In the Shadow of Asylum Decision-Making: The Knowledge Politics of Country-of-Origin Information

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Country-of-origin information has secured a central place in European asylum systems, underpinning state decisions on the asylum status of refugee populations. All European states produce this type of information, and dedicated country-of-origin information units are increasingly common. This article analyzes the knowledge politics of country-of-origin information, with a focus on the relation between knowledge and decision. We are interested in this type of knowledge precisely because it is uneasily positioned in-between social scientific methodology and policy decision-making and is infused with a "pulsional normativity." We distinguish three phases of country-of-origin information production: first, a phase of investigation, where foreign lands are reduced to stable and mobile forms so that they can be studied as research units; second, the concordance of information production, relying on standardized instruments and practical skill; and third, the consolidation phase, which involves the return of country information constructed inside research units back into the administrative and regulatory world. The final section of the article examines how complex and frail information about countries of origin becomes deployed as valid grounds for asylum decision-making.

Introduction: The Eritrea Controversy

On November 25, 2014, a press release issued by the Danish Ministry of Justice stated that it would suspend refugee status determination for Eritrean asylum seekers. On the basis of newly gathered country information, the government of Denmark decided that there was no systematic risk of persecution upon return for Eritreans who had fled national military service and/or left the country illegally. The information used to support this restrictive asylum policy was derived from a country-of-origin information (COI) report by the Danish Immigration Service, based on two fact-finding missions to Ethiopia and Eritrea, which was later also made available to the public (Danish Immigration Service 2014).

The decision to suspend refugee status for Eritrean asylum seekers and the report with underlying evidence were met with public suspicion; it came at a time when there was considerable debate on the growing number of asylum applicants in Denmark. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the UNHCR published statements claiming that the evidence was being used by the Danish

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government in a strategic effort to bolster restrictive asylum policies and noting that methodological errors harmed the reliability of the report (Rosset and Liodden 2015, 26). The media picked up on the dispute when Professor Gaim Kibreab, Director of Refugee Studies at London South Bank University and one of the few nonanonymized sources referenced, renounced the report for deliberately misrepresenting his views and drawing erroneous conclusions on the security situation in Eritrea (Berlingske 2014). A full-blown controversy emerged when, in a remarkable series of events, two of the three fieldwork experts went on sick leave, only to later resign from the immigration service. The two dissidents later expressed their discontent with the Eritrea report, saying that it drew wrongful conclusions from the evidence they offered (Amnesty International 2015; Rosset and Liodden 2015).

The "Eritrea Case"—as it was called by the Danish media—points to the *politics of knowledge* in contemporary asylum regimes: it signals a close connection between the gathering and processing of information about country conditions on the one hand, and political authority to make decisions on the admissibility and deportability of refugee populations, on the other. Disputes on the credibility of evidence for asylum decisions take place not only in specialized fields but also in public forums involving decision-makers, human rights organizations, and the media. As a result of this controversy, the Danish asylum authorities eventually renounced the country report, and the government reversed its decision deeming Eritrea safe to return for asylum seekers. Nevertheless, as we will see in this article, the contested report continued to circulate and provided a basis for expert claims and asylum decisions.

The aim of this article is to explore the relation between country-of-origin information and asylum decisions: How is authoritative knowledge about countries of origin produced in practice by research units? And how do these knowledge practices pave the way for making authoritative decisions concerning belonging and citizenship? Country-of-origin information—as a distinctly "low-tech" knowledge practice (Bonelli and Ragazzi 2014)—has grown in importance since the early 2000s. Practically all European countries have established dedicated country research units, and national and EU law often requires the use of country-of-origin information in decision-making (Gyulai et al. 2013).

This article critically interrogates the ways in which country-of-origin information is geared toward the production of facts and evidence that can be used to ground asylum decisions and how this process is interlaced with expressions and interventions of power and authority of various sorts. The intersection between actor-network theory (ANT) and international political sociology provides a viable terrain upon which to interrogate these knowledge practices (Barry 2013; Best and Walters 2013; Salter 2015). We are interested in this type of knowledge precisely because it is uneasily positioned in between social science and policy decision. Consequently, we will emphasize two aspects of the politics of knowledge in particular. First, we examine the relation with materiality. We argue that the relation between knowledge and decision-making is a process of *translation* in which facts and evidence are slowly consolidated to support decision-making processes. We compare the COI units to Latourian "centers of calculation," understood as specific governmental sites from where expeditions and data-collection take place and where information is combined to build representations of asylum seekers' countries of origin. Complex and fragile information about countries of origin (for example documents, (web)sources, and pieces of fieldwork evidence) is materially gathered, standardized and consolidated, and processually rendered into grounds for asylum decision-making.

Secondly, we attend to normativity: the process of translation is interwoven with normative aspects of all sorts. COI researchers claim that their work is purely empirical: that it presents disinterested facts while leaving decisions concerning asylum and belonging to case workers and policy makers. However, we argue that such decisions are not purely the logical consequence of translation but *articulations* that are

neither grounded in the procedural authority of law nor the objectivity of research methods. In this article, we draw on Kyle McGee's (2014, 61) suggestion that trajectories aimed at finding facts entail a specific "normativity of associations" that he calls "pulsional normativity." For McGee (2014, 19), "to open a black box and reveal its constitutive assemblage . . . always seems to drop us in the locus of an ongoing trial of strength." We regard the production of COI as specific trajectories in which "trials of strength" take place and zoom in on these trials as sites where normativity circulates. Such trials exceed calculability and entail the operation of a specific power in which authority is expressed so as to bridge the gap between knowledge creation and decision-making. The expression of authority is not a univocal process because trials are not closed circuits but allow for interaction with various actors, such as different experts and stakeholders, and various practices, such as investigations and coordination.

