hardly access the socio-economic rights they are entitled to.

The fact that refugees are deprived of socio-economic independence while cannot rely on adequate humanitarian support, means that they are forced to take care of their livelihood from a condition of cramped, obstructed agency:

they are pushed to perform social reproduction activities being at the same time highly obstructed in their autonomy. Feminist scholarship on unpaid labour equips us with the analytical lens for politicising what might daily life in camps (Federici 2019; Mezzadri 2016). The usurpation of refugees' lifetime is enforced not only through protracted confinement but also by disrupting their autonomous social reproduction activities. The unpaid work done by some asylum seekers in camps for coping with their own livelihood consists in social reproduction activities – most of which humanitarian actors are in charge of – done with a very restricted leeway of manoeuvre and complying with disciplinary-spatial restrictions. The depiction of refugees' daily activities in camps as ways for killing time is deceptive as it overshadows the social reproduction work and unpaid labour that refugees do. Relatedly, the daily scenario of refugees to take care of their own livelihood shows that confinement is not made of protracted (and empty) waiting time only.

While refugees wait for the outcome of their asylum claim or for being moved, they are de facto forced to engage in a series of social reproduction activities, as well as bureaucratic steps, from a condition of obstructed agency. To grasp how refugees' lives are choked and trapped between lack of autonomy and lack of humanitarian support, it is key to look into the bureaucratic conundrums they have to navigate (Horton 2020). What matters is less the multiplicity of documents needed for getting access to social-economic rights than the conditions for obtaining those papers and the actual obstacles that they encounter in practice. For instance, without the residence permit document (ADET), refugees cannot get social benefits, nor can they access the labour market. In order to obtain such document they need to go in person and lodge an application at the territorial competent Regional Asylum Office, which must be in the same zone of the police station from where, later on, they collect the paper. If they fail to renew their ADET on time, refugees are penalised with 100 euros fine; and the renewal procedure itself is an obstacle for asylum seekers, as they can hardly find correct information about the steps to follow and the outcome is often delayed (Refugee Support Aegean 2022).<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, without the unemployment card, they cannot apply for employability programs: about 90% of people who live in refugee camp do not have it.<sup>20</sup>

Refugees' lives are choked, and their lifetime is taken hostage; but this does not mean that they are simply kept in status of protracted waiting. Rather, their lifetime is withheld also because they need to navigate bureaucratic-administrative conundrums for getting access to socio-economic rights they are entitled to. The Greek context shows that refugees are choked as they are entrapped into the ambivalent *less autonomy-less dependence* condition. That is, they are hampered from building up autonomous infrastructures of liveability; and, yet, they can rely only on humanitarian-financial support and need to deal on their own with the administrative barriers for becoming

potential workers or welfare beneficiaries. The governmental hold exercised over refugees is enforced not only through spatial tactics but also by seizing their lifetime. As Shahram Khosravi has observed, migration policies steal migrants' time, both by keeping them waiting indefinitely – for getting papers or asylum – and by hampering them from planning their own future and life (Khosravi 2019). Hence, migrants are actively disrupted from maintaining control over their time and from re-constructing spaces and infrastructures of sociability. More precisely, Khosravi incisively argues that “deportation is not only a spatial expulsion, but also a temporal one.

Deportability is a statement of a spatial as well as a temporal dis-belonging [. . .] Expulsion is nothing less than robbing an individual of the viabilities of life” (Khosravi 2018). Hence, carceral humanitarianism and refugees' carcerality are not only a matter of spatial and mobility restrictions: they are enforced also by robbing and seizing refugees' lifetime. In fact, the point is not only to highlight that carceral mechanisms are at play beyond official spaces of detention (Tazzioli and Garelli 2020) and how they stretch beyond the camp and the prison (Altin & Minca 2016; Turner & Whyte, 2022) but also how they involve a hold over lifetime: the protracted confinement of refugees hampers them from investing time, building up their social-economic life in Europe, as well from planning their future. In Greece refugees' lifetime is choked, kept hostage by policies and legal-administrative measures that shrink their autonomy and independency while, at the same time, deprive them of humanitarian support as well. If as a result of being deported migrants lose what they have invested on over years in a certain place, both in economic and social-relational terms.

