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Rethinking freedom from the perspective of refugees

Lived experiences of (un)freedom in Europe's border zones

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Conclusion

In 2015 and 2016, the international media was full of disturbing images of migrants from the Middle East, Africa and other parts of the world who were risking their lives in border areas to find a place of refuge in Europe. The mass migratory movements in those years were, euphemistically, described as the European Refugee Crisis. This phenomenon was regarded as the most unprecedented humanitarian crisis since the World War II. Humanitarian leaders and aid organisations were calling upon host countries to step up and respond to the humanitarian needs of millions of people waiting at the frontiers (UNHCR, 2015). In the same period, many politicians across Europe were warning—sometimes even with a racist tone—against potential threats of irregular migration and magnified undesirable consequences of the refugee crisis for Europe’s security, stability, welfare, culture, and demographic composition. To respond to the crisis, European nation-states gave shape to a complex regime of deterrence and containment with the aim of managing irregular migration flows. This migration regime was materialised in preventive measures, restrictive migration and asylum policies, strategies of containment, militarisation of border zones, pushbacks, outsourcing and offshoring border control (De Genova et al., 2016; Stierl et al., 2016; Squire et al., 2021; Tazzioli & Garelli, 2020).

The proliferation of narratives and politics of crisis went beyond Europe’s geographical and symbolic borders. While I was preparing my initial plans for writing this dissertation in 2017 and 2018, the media were, frequently, reporting about the abysmal conditions in overcrowded refugee camps around the world, from Moria (Greece) and Kutupalong (Bangladesh) to various city-like refugee settlements in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. Humanitarian aid organisations and border control agencies were, each year, presenting new numbers and data about the sharp rise in migrants crossing borders across the world (UNHCR, 2022b). In 2017, the UNHCR reported that political violence in Myanmar caused an extraordinary humanitarian crisis in Southeast Asia. As a result, over 742.000 Rohingyas were forced to seek asylum in Bangladesh and were waiting for ‘international protection and humanitarian assistance’¹⁷¹. Moreover, several studies suggest that between 15% to 20% of the Venezuelan population had escaped the country because of socio-economic instability, political turmoil, and the ongoing humanitarian crisis, representing the second largest ‘displacement crisis in the world’ (Wolfe, 2021; World Bank, 2019).

As I am completing this dissertation in 2022, the media is again dominated with news about another ‘unprecedented’ refugee crisis caused by the Russia-Ukraine war. The mass flight of

¹⁷¹ UNHCR (2019, July 31). *Rohingya Emergency*. The UN Refugee Agency. Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.org/rohingya-emergency.html>

Ukrainians is, once again, described as the fastest growing ‘refugee crisis since the World War II’, a claim which is cynically supported with facts, statistics, and figures (UNHCR, 2022e). As Stierl and de Genova pointed out, this ‘spectacle of statistics’ and ‘politics of counting’ have been instrumental in bringing about a bureaucratic discourse that reifies refugees in terms of numbers, unmanageable influxes, and threatening flows (Stierl et al., 2016; see also De Genova et al., 2016; Squire et al., 2021). However, beyond its rational cynicism, this spectacle of statistics and numbers also discloses an undeniable truth about the reality of migration in this century. At present, permanent statelessness, extended exile, and mass flight of refugees constitute the normalised mode of existence of a growing number of people who do not fit within the boundaries of the nation-state paradigm. To use a Marxian metaphor, one could suggest that a spectre is haunting the globe, the spectre of refugeehood and mass migration (see also Negri & Hardt, 2000, p. 213).

According to Balibar, “the appearance of masses of ‘stateless refugees’ and ‘superfluous human beings’ in the global space expresses the counter-history of the post-colonial world order. It tells the story of people who are ‘deprived of all personal protection by the destruction or dissolution of the political communities to which they belonged—despite the efforts of international organisations created precisely in an attempt to respond to this unprecedented situation—and permanently threatened with elimination” (Balibar, 2014, p. 170).