The article is organized as follows: In the next section we explore the question of how ANT's "methodological toolbox" (Bueger 2013) is well-equipped for the study of country-of-origin information and develop the argument that the concept of "center of calculation" is suited to describe COI units. In the subsequent sections, we distinguish three phases through which country-of-origin information is arrived at: first, a phase of *investigation*, where foreign lands are reduced to stable and mobile forms so that they can be studied and manipulated at research units; second, the *concordance* of information production, that is, the formation of a shared set of transnational research practices, relying on standardized instruments and practical skill; and third, the phase of *consolidation*, which involves the return of country information constructed inside research units into the administrative and regulatory world. These phases often follow a chronological order but overlap and mutual interactions occur regularly. More importantly, our analysis suggests that these phases are not independent from the final decision-making but take place *in the shadow of decision-making*. As such, they are infused with a pulsional normativity: all phases combine knowledge generation and the materiality of creating evidence with the normativity of decision-making and the expression of authority.

Our discussion draws on a larger research project on COI and the governance of asylum.[1] The empirical reconstruction is primarily based on a critical reading of the procedures, guidelines, methods, research missions, and protocols that are applied to arrive at COI reports. One of us participated as an observer in a COI training session. Analytically, we combine the distinction of the three phases of investigation, concordance, and consolidation with an ANT-framework in which the coming into being of chains of association is central. To study the conceptual and normative aspects of the relationship between fact-finding missions and knowledge practices, on the one hand, and decision-making, on the other, we aim to identify the decisive steps that are taken throughout the aforementioned three phases in COI practices so as to consolidate findings of all sorts into chains that allow for the grounding of asylum decisions (cf. de Goede 2018).

Country-of-Origin Information Units as Centers of Calculation

Over the years, country-of-origin information (COI) has secured a central place in European asylum systems. Country-of-origin information supports state decisions on country-specific populations, including accelerated procedures for return and resettlement or safe (third) countries of origin lists.[2] It is also much used in individual asylum status determination. All European states produce this type of information, but organizational structures (ministerial department, number

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[1] Jasper van der Kist, "Knowing Asylum Seekers: The Chain of Country of Origin Information," (PhD diss., University of Manchester, 2018–21).

[2] For a discussion on COI expertise in (British) asylum courts, see Anthony Good (2015).

of staff, independence, etc.) and research practices (procedures, methodology, quality control, etc.) differ (for an overview, see Engelmann 2015, 108–9; also ICMPD 2006). A contrast can be made between a COI *service*, which consists of a few appointed experts who conduct cursory online research on countries, and COI *units*, which consist of reasonably well-established centers with a specialized staff of people (Engelmann 2015, 106). Services are becoming less common and are mostly found in smaller countries with fewer resources, such as Luxembourg and Malta. Increasingly, bigger, specialized, and more independent COI units can be found in countries that have become key asylum destinations, such as Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, Sweden, Denmark, the UK, and France.

We suggest that it is useful to understand COI units, which are now maintained by a majority of European countries, as akin to Latour's "centers of calculation" (Latour 2005, 178–83). Even if COI units are not firmly central nor strictly calculative, they occupy a strategic position where information on the refugee-sending world is accumulated, interpreted, combined, and mobilized. States consist of various heterogeneous actors capable of mobilizing each other and forming associations to execute specific tasks (Callon and Latour 1981; Passoth and Rowland 2010). As the Eritrea controversy shows, in order to arrive at asylum decisions, states have to split themselves up, move toward different locations, and start field projects to test their own programs and connect their internal and external worlds. It is within COI units that information "is . . . created, collected, assembled, transcribed, transported to, simplified and juxtaposed in a single location, . . . where everything that is relevant can be seen" (Law 2001, 8). Like Latourian centers of calculation, COI units function as powerful nodal points where distant information, material, and specimens are gathered and combined, and where the truth of the situation in migrant-sending countries is inscribed.

Consequently, COI unit practices enable "action at a distance" that allow the identification, sorting, and adjudication of asylum populations (Latour 1987, 217). They echo the information asymmetries of Latour's study, which are the result of the ways in which colonial voyages enabled the collection of specimens and materials in the imperial heartland (Latour 1987, 215–57). Akin to colonial expertise, knowledge and rule are closely related in COI units as a "set of practices" that collect and standardize information, measure, classify and calculate (Mitchell 2002, 4, 6). Critical observers often warn that these state knowledge practices "disenfranchise the refugee through eliminating his or her voice in the process leading to the decision to deny or terminate protection" (Chimni 2004, 61; Lawrance and Ruffer 2015, 11). Despite their technical appearance, then, COI units can be said to exercise considerable power over the politics of belonging and repatriation.