The protracted spatial confinement that asylum seekers face in camps delays, slows down and disrupts their life's plans: the possibility of building up and consolidating networks are eroded, even if never fully wiped out. A preliminary clarification is however needed: border violence needs to be scrutinised in its stretched geography and temporality, and not seeing the stolen time of migration as something which happens in Europe only (Pinelli 2018). The 'temporal violence continuum' (Iliadou 2021, 214) shapes migrants' subjectivities. Therefore, what migrants experience in Greek camps should be situated in partial continuity with other moments and sites where, along their journeys, their lifetime is taken hostage, and processes of 'accumulation by immobilisation' are played out (Achnich 2022). However, first, the seizing of time does not stop when migrants eventually get the refugee status: to the contrary, it haunts, and shapes migrants' lives all way through (Mountz 2011). Second, there is something distinctive to refugee humanitarianism and to the way in which it foregrounds a specific inflection of governing by seizing lifetime. Indeed, while they wait for the outcome of the asylum claim refugees are obstructed from investing time.

This is both because the waiting time remains unknown and because of the multiple disciplinary and spatial restrictions that hamper them from building up autonomous infrastructures of sociability. In Greece, refugees have been progressively turned into migrants, as they have been deprived access to humanitarian-financial support and de facto obstructed from getting the papers that allow them to access job market and welfare. Second, an insight into the Greek context shows that the seizing of time cannot be disjoined from choking and harming refugees' lives as political technologies of migration governmentality. That is, how does the robbing of lifetime impact on refugees' lives? What do modes of confinement beyond detention tell us about refugees' (stolen) lifetime (Tawil-Souri 2017)? The seizing of time in refugee camps and hotspots takes place through and is enmeshed with governmental tactics apt at choking and harming. As it emerges from the words of an Afghani citizen, stranded with the rest of the family in Ritsona camp: 'I have been in this camp for two years, I have received a first instance rejection and now I wait for the result of the appeal. I can go out of the camp during the day. But to go where? The first village is forty minutes by bus, and there are no jobs. Our lives have been disabled by the state. I feel as if I am no longer able to do what I was able to do before'.<sup>21</sup>

Jasbir Puar has developed the idea of a politics of maiming, as a key biopolitical technology used by the Israeli army in Palestine: the lives of Palestinians are violently disrupted not only because they are left to die but also because they are harmed and debilitated (Puar 2017). Harming and debilitation as political technologies exercise a specific hold over lifetime: indeed, to be at stake is the withholding 'of futurity, making impossible anything but a slowed (down) life, and immobilising the body' (Puar 2021, 404). Keeping lifetime in hostage means delaying and, at once, harming targeted populations. In fact, dispossessing refugees of their time, is 'a means to short-circuit self-determination' and to infringe the social and individual sense of the future (Peteet 2018, 47). Tawil-Souri has contended that 'checkpoints perform temporal work [...] alongside a variety of temporal techniques' that differentiate mobility and slow some down (Tawil-Souri 2017, 387). Drawing on this literature, I suggest that spatial technologies – such as camps and hotspots – apt at confining people who seek asylum, perform a specific temporal work: they steal migrants' lifetime and, more precisely, withhold their future by depriving them of the possibility to act according to their own time.

What characterises the withholding of time in refugee humanitarianism is the condition of being 'stuck in transit' (Brekke and Brochmann 2015; see also Picozza 2017), as the Greek context shows, and the fact that carceral mechanisms are enforced even beyond official spaces of detention. While in 2015 the so-called Balkan Route constituted a sort of migration corridor from Greece to

other EU member states, since 2016 the passage has increasingly become harder because of Germany's decision to close borders to Syrians: the migration 'corridor' has been turned into a violent border zone, where women, men and children are often pushed back multiple times (Minca and Collins 2021).<sup>22</sup>

### **Refugees' Expansive Claims Against Minimalist Biopolitics**

During the last five years Greek authorities and the EU have escalated a sheer politics of containment, hampering migrants from getting access to the asylum procedure and to rights. Refugees have repeatedly mobilised in camps, organising protests due to the lack of humanitarian support, the exclusion of many from cash assistance and humanitarian support. In particular, through their mobilisations refugees have laid bare the (in)dependency conundrum in which they are entrapped and, relatedly, the choking of their lifetime in camps.