As several critical scholars have observed, the hyperbolic and inflationary usage of the vocabulary of crisis and humanitarianism obscures the reality of migration and turns refugeehood into a pathological concept denoting abnormality, fear, and victimhood. These narratives of crisis ignore emancipatory phenomena and practices of freedom, which are embedded and expressed in refugees’ migratory movements, acts of flight, collective struggles, and everyday attempts for liberation (De Genova et al., 2016; Hardt & Mezzadra, 2020; Squire et al., 2021; Tazzioli et al., 2018). This dissertation was an attempt to contribute to our understanding of the meaning and political significance of freedom by examining the dynamic relationship of freedom and unfreedom in different spatio-temporal phases of refugeehood.

In the first chapter, I elucidated that humanitarian approaches to refugeehood are confined within the boundaries of the nation-state paradigm. These approaches reduce refugeehood to a temporary and exceptional state that should transform into national citizenship, either through inclusion (naturalisation) or exclusion (repatriation). In this binary scheme, refugees are considered as victims of persecution who should be offered protection and humanitarian assistance in extraordinary moments of emergency. This humanitarian framework is premised on negative and state-oriented conceptions of freedom and interprets persecution as life-threatening forms of coercion and domination. As such, it depicts refugees as absolute victims and, conceptually, locates

them in the domain of unfreedom. For humanitarians, refugees depend on the conditional hospitality of receiving states that have no binding obligation to offer access to their territory. On this account, refugees' degree of rights and freedoms are derivative and conditioned by their formal inclusion in the domain of national citizenship.

As the Arendtian/Agambenian critique demonstrate, it is too simplistic and misguided to conceive refugeehood as a transitory or temporary state applying to individual victims under exceptional circumstances. On the contrary, refugeehood should be regarded as a mass phenomenon that poses a serious challenge to the internal logic of the nation-state paradigm, which is premised on the principles of national citizenship and territorial sovereignty. This critical diagnosis shows that mass flight of refugees should be regarded as a normal consequence of exclusionary structures of the nation-state model, which is premised on the mystified unity of nation, state, and territory. It also highlights the paradoxical nature of modern human rights and offers an illuminating analysis of several institutional boundaries that, systematically, prevent refugees from gaining access to the formal domain of freedom, rights, and citizenship. Still, this criticism remains one-sided and, primarily, limits its analytical focus to institutional mechanisms that amount to refugees' unfreedom, articulated in terms of loss of the world, rightlessness, and bare life.

In chapter two, I argued that citizen-centric and state-oriented approaches pay little attention to refugees' political subjectivity and overlook practices, lived experiences, and conditions in and through which refugees perceive and interpret the dynamics of freedom and unfreedom. To examine this dynamic relationship, I developed the notion of (non)-subjectivity by drawing on Rancière's politics of non-parts and emerging insights in the autonomy of migration approach. The notion of (non)-subjectivity represents the perspective of political figures who enact, articulate, and experience freedom by transgressing the exclusionary limits of politics and citizenship. By analysing emancipatory practices and political interventions of Frederick Douglass (a fugitive slave) and Olympe de Gouges (a revolutionary woman), it was demonstrated that, for political (non)-subjects, freedom does not denote a static condition or pre-given right. Rather, freedom is the product of practices, lived experiences, and struggles by which (non)-subjects appear on the political scene and reclaim an equal place in the human world. For (non)-subjects, the meaning of freedom manifests itself in the act of flight and border crossing, resistance against structures of exclusion and unfreedom, and performative call for equality.

Following this theoretical vantage point, I argued that refugeehood should be regarded as a self-standing, non-derivative, and multi-faceted human condition that transgress dichotomous demarcations between inclusion versus exclusion, and citizenship versus rightlessness. As political

(non)-subjects, refugees problematise the formal boundaries of freedom and expose the tension between universal freedom and exclusionary limits of national citizenship. To understand the meaning and political significance of (un)freedom, one should prioritise their perspective and reflect on lived experiences of unfreedom in their pre-flight condition, liberatory practices of flight and border crossing, and the interplay of freedom and unfreedom in receiving countries.

Four chapters of this dissertation offered insights into the meaning and political significance of (un)freedom in different spatio-temporal phases of refugeehood, spanning from pre-flight, flight, to post-flight conditions. Chapter three highlighted that the question of freedom lies at the heart of refugees' perceptions and practices of flight and escape. In this context, two interrelated observations were put forward. Firstly, for refugees, structural exposure to conditions of unfreedom is one of the key drivers and motivations to contemplate flight. Secondly, as the experiential accounts of refugees demonstrate, the Conventional concept of 'persecution' only captures a marginal dimension of refugees' perceptions of unfreedom. For this reason, this Conventional concept cannot serve as comprehensive criterion for envisioning the unfree conditions from which refugees escape on a mass scale in the twenty-first century.

