Making deportable people
Bureaucratic knowledge practices in European deportation sites
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Chapter 6

ALL BUREAUCRATS - Conclusion

We will now release madam back into the wild.

– Case-worker reacting to the rejection of a scheduled deportation by the court

6.1 Getting rid of the migrant

Deportation, as a practice, is not only within the capability of indifferent bureaucrats tucked away in office towers, or of unscrupulous characters in history books. Nor does a migration ‘crisis’ unfold independently of us, as if it is merely caused by ‘them’ entering, as we are taught, ‘our’ space. Rather than identifying culprits whom we can easily distance ourselves from, the contributions making up this dissertation locate the act of deportation as embedded in our mundane, daily lives. That gives the intervention I aimed to make with this dissertation a reflective nature. I mean this not only in a direct sense (as in: if ‘we’ bomb Syria people will seek refuge here) but also in a more enacting sense: what do we make out of this relationship between ‘us’ and ‘them’ that is reflected in a concept like a ‘migration crisis’, and that is also the foundation of deportation practices? The preceding chapters address this issue by shedding light on deportation in different, though unifying, ways, namely
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by challenging easily taken for granted perceptions within the deportation field that tend to obfuscate or distract from what (more) is happening in and through deportation. By deconstructing these perceptions, which often come in stubborn dichotomies, the aim is to open up the tense field that surrounds deportation to create space wherein we can ask anew what these practices actually do — and how we are intricately caught up in these workings.

In short, the individual chapters opened up discussions concerning these perceptions about deportation bureaucracy as they occurred during fieldwork. Chapter two looked into the dichotomy between state and civil society actors engaging with deportable subjects, and how deportation practice creates a ‘cosy consensus’ between the two when it comes down to perspectives on belonging and non-belonging. Chapter three addressed the value of gaining insight into the affective side of bureaucratic practice. Rationality is often mobilized as bureaucracies’ legitimizer, but various affects are carefully calibrated in ‘paper work’ practices. Indifference is one of these bureaucratic affects, rather than indicating a lack of it. Moreover, comparing practices in a Deportation Unit with those in a Criminal Court sensitized the reader about the situated character of affective modes in state bureaucracies. Chapter four showed how deportation practices, and more specifically files, bring together acts and actors wherein definite boundaries between research groups become untenable. As was made clear, the singular research actor does not exist and an ethical attitude is crucially dependent on which relation is formed with whom. This implies that the boundary between what is ethical versus what is unethical is blurred for a researcher. Chapter five dealt with the juridically crucial divide between the individual and population when implementing deportation. This distinction, however, is undermined in the daily work in the Unit. Instead, the bureaucratically composed individual is built in a constellation of population categories that are, in turn also made. These population categories, based on a racial and national order, enable a specific management of population.

In addition to the ‘stubborn perceptions’ challenged in these chapters, I here wish to discuss yet another dichotomy, one that is inherently related
to the field of migration research of which deportation often is considered to form a part. This is the dichotomy between the migrant versus the non-migrant. I use ‘non-migrant’ because existing terms appear inaccurate to oppose the concept of a migrant – unsurprisingly, maybe, because the term ‘non-migrant’ is the norm nowadays. ‘Citizen’ comes close to an antonym of ‘migrant’ (see also chapter two) but does not quite cover all aspects that come with these two subjectifications: when it comes to identification, citizens can be identified as or self-identify with migrants and vice versa. Also, when it comes to acts, citizens can perform migratory acts and migrants can perform acts of citizenship (Isin 2009). Some people remain migrants long after they move; others never become migrants despite their cumulative movements (c.f. Feldman 2015 on ‘migrant-hood’). Migrants can be granted citizenship, and citizens can become deportable, for example through a process of ‘unmaking citizenship’ (see Nyers 2018).

‘The migrant’ does not seem a neutral concept, but rather a confusing, unstable term that is dependent on the context in which it is used. However, being preoccupied with practices of deportation for the past few years, I was often understood — also by myself — as a ‘migration’ scholar, a field of study that arose at the end of the 19th century but really ‘took off’ from the 1930s onward (Greenwood 2003). Within migration studies there is a wide variety of terms to apply to the people who are under study. The question of what terminology to use for such a diverse and ever-changing subject of research like the migrant is clearly not straightforward. Indeed, ‘[t]he contested nature of the adjectives attached to migrants who are the subject of these studies and policies – undocumented, irregular, clandestine, non-compliant, unauthorized, trafficked, sans papières, etc. – is an indication of the intensely politicized nature of claims to knowledge and analysis’ (Anderson and Ruhs 2010: 175). Which concept to use matters not least because ‘in the way in which concepts are constructed and deployed, people are recognized as being in, or out, of place and their movements facilitated (as citizens) or constrained (as refugees or migrants) as a consequence’ (Bhambra 2017: 400). This politicized nature concerning the concept led me to not only divert my
research focus from ‘the migrant’ as a main research object; it also made me increasingly hesitant to use the term ‘migrant’. It seemed necessary to raise questions such as who becomes the migrant in the context of deportation, according to whom, and why, before confirming the reality mobilized by the use of these very terms. In the context of studying deportation practices, were the deportees in my field indeed migrants?