The suspension of the Cash Assistance Programme for about four months in autumn 2021 and the government's decision to leave many asylum seekers without food in camps triggered a wave of collective struggles in Greek refugee camps. Malakasa, Ritsona, Schisto, Nea Kavala and Eleonas are some of the camps where asylum seekers mobilised, demanding Greek authorities to restore unconditional access to food and the monthly financial support. What is noticeable is that by building on very punctual demands related to the suspension of food delivery and to evictions from shelters in camps, refugees' collective mobilisations have been driven by expansive claims that radically questioned the exclusionary asylum system and modes of governing by choking lifetime.

Indeed, states and humanitarian actors blame refugees for being pampered, for relying too much on humanitarian aid and lack of independence (Harrell-Bond 1999; Hyndman 1997). Through their claims, refugees have challenged such a discourse: they have revealed that they are pushed to cope with their daily needs and to become self-reliant, while any autonomous activity they engage in is hampered by state authorities and, in so doing, they are caught in a protracted dependence on humanitarian actors. Refugees linked the protest about the withdrawal of humanitarian-financial support with right claims about education, mobility and access to public transports. As an Afghani refugee stressed to me, "our struggle is not about the right to food and accommodation for all refugees: we demand that children's rights to education and job are guaranteed and that public transports are accessible. Indeed, even if we are allowed to go out of the camp, we are confined in the middle of nowhere, and most are unemployed".<sup>23</sup> The claims related to food have not been framed exclusively in terms of lack and insufficiency of provisions: rather, refugees also insisted on the very scarce quality and refused to accept pre-cooked food. On December 14, 2021, at Ritsona camp, refugees

collectively blocked a van full of food cans and claimed their right to buy and cook their own food.

As the Afghani refugee community leader, Parwana Amiri, pointed out ‘we stopped the food car to say that, we don’t want prepared food anymore. Food is not enough, when we have patients who needs medicine, tell them to stop their empty promise’.<sup>24</sup> Struggles for better food are common in refugee camps and in detention centres<sup>25</sup> and it is important to politicise claims against the widespread moralising criticism according to which ‘refugees even dare being fussy on what they want to eat’. Around punctual struggles over food choice and quality other claims – such as, about the right to education, to protection and to movement – coalesced. ‘We protest against the inadmissibility law that will turn many of us into illegal and destitute migrants from one day to another’, a M. an asylum seeker from Syria stressed to me outside the refugee camp of Ritsona. By arguing this, asylum seekers questioned the exclusionary legal architecture of the refugee regime: they warned against the preventive illegalisation that children, men and women are targeted by. They have refused to articulate their collective mobilisations according to the exclusionary terms and categories of the state. That is, refugees’ struggles in Greece have not been symmetrical to the governmental minimalist biopolitics used for choking their lifetime: they have rather flagged up the multiple ways in which their lives are injured, and their lifetime is stolen, making them unable to plan their future.

In fact, refusing that their lifetime is organised and choked by state authorities and humanitarian actors, refugees have engaged in ‘self-organising commoning practices’ (Tsavdaroglou and Kaika 2022, 233), for instance by leading classes activities for children in camps or providing free masks to the refugee communities during the peak of Covid-19. Refugees’ refusal of minimalist biopolitics reveals what Foucault has defined modes of ‘collective intolerance’, referring to struggles against the carceral system that make the prison knowable and intolerable at the same time (Foucault 2021): that is, the catalyst that those collective mobilisations have in common is the unacceptability of the specific power relations and modes of subjugation that asylum seekers who live in camps are targeted by. The expansive character of refugees’ claims is also demonstrated by the fact that the protests continued even after that the Cash Assistance Programme restarted. As reported by the activist network *Solidarity with Migrants*, in October and November 2022 refugees mobilised in the camp of Schisto to denounce the unbearable conditions that vulnerable and disabled asylum seekers experience. They demanded that vulnerable refugees were transferred to apartments in Athens and that all camp residents were provided with a social security number (necessary, among other things, for taking a medical appointment) and can access education and the health system.