Knowledge practices of COI units thus occupy a special position in between research and policy decision. COI reports claim to dispassionately present pure factual information, supported by transparent referencing, and fully refraining from asylum judgement, which is ultimately made by case workers and courts. However, county-of-origin information holds a curious middle ground between social science—with its claims to objectivity—and the production of practical policy knowledge. The work of COI units redeploys social scientific methods and protocols, but testing theories and producing facts is not the objective; instead, the aim is to deliver valid grounds for decisions to the policymakers and front-line professionals. As Berling and Bueger (2015, 9) have put it, "[e]xpertise occupies a boundary position." In this context, we ask what is specific about the knowledge work that is geared toward bureaucratic decision. As Isabel de Rocha de Siqueira (2017, 11) points out, for example, the policy field often works with a pragmatic orientation toward "good enough" numbers (also Hansen and Porter 2012). This suggests that procedures of credibility and validation work differently from social science, where such pragmatism would be frowned upon (even if it may operate in practice).

Ultimately, the purpose of COI reports is to enable and support decisions on refugee populations. The circulation of COI information thus takes place *in the shadow of decision-making*: it is always already geared toward supporting and enabling asylum adjudication. How does this distinguish COI knowledge practices from techniques and procedures for regulating scientific objectivity (Daston and Galison 2007; also Poovey 1998; Stengers 2000)? In the case of expert knowledge, its authority depends less on its *objectivity* in the scientific sense and more on its *validity* in the sense of being accepted or rejected as valid expertise that can properly ground decisions and—eventually—hold before a court of law. With asylum-relevant expertise, in other words, "[w]e are no longer in the register of truth as a reference but . . . in that of truth as success or failure, in truth as fulfilled conditions of felicity" (Callon 2007, 321).

The complex trajectory through which materials and documents come to support legally binding asylum judgments is comparable to how Schuppli (2014, 299) describes the process of collecting and interpreting legal materials and testimonies. For Schuppli, it is not so much the case that decision-making bodies like courts accept or reject preexisting expert materials but more the case that the tight procedures of bringing (forensic) materials before the court produces "informed materials" (see also Bensaude-Vincent and Stengers 1996, 206). Legal evidence is not regulated through procedures of objectivity but through chains of "acquisition . . . processing and presentation," that inscribe materials as authentic and give them validity to speak before the court. Drawing a parallel with COI materials, we argue that they are progressively "enriched" to carry weight within legal and public forums (also Weizman et al. 2010). This leads us to focus on the knowledge production of COI units as processual and iterative, generated through the three phases of investigation, concordance, and consolidation.

A certain "pulsional normativity" (McGee 2014, 45–46; 61–68) pumps through the veins of COI processing. As McGee shows, chains of association are not purely technical but hold together or fall apart through trials of strength and the affective work of actants, which "oblige, . . . seduce, . . . convince, . . . [and] impose" (McGee 2014, 61). Because associations require affective investments of their participants, there is always "a valuative decision at the heart of association," or a normativity pulsing through the chain (McGee 2014, 62). In the next sections, we examine the associations that render contested country-of-origin information produced in COI units into valid grounds for legally binding asylum decisions. The distinct but related phases of investigation, concordance, and consolidation display various examples of the "material force" of asylum-relevant knowledge production and its associated trials of strength. The final decisions to be arrived at are not the inevitable logical consequence of chains of translation but *articulations* that are grounded neither on the authority of law nor the method of social science alone.

Here, Jacques Derrida's conceptualization of the decision can be fruitfully combined with our focus on knowledge production as processual and McGee's notion of trials of strength. For Derrida, decision-making "demands that one calculate with the incalculable," namely "justice." In the Derridean sense, justice can never be rendered fully calculable or rule bound: "a decision between just and unjust is never insured by a rule" (Derrida 1992, 16). As a result, a decision, in order to be a proper decision and not just the outcome of mere calculation, is not something that can be processed but requires a "mystical" moment—an *épochkè*, a Greek word meaning *pause*—instead (Vaughan-Williams 2008, 327). The approach of this article allows us to investigate how these pauses are enacted and erased in practice. Where, in the material processes of knowledge production and asylum decision-making, are these pauses as gaps of undecidability anchored? The work of COI units seeks to reduce the fundamentally undecidable ethical decision of granting (or withholding) asylum to a calculative procedure, where Derrida's undecidability is dispersed

and largely erased. The moment of undecidability, as Derrida called it, not only applies to the decision-making moment *after* the phases of investigation, concordance, and consolidation but is delegated and dispersed throughout the chain. As a result, normative moments of undecidability allow for constitutive trials of strength that *relate* and *mediate between* the processes of knowledge production on the one hand and decision-making on the other, thus mitigating the practical and conceptual distinction between the two. The methodological conclusion to be drawn from this is that the configuration of decision-making can only be studied and identified by following the trajectory (McGee 2015, 64) in which these trials or pauses are staged. Identifying this staging, as we will do next, points at the various moments and places at which pauses arise in the chains of association of COI knowledge practices that allow for decision as well as for conflicts and controversies about these decisions.

COI Research: The Phasing of Investigation, Concordance, and Consolidation

Investigation

Reminiscent of Latour's (1987) discussion of centers of calculation, COI units occupy a strategic position from where data and information about distant countries is assembled and put to work. By following their paper trails, we find two dominant but distinct knowledge practices, namely *fieldwork* and *desk research*. With the former, experts travel to a distant country with the intention of returning with local testimonies. With the latter, country experts do not go out on expeditions themselves but accumulate and build on information from others. Both forms of knowledge practice entail specific challenges and pose particular questions with regard to normativity and authority.