To offer a broader framework for interpreting unfreedom, I proposed the notion of 'abandonment' and suggested that mass flight of refugees and migrants stem from various social, political, economic, and environmental factors, which correlate with failure of nation-states, environmental catastrophes, humanitarian interventions, international wars on terror, and permanent statelessness. For many refugees, abandonment encompasses an essential experiential dimension of unfreedom in their pre-flight and post-flight condition. In the juridico-political sense, it describes the human condition of people who are, systematically, exposed to legal insecurity and political practices of rejection and neglect, without necessarily facing life-threatening coercion. In the spatio-temporal sense, abandonment represents structures and arrangements in which a human being is prevented from obtaining an equal and consistent place in the world.

Viewed from this interpretative angle, refugees' act of flight is a liberatory undertaking for breaking the cage of unfreedom. The act of flight has two essential dimensions that characterise the dynamic transition from unfreedom to freedom. On the one hand, it signifies courageous practices of escape, desertion, and border crossing, by which (non)-subjects negate the exclusionary determinations of borders and political structures of abandonment. On the other hand, it denotes a purposeful migratory movement in and through which (non)-subjects exercise their subjectivity and claim an equal place in the world. For refugees, the experience of freedom manifests itself in this double movement which marks the passage from non-existence to political existence.

Unlike state-oriented approaches, freedom should, therefore, not be reduced to a static status or formal entitlement which is unambiguously granted or denied. Viewed from the perspective of (non)-subjects, flight and border crossing is not just a physical movement from one geographical location to another. It is a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing practices, experiences, counterstrategies, and autonomous interventions by which refugees blur distinctions between inside versus outside, and subjects versus non-subjects. The meaning of (un)freedom takes shape in this dynamic conflictual field in which abandonment and flight operate as determining factors. Freedom is the result of negating the structures of unfreedom and creating *possibilities* for obtaining an equal place in the world.

In the second part of the dissertation, I examined in what way this conflictual relationship is reflected in refugees' post-flight condition. The analyses presented in chapters four and five elucidated that refugees' desire for freedom is not simply fulfilled and realised. In receiving countries, refugees are often thrown into ambivalent power dynamics governed by the unequal host-guest-enemy relation. This power dynamics gives rise to political structures, spatial arrangements, and intersubjective relations that refugees interpret as unfreedom. On the one hand, refugees are, mostly, treated as vulnerable victims who are dependent on the generosity and hospitality of the host. On the other hand, they are, increasingly, being viewed as alien forces whose migratory movements pose a threat to the sovereignty and stability of host states. They find themselves in an ambivalent zone in which they are either regarded as absolute victims or enemy-like figures. In this ambivalent zone, refugeehood is alienated from its emancipatory dimensions and transforms into an alien persona, representing victimhood, redundancy, abnormality, and powerlessness. On an intersubjective level, this persona functions as a humiliating label that prevents refugees from obtaining an equal standing in the world. As argued in chapter four, refugees' experiences of unfreedom take shape in everyday encounters, interactions, and processes that expose them to victimisation, humiliation, and alienation.

In the post-flight condition, refugees are located at the intersection of humanitarian government and abandoning politics of migration control and border management. On a political level, the hierarchical distinctions between powerful hosts versus powerless guests, citizens versus threatening aliens amount to bordering practices, preventive measures, and bureaucratic forms of reification, rejection, and neglect. These political structures reify refugees in terms of statistics, mass flows, migratory floods and, consequently, perpetuate the conditions of abandonment and placelessness. As examined in chapter five, refugees' unfreedom does not arise from proactive

politics of domination and coercion. Rather, it stems from the abandoning force of reactive policies and acts of border making that aim at managing ungovernable migratory movements.

In the spatial sense, abandonment and unfreedom is materialised in political practices of encampment. The proliferation of practices of encampment is the result of securitised and humanitarian forms of crisis management. Refugee camps and camp-like settlements embody the spatial determinations of unfreedom and signify non-places in the symbolic, material, and political sense. Instead of offering a proper place of refuge, the dehumanising architecture of the camp violates the integrity of human body and deprives refugees from obtaining a proper dwelling place in the world. Long-term encampment and physical segregation abandon refugees to spatial and temporal arrangements that are characterised by indefinite waiting, physical segregation, incapacitation, and bureaucratic humiliation.