Refugees’ expansive claims are discordant with respect to state’s narrative and to reformist critiques of camps which advocate for more human camps,

and for participatory refugees' policies. To the contrary, first, by focusing on very specific claims, such as food and access to public transports and education, they questioned the asylum system at large – denouncing the preventive illegalisation of asylum seekers and the lack of information about their rights and access to the asylum procedure. More specifically, they foregrounded the (in)dependency conundrum enforced by both state and non-state actors. Second, refugees did not only challenge the forced protracted confinement in camps: rather, they touched upon different aspects of life in camps that coalesce around the impossibility to plan their future. Scholars have discussed how refugees resist, both collectively and individually, the politics of destitution, the disciplinary governing of their lives and the increasing securitisation of asylum. Introducing the concept of 'slow resistance', Natasha Saunders and Tamara Al-Om explain that asylum seekers' different struggles can be conceptualised as ways to resist the slow violence of the asylum regime, which keep refugees alive in a state of injury and depriving them of rights (Saunders and Al-Om 2022).

However, refugees' collective protests cannot be contained within the juridical-administrative boundaries of states' categories, nor do they just expose the effects of slow violence (Mezzadra 2010): they raise the level of the struggle to socio-economic rights, refusing to give up their lifetime and their determination to decide where and how to live. Through their expansive claims they made the reality of camps knowable and intolerable and revealed that migrants' 'incurability' (De Genova 2010) is at play also in moments and contexts in which lives are choked and the leeway for struggling is limited. Refugees exercise an active intolerance – through claims and collective mobilisations – refusing mere corrective to fix the exclusionary and racialised politics of asylum. Far from being in a condition of full autonomy or, reversely, being deprived of the possibility to resist, migrants often struggle from within 'cramped spaces' and from a condition of 'obstructed agency' (Walters and Lüthi 2016). Governmental tactics apt at choking lifetime enhance protracted obstructed agency. Refugees' expansive claims in the Greek camps show that struggles over asylum are not flattened on resilience nor are they confined to demanding what they are entitled to.

By claiming their right to education, asylum seekers refuse being choked and stolen of their lifetime. Likewise, by blocking the van carrying pre-cooked food into the camp, they refused the minimalistic biopolitics as well as the humanitarian blackmailing discourse according to which refugees should be grateful for what they receive. Refugees in the Greek camps exceeded the right language as such, insofar as they struggle for something that was not contemplated by the humanitarian logics nor by the state's politics of asylum; relatedly, they exceed the legalistic rights framework by bringing to the fore the substantive socio-economic deprivation they are exposed to, and the stealing of their lifetime. In a way, 'the state's abjection of migrants was met with

a politics of incorrigibility that truly rendered *unintelligible* state's categorie's (De Genova 2010, 106). Positing this does not mean mythicising their collective struggles, nor assuming that their mobilisations were successful. Indeed, while the food provisions and the cash assistance restarted after months of suspension, the right to education and access to transports are far from being met.

Despite some of the demands of the protesters were not answered, refugees' collective mobilisations in camps foregrounded the unacceptability of asylum policies that work by choking lives and stealing lifetime. In short, they highlighted that the (in)dependency conundrum strengthens carceral mechanisms which exceed spatial restrictions, by seizing their lifetime. They also refused to settle for living conditions that turn them into subjects of humanitarian aid and, relatedly, they refused to be happy with any sort of food and accommodation provided. It is not in terms of victory or failure that the political dimension of refugees' collective struggles should be assessed. The incorrigibility of refugees' collective claims and struggles pushes us to revisit analyses on migrants' struggles in light of the specificity of humanitarian control and the hold exercised over refugees.