By going out to a country of origin, and bringing back notes, recordings, and sometimes photographs, fieldwork is the most apt example of the "cycle of accumulation that allows a point to become a center by acting at a distance on many other points" (Latour 1987, 222). Fact-finding missions consist predominantly of arranging meetings with local experts or NGOs or with participants in, and witnesses of, events in a specific country of origin. The goal is to write up these interviews and observations in their local contexts. A good example is a mission by the UK Home Office to Sri Lanka. The expedition was conducted July 11–23, 2016, and aimed "to gather accurate and up-to-date information from a range of sources about treatment of Tamils and people who have a real or perceived association with the former Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)" (UK Home Office 2017, 7). The reference materials that the British fact-finding team brought back consisted of forty-nine interviews, supplemented by further ad hoc meetings with people who were pre-identified as relevant and available. These recorded testimonies included "representatives of the government of Sri Lanka and state-sponsored civic groups and members of civil society, as well as domestic and international nongovernmental organizations, who would have *informed views*, based on their *professional and personal experience*" (UK Home Office 2017, 8; emphasis added).

The challenge for COI units is, to paraphrase Latour (1987, 220), *how to be familiar with country conditions that are distant in space, time, and culture.* Themes that COI reports address include, amongst others, the treatment of ethnic or religious groups, national human rights related laws (e.g., the rights of women and minorities) and their application, treatment of government opponents, incidents such as demonstrations, postelection or sectarian violence, conditions of living, discriminating against minorities, and geographical details. But while geographical or legal information is relatively self-evident and easy to retrieve, other information is much more problematic. Evidence on matters such as social impacts, human rights abuses, corruption, or violence are much more volatile,

subjective, and open to cultural and linguistic (mis)interpretation and even fraud. Moreover, practical constraints can hinder investigations: the country might be sealed from the outside world or too dangerous to visit. In Eritrea, for example, as one of the most closed off countries in Africa, investigators cannot rely on independent media, civil society organizations, or the political opposition for their information.

Fact-finding missions are seen as one of the best ways of gathering country-of-origin information because these missions have "the advantage of offering COI which may otherwise not be available to the public and the decision makers" (Weise Olesen and Olesen 2012, 9). In other words, the validity of missions is ensured by the geographical proximity and competence of fieldworkers (Gibb and Good 2013, 316, Livingstone 2003). As a methodological device, fieldwork is in line with a (Western) tradition of ethnographic research describing "a particular society and culture known to be based at some point on the experiences and observation of a fieldworker 'who was there'" (Strathern 2005, 7). The fact-finding mission assembles and translates *local knowledge*, that is, "the very mundane, yet expert understanding of and practical reasoning about local conditions derived from lived experience" (Yanow 2004, 12 cited in Bueger 2015, 12).

Fieldwork comes with its own set of practical challenges, the most pressing issue being that missions are resource intensive. They require a lot of preparation, their conduct may range from several days to sometimes even weeks, and the actual writing of the report is time-consuming. It is for this reason that desk research is the preferable mode of investigation, as it allows experts "to configure stores of existing information into new forms" (Camic, Gross, and Lamont 2012, 16). Global internet access has opened up a plethora of new ways of finding detailed and up-to-date information in even the most remote areas of the world (Gyulai 2011, 11). Moreover, there are several custom-built documentation systems that offer a shared platform through which investigators can easily store, search, and find relevant research materials for their projects.[3]

Desk research, on the other hand, is grounded in both a technical and professional expertise that includes knowledge of wide-ranging sources, an ability to carefully assess unknown sources, as well as the capacity to interact with research instruments (ACCORD 2013, 84). Different types of information are translated through the capacity of a specialized class of experts who are familiar with the complex challenges of source assessment and selection. While most of the sources cited in COI reports are authoritative in the sense that they do not necessitate full source assessment, information found online often lacks proper channels of quality control (O'Sullivan 2009, 2). While protocols are becoming more important in country research, researchers' accumulated practical know-how and experience of interpreting and assessing sources remains key.

An example country report based on desk research is by the Information Centre for Asylum and Migration, part of the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF). It describes the current situation, rule of law, and human rights situation in Kosovo. The objectives of the May 2015 report are, first, to document the number of Kosovars applying for asylum in Germany and elsewhere in Europe and, second, to gain more knowledge about the most common grounds for asylum (BAMF 2015, 6). The report follows up on two previous reports on Kosovo's state building, political development, and security situation (June 2008) and economic and social situation, health care, and reintegration (May 2011). The Kosovo report strives for objectivity by applying procedures that we normally see in (social) scientific domains, most notably the cross-referencing of information. The disclaimer

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[3]These COI databases include publicly available online databases—including *Refworld* run by the UNHCR, *Ecoi.net* by ACCORD, and the more restricted *COI Portal* by EASO, the latter connecting national databases for the use of asylum officials only.

is most telling in this regard: "[The country-of-origin information] was composed on the basis of carefully selected and reliable information. . . . All information provided has been researched, evaluated and analyzed with utmost care within a limited time frame. All sources are referenced and cited according to scientific standards" (BAMF 2015, 5).