Nonetheless, institutional determinations of unfreedom are never all-encompassing and remain a partial factor. As the experiential accounts of refugees and heterogenous politics of solidarity make clear, the question of freedom takes shape in a conflictual field that is only partially determined by the unequal host-guest-enemy relation. In their post-flight condition, refugees develop various counterstrategies and signifying practices by which they unsettle conditions and practices of unfreedom. Chapter six demonstrated that the meaning of freedom becomes intelligible and experienceable in interactions, collective struggles, and interpersonal encounters by which refugees unmask the alienated and victimised persona of refugee. As (non)-subjects, they take the stage and put the hierarchical distinctions between hosts versus guest, citizens versus refugees, friends versus enemies into question. In their performative call for equality and resistance against acts of border making, they exercise their subjectivity, reclaim their humanity, and make themselves recognised as equals. These liberatory interventions allow refugees to enact freedom by establishing autonomous bonds of friendship among citizens, non-citizens, and fellow refugees.

These observations support the claim that, for (non)-subjects, freedom does not collapse into a formal entitlement or status arising from consensual processes or power-free conditions. Rather, its meaning and political significance is manifested in a dynamic conflictual process. The path to freedom is being realised in the double movement of negating hostile inequality and constituting autonomous bonds of friendship. Freedom is the fruit of this double movement and expresses itself as friendship. Freedom as friendship signifies an autonomous relationship that is marked by equality and mutual belonging. It denotes a relational field that allows refugees to give shape to a common place of refuge in the world.

As Sa'edi and interlocutors remind us, to create this common place of refuge, one should put an end to the unequal world of purgatory and revitalise the unity of freedom and equality.

(Non)-subjects should cross exclusionary hierarchies and give birth to a new political beginning (a principle). This principle (*as*) is anchored on the liberation of the placeless. It serves as a ‘launching platform’ for breaking the cycle of placelessness, ‘homelessness’ (*avaregi*), and ‘gradual death’ (Sa’edi, 1982, p. 5). This new beginning allows refugees to gain access to the human world and contribute to the creation of common places of refuge. This common place of refuge is built on a non-reciprocal element (*philia, dusti*, friendship) that ties freedom and equality as two aspects of the same relational domain (see also Balibar, 2014; Castoriadis, 1996/2007; Derrida, 2006).

How these common places of refuge could be envisioned in the realm of politics on a macro level is a question worth exploring and deserves to be the subject of future studies. In current nation-state paradigm which is, increasingly, being dominated by hostile migration policies and securitised arrangements of crisis, speaking of politics of friendship might seem utopian and unrealistic. However, the emergence of creative projects of solidarity and cross-border activism also show that alternative forms of politics are truly possible, especially in situations where politics and narratives of crisis turn into a crisis themselves and prove ineffective.

What these creative initiatives and projects have in common is that they all prioritise the perspective of the placeless and aim at putting an end to host-guest-enemy antinomies. They all revolve around the question of freedom and seek to reconstitute the meaning of equality, political membership, and solidarity (Mezzadra, 2018). They all cross internal and external borders of nation-states and dismantle structures of rejection, border violence, neglect, and abandonment (Fischer & Jørgensen, 2021; Lafanzi, 2018; Schwiertz, 2022). In this regard, the case of City Plaza offers an illuminating example for envisioning the main characteristics of politics of friendship. This creative project gave shape to spatial, temporal, and political arrangements marked by friendship, solidarity, and equality. City Plaza created autonomous bonds of mutual belonging that transcended the boundaries of race, gender, and nationality. It offered a common place of refuge to citizens, non-citizens, and international activists from all over the world. As a common place of refuge, it was not a utopia but the fruit of active participation of autonomous agents that considered each other as equals, as friends, as *solidarians*.

“A good and free society is a community where there is no fear and anxiety. It is a community where you feel that you are in friendly terms with others. It is a community of friends where everyone can co-exist, where you can share your smile and joy with others. This is the main characteristic of the community that I am searching for. Hopefully, I will find it one day.”¹⁷²

¹⁷² Interview with Shahab, Lesvos, February 2018.