6.2 Where does the deportable subject come from?

‘Does anyone have someone for Pristina…? No one at all? ’

Damn, I got four Moroccans for tomorrow
- their escort is fully arranged for by the police –
  but now they all just applied for asylum’

Following procedural regulations, a deportation has to be halted until asylum requests are turned down.

‘We do have enough other Moroccans’,
she reasserts her words by raising the pile of files in her hands,
‘But North Africans always apply for asylum to prevent their deportation.
Whereas Kosovars never do. And the escort is paid for anyway.’

- Case-worker, Deportation Unit

As addressed, some of the incoming arrests in the Deportation Unit were from people with ‘Arab looks’ whose papers were perfectly fine (see chapter five). Others had been in the possession of residence permits for years in the country that now attempted to deport them. People prone to deportation maintained family connections and jobs on the territory where they resided. Like one of the bureaucrats told me, ‘some people do have more here than they have there.’ Also, I myself had been ‘here’ and ‘there’ during my PhD trajectory, even more so than many people I was about to refer to as migrants.
This makes one wonder whether it is indeed the movement of people that is decisive in making them migrants. First, as has been argued, it is not movement in general in migration policies but the movement of some that takes center stage. As Bhambra wrote: ‘The issue was never simply mobility, but rather the color of those who moved and the direction in which they moved’ (Bhambra 2017: 403). Bhambra points out that the body of ‘migrants’ is actually predominant over merely mobility. Rather than mobility or body, I wish to suggest another starting point to think through the concept of the migrant, namely one that somewhat shifts our attention from the subject identified as the migrant. Not movement but rather place seems decisive when applying the term migrant. Moreover, this is a place that people can relate to as being ‘in’ (if you belong here) or ‘out’ of place (if you belong there). In the context of contemporary deportation, the nation-state is mobilized as the place to think about who is in and who is out.

The world that is organized in nation-states is made to home certain people, those who manage to inhabit belonging – bodies at home - and excludes others. Nation-states thus testify to an organization of population. As Bhambra put it, ‘Discussions of who is a citizen and has rights (or should have rights) – in contrast to migrants who do not, or should not – occur in the context of understandings of citizenship and rights that are seen to be forged in and by the nation-state (2017: 401). Deportations figure as a perpetuating practice in the imaginary of the nation-state. For this community to be imagined, a politics of belonging wherein people become part of a certain population is necessary. It has therefore been argued that ‘[a]s well as reaffirming its legal rights, deportation also affirms citizenship’s normative qualities’ (Anderson et al. 2011: 548). A body-at-home can inhabit the world differently than a non-belonging body. This distinction made by categorizing certain bodies as strangers nourishes ‘profoundly asymmetrical and nonreciprocal forms of recognition’ (Coulthard 2014: 25). In other words, different categories of population enable (im)possibilities that are not equally accessible to or distributed among bodies recognized differently. Deportations, a means of population control (Weber 2015), maintain the vicious circle in which the
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experience of belonging selves can be forcefully perpetuated by the imaginary of non-belonging others.

When recognizing migrants, our gaze is often turned externally – to that infamous horizon outside of our nation, our home, where the migrant appears from. Yet where exactly we turn our gaze to in order to find the migrant remains undefined. The figure of the migrant is constructed in our here and now and changes over time and place. Crucially, where we turn our gaze from actually matters. Paradoxically maybe, the point of departure to find the migrant is a nation that imagines their unity as a socially bounded place (Anderson 2006): a place where people from ‘out there’ can ‘enter’ and ‘leave’; movements mediated by national borders. Such a place is also ‘our’ home, where bodies recognized as non-belonging become strangers (Ahmed 2013), wherein this stranger is judged ‘in terms of what she will do for – or to – us as a nation’ (Honig 2009: 46). ‘Deportation infrastructures’ (Walters 2018) are part and parcel of this nation building project. This project not only legitimizes the human costs of deportation involved for those subjected as ‘non-belonging’ populations but also crucially needs these collectives of non-belonging people to perform the collective of the nation. Hence, the questions on deportation raised in this thesis are not about a stranger who arrived from a faraway horizon, but quite the opposite: they are concerned with this quest for the Self, a sense of belonging, and how the concept of the stranger arises in close relation to this quest.