Processes of selection, standardization, and cross-referencing entail what we have called trials of strength, where certain associations become possible over others. In the final Kosovo report, uncertain country information becomes robust by enrolling documents and weaving them together into a coherent and logical narrative, "strip[ping] events from their subjective meanings in a pursuit of objective legal facts" (Wilson 1997, 134; also Callon 1990, 135–36). And if traces of these messy and uncertain pauses are erased, and when the chains of reference are made long enough, the COI report can be seen as an adequate representation of reality—or at least a "a black-box that no one seeks to examine too carefully" (Best and Walters 2013, 333). Others will look at the final report, consider the country conditions, and enroll this information into their own projects. The accumulation cycle will accelerate as the COI report is cited by other experts in subsequent COI reports—or controversies will start about the accuracy of this information and "about who may be said to speak in the name of [these countries]" (Latour 1987, 228).

Although reports aim to arrive at associations that form a consolidated chain to support decisions, the networks that COI units maintain remain fragile and infused with normativity. It is interesting to observe how experts in this specialized field are often the first to acknowledge the limitations of their investigation (Tsangarides 2010, 16–17; Gyulai et al. 2013, 11; Dornell 2015, 248; Ruffer 2015, 92). Most COI reports include a disclaimer on the inconclusiveness of their findings, particularly in relation to the individual asylum claim. The UK Sri Lanka report, for instance, cautions against making generalizable claims because "factors including time constraints and availability meant that the list of sources consulted and information provided are not exhaustive" (UK Home Office 2017, 7–8).

While country investigation mimics scientific forms of knowledge production by producing references to a world "out there," desk research in particular has a tendency to be "self-referential" (cf. Latour 2010). The experts involved in country research build on the work of their colleagues, and already established country information is enrolled in subsequent reports (cf. Leander 2015, 12). The Eritrea report discussed in the introduction to this paper illustrates this very well. Thus, even though the Danish authorities had dismissed the information after the controversy, the UK Home Office cited it in one of their own reports, referring to it as the "most up-to-date information available from inside Eritrea" (UKHO 2015a, 5; UKHO 2015b). And this was not an exception. The Norwegian unit responsible for country information published as many as three documents on Eritrea based on the Danish report. Meanwhile, Sweden published the information on their own database but added a note about its limitations (Rosset and Liodden 2015, 28–29).

The self-referential nature of COI reports displaces the pauses of meaning and interpretation of complex country conditions in order to maintain an authoritative appearance. However, COI investigative practices entail considerable power in the ways in which they select, order, and present materials and achieve articulations that can be passed on to the next phase. For example, in fieldwork, the inclusion and exclusion of voices deemed more or less credible has powerful effects. This played a role in the LTTE report, where the British mission did not pay attention to the perspectives of Tamils themselves, despite this ethnic group being the object of investigation. This lack of attention is characteristic of the kind of undecidability of what has been called a pause. The direction of knowledge practices and investigative processes is not calculable but open to arbitrariness. In this case, investigators rely on the "informed views" and "professional experience" of state officials and local NGOs. By translating these local expert testimonies into authoritative

spokespersons for country conditions, COI units perpetuate the power asymmetries that exist in the field of asylum, namely that the perspectives of the lives experts speak for and about are not recognized as reliable (Fassin 2007; see also Stengers 1997, 84–85). As such, the phase of investigation can already be said to entail a certain pause, a "mediating moment" at which the space between knowledge creation and decision-making allows for a certain authoritative arbitrariness.

Concordance

Centers of calculation not only conduct expeditionary investigations, they also have to relate their articulations to a broader field of expertise and to coordinate, standardize, and harmonize findings. As Daston and Galison (2007) have argued in their study *Objectivity*, the development and presentation of what are considered to be objective facts is accompanied by the creation of a specific form of "expert judgment" and a group or class of professionals capable of conducting such judgments. The emergence of certain hierarchies of experts and expertise entails a specific politics of knowledge in which a particular kind of power is expressed. As a result, specific forms of knowledge appear and disappear, and specific experts and expertise enter or leave the stage.

We call the next phase in the chain of COI production, in which coordination plays a central role, *concordance*. As the number of asylum seekers increased, and flight routes became more complex, European governments recognized the importance of having a restricted and qualified group of professionals establishing policy-relevant country information (Engelmann 2015, 110). The establishment of COI units signifies this transition from country-of-origin information as an incidental inquiry, into a "profession in its own right" (Gyulai 2011, 11). But it might be an oversimplification to speak of an *epistemic community*, as some have claimed (Vink and Engelmann 2012; cf. Davis Cross 2013). While it is becoming increasingly integrated, as a relatively new form of inquiry, COI professional practice is struggling to define "an agreed set of problems, object, practices, theories or methods" (Barry and Born 2013, 7).

The fact that country information practices are heterogeneous, fragmented, and contested, conflicts with the goal of grounding decisions on belonging and deportation, as it "contradicts the monolithic view of knowledge making that the traditional approach to social knowledge assumed" (Camic et al. 2012, 25). In turn, this provokes friction because "these diverse origins present divergent modes of thought, mandates, and approaches to information production" (Tsangarides 2010, 97; Edwards et al 2011). In this manner, the practices of coordination and concordance are infused with normativity and pauses of undecidability. Gibb and Good (2013, 300), for instance, note how country information produced by the UK Home Office has been contested on multiple occasions for having "significant variations in how comprehensively women's legal, political, and economic rights were dealt with . . . , and the cultural context within which, for example, violence against women occurred was often not explained." And while these disputes focused on a single national COI unit, on a transnational level there is also the problem that different research cultures and practices result in country reports that are difficult to compare (Rosset and Liodden 2015, 28; see also ICMPD 2006; Engelmann 2015). This heterogeneity also poses problems for the establishment of a Common European Asylum System (CEAS) because without shared country representations, it becomes difficult to formulate a common response to asylum issues (European Commission 2016; see also Barry 2002).