Stressing the specificity of being governed as an asylum seeker or as a refugee does not mean taking for granted the migrant/refugee distinction; rather, it is a matter of showing how legal subjectivities have tangible effects on people's lives, by shaping the ways in which individuals are specifically targeted by power and how they can negotiate or act (McNevin 2006). Hence, a focus into refugees' mobilisations highlights how refugees tactically navigate and twist humanitarian discourses on autonomy and dependency, from within a condition of obstructed agency. This is also the case of refugees in Greek camps: they have articulated expansive claims from a condition of legal precarity and within a limited leeway of action, as their daily life in camps is shaped by humanitarian control and their permanence in the country dependent on Greek authorities' decision. Through their collective mobilisations refugees have generated an active intolerance – that is, they flagged up the intolerable functioning of the asylum system at large. While the suspension of food delivery and of financial support were presented as temporary measures, refugees have highlighted that these were not aberration nor exceptions. Rather, not only the protracted temporary lack of food and cash assistance became the norm for a part of the camp population; more broadly, but the withdrawal of humanitarian support is also a prism for analysing the exclusionary politics of asylum (Squire 2016).

## Conclusion

Critical knowledge production of the carceral mechanisms of refugee humanitarianism entails investigating the intertwining between asylum

system, confinement and modes of governing by choking refugees' lifetime. This means articulating an insight into spatial mechanisms of refugee confinement with a scrutiny of the tactics apt at robbing refugees' lifetime and their autonomous infrastructures of liveability. This is particularly evident in the Greek context where, as I have illustrated, geopolitical contestations over migration – between Turkey and Greece/EU as well as between Northern European countries and countries of first arrival – get centre stage. In fact, it is also because of those contested political relationships that asylum seekers are protractedly stranded in Greek camps. A critique of refugee camps and of encampment policies should be crafted in light of, and by taking into account, the specific humanitarian and state' hold over refugees' lifetime (Brankamp 2022; Weima and Minca 2021). Indeed, this paper has pointed out, carceral (refugee) humanitarianism is enforced through a mix of legal, spatial and disciplinary measures which choke refugees' lifetime. Conceived in this way, carceral mechanisms hamper people who seek asylum from carrying on autonomous social reproduction activities and from building collective spaces of liveability.

Through their collective mobilisations in camps, refugees, who are forced to take care of their livelihood have shown that the choking of their lives and the withholding of their future are not confined to the fenced space of the camp. Spatially, refugees' lifetime are choked even informal makeshift camps or in hybrid sites of confinement (Hagan 2018). Temporally, modes of governing by choking time stretch far beyond the protracted waiting for the outcome of the asylum claim: even after eventually obtaining the refugee status, people who seek asylum are hampered from building up infrastructures of liveability and regaining control over their lifetime. Paying attention to how refugees articulate their claims is key for not flattening the critique of humanitarian confinement onto the level of minimalistic biopolitics and challenging the choking of refugees' lives as such. The depredation of refugees' lifetime is enforced through carceral mechanisms that, as this paper has shown, takes place also beyond official detention. Critical knowledge production of refugee confinement should be attentive in not reiterating minimalist biopolitics and, instead, fleshing out how the debilitating mechanisms of racial capitalism are enforced also through the exclusionary politics of asylum, that locks and withholds people's lifetime.

## Notes

1. I conducted interviews with the Ministry of Migration and Asylum in Athens, with UNHCR in Lesvos and Athens, with the European Union Asylum Agency in Athens and in Lesvos and with the deputy directors of the camps in Lesvos, Malakasa and Ritsona. I have also interviewed both international NGOs – Doctors without Borders, Drop in the

Ocean – and Greek ones – Solidarity Now, Diotima, Legal Center Lesvos and HIAS. Conversations with asylum seekers have been conducted in the premises of the camps.