Over the past decade or more, problems of difference in the field of country-of-origin information have strengthened calls for mechanisms of evaluation. The most important and successful of these are standardization devices in the form of *COI guidelines*. Different organizations, ranging from governments to IOs and

NGOs, are responsible for the negotiation of these quality standards and criteria.[4] Surprisingly, given the contentious nature of asylum knowledge and governance, most of these guidelines are similar in content. Moreover, their success is evident as these standards have "gradually taken root in national and community asylum legislation as well as in the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights and national courts" (Gyulai 2011, 7).

COI guidelines describe the quality standards and requirements for researching and evaluating country information. The most common standard guidelines used today are from the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), a rapidly growing EU agency mandated to strengthen cooperation on asylum issues. The *Country of Origin Information Report Methodology* (EASO 2012) provides the main quality standards and requirements for country reports. It outlines four criteria: (1) neutrality and objectivity, (2) validity, (3) transparency and publicity, and (4) quality control. The guideline elaborates on these criteria and describes how the ideal research process should occur—that is, the stages of initiating, researching, reporting, and finalizing country information. Lastly, the document discusses how information should be presented. This is further developed in the annex, which shows how to format the information, including visual examples of a front page, table of contents, disclaimer, and bibliography.

The Report Methodology suggested by EASO is not a passive instrument but rather is designed to *shape* and *coordinate* country research (Lampland and Star 2009) and to eradicate pauses and conflicts. The guideline mediates by exerting effects on the routine behaviors and behind-the-scenes decisions of its users, such as the early stage design of the investigation, the credibility assessment of sources, or the representation of facts. In addition, quality standards have the "capacity to transcend the essentially transitory character of social processes and to remain uniform across separate and diverse local settings" (Smith 1990, 149). In other words, as another version of a stable and mobile inscription, the guideline extends the network of country investigation and allows different researchers (and users) of COI to "employ the same . . . outlook despite their lack of contact with each other" (Feldman 2011, 389; also Star and Griesemer 1989).

While guidelines are essential in the attempt to bring "order . . . to all those practices where messiness reigns" (Berg 1998, 227), they are insufficient by themselves to establish consolidated chains of associations. For one, these written texts leave much scope for interpretation and need to be complemented with something else in order for the standards to be replicated across social actors or jurisdictions. As noted in the previous section, COI professionals rely on technical skills "which are difficult to transmit and are often learned on the job and by example" (Callon, Lascoumes, and Barthe 2001, 55). In practice, we see therefore that the implementation of research standards is not only assured through the circulation of guidelines but also through the training of professionals (see Barry 2001, 77–78; Lampland and Star 2009, 24).

EASO plays a pivotal role in such training processes and transferring practical competencies. It has established *COI Training Modules*, teaching country researchers (as well as asylum officials) across Europe about the different aspects of country information in asylum procedures (EASO 2014, 15; Ahmed 2016, 28). In order

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[4] The first milestone in the formalization of common COI standards was the UNHCR's Country of Origin Information: Towards Enhanced International Cooperation (2004), guidance which aimed to assist in "the development of country of origin information standards, tools, and mechanisms hence, contribute toward more consistency in decision-making" (UNHCR 2004, 1). It was followed by Researching Country of Origin Information (ACCORD 2013 [2004]) by the Austrian Red Cross and the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD). The guidance played an important role in systematizing COI quality standards in Europe with comprehensive quality principles. The Judicial Criteria for Assessing Country of Origin Information (COI): A Checklist was created by the International Association of Refugee Law Judges (IARLJ 2013). The checklist is a more specialist-oriented document focusing on legal issues surrounding the assessment of COI.

to create this multiplier effect across the EU, it uses a so-called "train-the-trainer" system—whereby it trains national trainers, who can subsequently disseminate training at home. The COI training module applies a "blended-learning" methodology, combining both online and face-to-face training in Malta. The e-learning platform of the COI training provides participants the flexibility to work on the modules when, where, and for how long they want (Ahmed 2016, 28). A forum gives access to the "virtual classroom," which seeks to ensure that everybody feels involved in the learning process as the course proceeds. The face-to-face meeting is mostly meant as a recap, focused on practical case studies that familiarize participants with some routine trust logics and media consumption habits that we described above. It is also meant to provide a platform for sharing experiences and best-practices.[5]

Standards translate what used to be local, situated specifications for country research into increasingly formal, sometimes legally binding evaluation mechanisms. In order to make these programs operate at a distance, guidelines and training modules are increasingly "followed up by agents committed to implementation and oversight" (Lampland and Star 2009, 14). For instance, the UK Home Office set up a formal system of *peer review* in 2009 designed to enforce the quality and accountability of information production (Porter 2012, 541). The *Independent Advisory Group on Country Information* (IAGCI), consisting primarily of academics with relevant knowledge and expertise, periodically "reviews reports and recommends improvements to make them more accurate, balanced and impartial" (Good 2015, 126).[6]

These embedded systems of review are still the exception rather than the rule, however. More common is the empowered role of civil society organizations, who take on the role of watchdogs and assess whether country information produced by governmental COI units is in accordance with quality standards. They compare research practices or check whether experts are properly qualified to do the job (see for example ICMPD 2006; EMN 2014; cf. Andrijasevic and Walters 2010). A good example of the latter is how an EASO country report on Turkey is not only reviewed by a transnational group of peers but also through an unsolicited, collaborative effort of the Asylum Research Consultancy (ARC) and the Dutch Council for Refugees (DCR) (2017).

The phase of concordance can be said to consist of a variety of actions that are aimed at collecting, combining, and comparing information. Coordination in this phase not only consists of organizing knowledge but of tinkering with material and normative aspects as well. As we stated previously, following McGee (2014, 5) we consider the phases of COI research as particular trajectories aimed at the finding of facts in which a specific "normativity of associations" is at stake (McGee 2014, 61). Pulsional normativity entails that in the process of gathering information from different places and sources and combining them into purposeful facts, all kinds of thresholds and passage points have to be crossed that are not just technical or scientific. Examples of pulsional normativity in the phase of concordance included various activities to coordinate, standardize, and harmonize findings, as well as the coming into being of hierarchies of experts and expertise. Classifications and hierarchies of knowledge are arrived at in a noncalculable way. Instead, they emerge from

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[5] These observations are based on participation as a student in the "Blended Learning Course: Researching Country of Origin Information (COI)" held on March 10, 2016, at the Austrian Red Cross in Vienna. The content of the training was essentially the same. In fact, the EASO training module is modeled after the Austrian Red Cross/ACCORD's, and both use the same e-learning platform. The difference is that they use their own training manual.

[6] By way of an example, in a reaction to the UK Eritrea report, which referenced the controversial Danish Eritrea report from the introduction, the IAGCI wrote: "In the light of the evidential problems involved in relying upon the Danish report and the specific issues . . . the only possible way forward for the Home Office is to completely rewrite both CIG reports *in a manner which conforms to the guidelines set out by EASO*. A failure to undertake this will ensure that both CIG reports, and the Home Office unit that produces them, will be viewed as totally *lacking credibility*" (IAGCI 2015, 6, emphasis added).

particular pauses that aim to connect knowledge creation to decision-making. The phase of concordance illustrates that the various methodologies that are applied can be regarded as kinds of trials that combine material and normative elements into a research process so as to transform translations of knowledge into articulated facts.

Consolidation

The final phase of COI research consists of consolidation. The COI report stands at the end of a long chain of practices and procedures. Uncertain and partial testimonies are converted into *qualified knowledge*; it is through standard guidelines, training modules, and peer review that subjective observations are translated into asylum-relevant knowledge. Put differently, countries of origin "are not ready made, nor do they speak for themselves, but they are constructed in such a way that they gain agency, that is, evidentiary capabilities" (Van der Velden 2015, 2; see also Weizman et al 2010; Schuppli 2014). Fragile associations are formed through trials of strength that are infused with normativity and power. These knowledge processes do just come to constitute facts. Their objective is to offer seemingly impartial grounds for decision-making by erasing the fragility of associations and pauses of undecidability.

In order to understand how country information ultimately supports asylum decisions, we must also attend to the subsequent *consolidation* of country information in legal, political, and public forums. Country-of-origin information acts in the world as it comes to inform individual procedures of asylum determination or policy-decisions aimed at particular groups of refugees. The latter decisions include situations in which governments decide to summarily grant groups of people asylum—such as in the event of a "mass influx"—or to add and remove specific countries on so-called "safe (third) country of origin" lists, which allow for accelerated procedures on particular country nationals (ACCORD 2013, 12–13). COI experts enroll decision-makers by providing professional opinions and conclusions on asylum matters. As we have seen above, it takes a lot of work to ensure that country reports are translated into standardized forms that permit "evidence to stand up to the scrutiny of epistemological frameworks that evaluate and pass judgment upon them" (Schuppli 2014, 292). Prime examples are UK Country Policy and Information Notes (previously Country Information and Guidance Reports), which are directly intertwined with decision-making (Gibb and Good 2013, 298; Engelmann 2015, 110). These documents are highly regarded by both ministry officials and asylum judges, and their influence often extends beyond Great Britain and around Europe.

The role of the country information in the reorientation of policy-making is well illustrated with the British 2015 Eritrea guidance reports referred to above. The information is said to have led to a reduction of asylum grants to Eritreans from eighty-five percent to sixty percent, even though in hindsight its sources were fundamentally flawed (Taylor 2017). Most of the asylum refusals were later overturned by judges of appeal, but the UK Home Office was criticized for using the lower recognition rates to restrict access of unaccompanied Eritrean children waiting in Calais (Taylor 2017). Between knowledge production and decision-making there is a process of consolidation; the authority of a COI report is drawn from its use in governmental deliberations, while decision-makers use the authority of country expertise to validate their policy decisions (Gieryn 1995). Complementary to the lessons from the Danish controversy, then, this event also shows how weak and wobbly country information becomes a strong and stable reservoir of authoritative governing knowledge.