2. [https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/overview-main-changes-previous-report-update/#\\_ftn10](https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/overview-main-changes-previous-report-update/#_ftn10)
3. <https://www.mobileinfoteam.org/skypestopped>
4. What happened during the pandemic should not be seen as unprecedented. To the contrary, the sheer politics of refugee containment was already in place in Greece and March 2019 the Greek government announced the plan of fencing refugee camps and transforming them into closed centres.
5. The adoption of the ‘safe third country’ concept entails that Albanians and North Macedonians that seek asylum in Greece can be declared inadmissible to the asylum procedure.
6. Joint Ministerial Decision (JMD) 42799/2021 <https://www.e-nomothesia.gr/kat-allodapoi/prospughe-politiko-asulo/koine-upourgike-apophase-42799-2021.html>
7. Since the outbreak of Covid-19, Turkey has suspended the deportations from Greece.
8. Letter sent by six Schengen states to the European Commission: <https://www.statewatch.org/media/2485/letter-six-schengen-states-to-european-commission-secondary-movements-1-6-21.pdf>
9. As reported by Oxfam, ‘as of July 2021, 3,000 migrants were in administrative detention, meaning that they were detained without any criminal charges against them’ (Oxfam 2021, 3). Some of them are people who claimed asylum or who were about to – although there is no official number available about it.
10. Approved by the Greek parliament on October 31, 2019.
11. Interview conducted out of the gate of Malakasa, with M., asylum seeker from Iran, August 25, 2021.
12. <https://mitarakis.gr/gov/migration/1956-μέτρα-προστασίας-από-τον-κορωνοϊό-στα-κέντρα-υποδοχής-και-ταυτοποίησης,-στις-δομές-φιλοξενίας-και-στην-υπηρεσία-ασύλου>.
13. <https://www.e-nomothesia.gr/kat-ygeia/astheneies/koine-upourgike-apophase-agpoik-20030-2020.html>
14. Ibidem.
15. Expression used by UNHCR to indicate people who fall under the mandate of the UN agency. These include refugees, returnees, stateless people, the internally displaced and asylum-seekers. I use inverted comma to stress that this label is used for excluding some people seeking asylum from protection and humanitarian support. It implicitly entails that there are persons ‘not of concern’, that is who fall outside UNHCR’s mandate.
16. According to the new Greek law, the camp population eligible for food and cash assistance does not include those whose asylum application has been rejected, those who received the refugee status and those who have not lodged an asylum claim yet.
17. <https://migration.gov.gr/ma/hrimatiko-voithima-aitounton-11-2021/>
18. Cambridge dictionary.
19. Renewal requests must be submitted to the Asylum Service by refugees via email. However, the Ministry of Migration and Asylum indicates on its website an email address which is not the correct one. This latter can be found only on the application renewal form that asylum seekers need to download and fill in. However, many refugees got confused and emailed the wrong email address and, therefore, did not receive a new ADET paper on time (Refugee Support Aegean 2022)
20. Source: RSA.
21. Interview conducted with M., an Afghani asylum seeker, out of Ritsona refugee camp, August 28, 2022.

22. To some extent, for migrants who land in Italy or in Spain it is easier to move on and cross to other countries. In particular, given that most people who arrive in Greece want to claim asylum in other EU member states, the geographical position of Greece makes harder for them to reach Northern European country.
23. Interview with P., an Afghani refugee woman who has been at the forefront of refugee mobilisations in the camps of Ritsona and Malakasa. The interview has been conducted in the premises of Ritsona camp, August 28, 2021.
24. <https://migration-control.info/a-message-from-parwana-amiri-in-ritsona-protests-against-state-neglect/>
25. In the hotspots of Lesbos, asylum seekers have repeatedly protested over the years against the food quality, as well as because of the very long queue for getting food every day. Many of them opted for cooking on their own, using the monthly financial support for buying food. In the new camp, which was opened in September 2020, asylum seekers are forbidden from cooking food. The official justification used by Greek authorities is that there is a risk of fire.

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