As an evidence-based approach to policy, the presentation of country information is not restricted to political forums. While power has long been exercised through

governmental centers of calculation, forming the obligatory points of passage for decision-makers, with COI units we can also see something more recent, namely "the pairing of 'the right to information' with 'the obligation to inform' [that] appears to be a new 'arcanum of power'" (Lascoumes and Le Galès 2007). Since the 1980s, asylum has become an issue of *public policy*, which is "to presume if not the transparency, then certainly the availability of [information] to the public" (Walters 2014, 112; also Alexander 1999; Kneebone 2009, 252). Governments have sometimes held country reference materials confidential because they conflict with issues of foreign or national security (Reneman 2014). Given the impact that asylum policies can have on people's lives, it is no surprise that these practices of nondisclosure are criticized. Today, the veil of secrecy that covers the sources that inform decision-makers is variable. Where most COI units are not obliged to make their information public, some countries have legal requirements to do so (ICMPD 2006, 31). While these settings might be less protocolized, this does not mean that standards do not play a role. We have already noted the role of civil society organizations in validating standards, but the same can be said of COI reports.

To sum up, while country-of-origin information operates in a *symbiotic relation* with asylum decision-making (Gieryn 1995, 435), it can also be seen as the production of "public proof" (Latour 2012). In both instances, country information not only becomes "robust through its own validation procedures" but, in order to become policy-relevant information, it must also "acquire an (other) efficacy from beyond itself" (Strathern 2008, 467). Country information entails multiple trials of strength throughout its chain of knowledge production. Often, contested information and fragile associations hold together when supporting asylum decisions. Sometimes, these associations break down and knowledge fails to be validated: every so often COI reports become contested for making erroneous claims, which can lead to disastrous consequences for the lives of asylum seekers.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed the work of COI units, understood as centers of calculation that gather information from distant lands in order to render it into evidence of the situation in migrant-sending countries. We have argued that COI units operate in the shadow of decision-making: the procedures for their knowledge production borrow from social science, but their objectives are not the production of (scientific) *facts* but the enabling of asylum *decisions*. COI research aims to transform the translations that are conducted in the investigation processes into articulated facts that can function as a kind of "pause" so as to enable decisions. The "pulsional character of relationality," as McGee (2014, 64) called it, is of interest for the study of COI trajectories because it mitigates the distinction between processes of fact finding, on the one hand, and processes of decision-making, on the other.

We have suggested that there are three phases to the emergent nature of country-of-origin information: investigation, concordance and consolidation. Instead of producing and transporting clear-cut facts, the calculation that takes place goes hand in hand with acts of anticipation that shape the conditions under which decisions have to be made. By applying a perspective that is sensitive to the material and normative aspects of COI research, we have rendered visible certain "pauses" in the stages of investigation, coordination, and validation. The pauses can be understood as emerging "mediating moments" in which the bridge between facts, norms, and decision is crossed. Decision-making moments are delegated and mediated throughout the fact-finding process. COI reports are often incomplete, out-of-date, oversimplified, subjective, and thus potentially contestable; countries of origin "are objects that continuously raise new questions, have to be re-evaluated and dealt with differently" (Bueger 2015, 6). Rather than black-boxes, COI research is more like

"grey boxes in which a few unanswered questions remain partially visible, as occasional irritant that keeps things unsettled" (Best 2016, 42).

However, we have shown that much of the work done by COI units seeks to erase the undecidability of asylum adjudication and to reduce the pauses between knowledge and decision. COI units seek to reduce asylum determination to a calculative operation: what matters is the regulation of decision procedure and the standardization of knowledge. As Louise Amoore (2014, 435) has provocatively argued in relation to algorithmically driven security decisions: what matters is not so much the accuracy of underlying data but rather whether data arrangements have the "capacity to . . . establish a decision procedure." Our analysis suggests that the associations in the trials that connect knowledge practices with decision-making allow for the involvement of all kinds of possibly conflicting forms of expertise and expert viewpoints.

The article also contributes to the emergent dialogue between STS and security studies—our analysis shows that ANT has more to offer IR than a "material turn." Instead of being restricted to the instrumentalism of gaining evidence and arriving at representations, ANT allows us to explore the normativity of knowledge-producing practices by unpacking trails of strength and engaging with the "mysticism" of decision-making. Our analysis underlined that there is a certain politics of knowledge involved in the emergence of hierarchies of experts and expertise and in the classification of specific forms of knowledge that could be captured with the notion of pulsional normativity. The concept of pulsional normativity raised awareness of the presence of incalculable moments at which the gap between knowledge and decision-making is bridged. These pauses allow for the expression and intervention of authority, often in arbitrary ways.

The route from investigation to consolidation via concordance is not a closed circuit. Increasingly, it takes place not only in a restricted procedural sense by appointed actors and organizations but also by cooperating with civil society organizations. Moreover, "consolidation by contestation" seems to have become an important aspect. The closure of controversy is not necessarily determined by a country of origin "out there" but rather by complex sociomaterial factors. Far from universal applicability, COI reports require a lot of effort to be made to work across the European asylum system. Public knowledge controversies such as the Eritrea Case have a purifying function, as they allow for public monitoring and broadening the field of peers that have a say in the validation process. In this respect, the distributed articulations and pauses are not just steps in a procedure but part of a broader heterogeneous landscape, a hybrid forum of experts, representatives, media, NGOs, and international organizations within which the pulsional normativity of COI unit research is being questioned.

Acknowledgements

Funder Information

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