The figure of the deportable subject thus fulfills a role that goes far beyond the mere act of deportation. This diverts from Bauman’s analysis of our times, wherein he speaks about ‘[t]he production of “human waste”, or more correctly wasted humans’ (Bauman 2004: 5). The preceding chapters make one wonder whether these strangers are indeed some sort of collateral damage, ‘wasted lives’ as Bauman puts it. For Bauman, human waste is: ‘the “excessive” and “redundant”, that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay’ (Bauman 2004: 5). The human waste that is subjected to being ‘removed’ – using the emic term for deportation here – are non-belonging bodies. But contrary to Bauman’s
analysis, what makes them strangers is not that they belong to a population that does ‘not wished to be recognized’. The deportee is a stranger precisely because of being recognized as such, a non-belonging figure that is being opposed to the figure of ‘us’.

Continuing with the thought that the making of the deportable subject does not merely aim to ‘solve’ the issue of human collateral damage, I now wish to draw together the empirical insights of the chapters by asking: where do those who are subjected to deportation come from? I wish to ask this question not in its geographical understanding but in the performative sense: how are deportable people made in our social life – a world of which both deportable and non-deportable people as temporary and inherently related categories form a part - and to what end? I raise these questions in an attempt to adjust our gaze, following the observation that the subject of deportable people is crucially coming from ‘inside’ rather than outside. This way, I hope that we can think about what it means to live in a society wherein deportable people are made to form a part. Therein I wish to think along with Honig’s insight that the ‘stranger’ – the figure recognized as such – teaches us who we are (Honig 2009) and to move towards self-reflection rather than searching for explanations outside of ourselves, so often found in scapegoats. The main question running through this thesis can thus be formulated more accurately now, namely how the deportable figure is made within – to be part of – our society.

6.3 The political project called deportation

I am also part of some horse-trading here, you know. If I know that I can influence one [deportation] procedure in a positive way by granting a visa for another? Well, then that’s what I’ll do!

- Functionary in the Deportation Unit
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The deportable person as a bureaucratic subject is made in daily file-work, or, deportation file-work entails an institutionalized process of making. The curious thing, however, is that there is no singular way of knowing the deportable subject, nor is there a predetermined way how to know it. It appeared impossible to predict how a case would unfold exactly. On the contrary, as a file goes, considerations concerning the continuation of a file were constantly present. Exactly because of its relational and situated character it proved challenging to get a grip on bureaucratic practices that produce deportable subjects, to capture them and translate them into ‘findings’. It is not for nothing that Ten Bos describes bureaucracy as a ‘hyper-object’ (Ten Bos 2016: 31). Hyper-objects have in common that they ‘defy the possibility of looking at them “directly” and seeing them “in full”’ (Van Oorschot 2018: 262-263, besides bureaucracy, other examples of hyper-objects include climate change and globalization). Ten Bos observes, ‘We will never have a true outlook on or overview over hyper-objects, not even if we would catch a milliard glimpses of them’ (2016: 3824).

Having experienced that bureaucratic deportation practice inherently remains hard to grasp, constantly changes, and that it overwhelsms the observer as much as it might confuse the file-worker, I came to understand that the situatedness of the knowledge that is produced lies at the heart of the productivity of this practice. This moved me to attempt to craft a language to address the constantly escaping, transforming shapes of the workings of deportation bureaucracy. Despite its slippery appearances it became possible to research this practice by paying attention to what it performs: the categories and subjects that are made; that is, the constellation of the deportee as a recognizable subject. This constellation thus is a reality enacted in practice (Mol 2002: 50). It is this locally produced bureaucratic knowledge that has a mobilizing effect, shapes realities, in spaces not limited to the setting of the Deportation Unit alone. This makes deportation file-work a bureaucratic

Translation by author
knowledge practice that, by making the deportable figure, fulfills such a crucial task in the deportation infrastructure.

The impossibility to see deportation bureaucracy in full appeared integral to this knowledge practice. Rather than a testament to an arbitrary process, elusiveness and changeability are inherent in the knowledges that deportation bureaucracy mobilizes and to the power that can be performed through it. The performative character of bureaucracies can also be read in the opening sentence of the earlier cited book by Ten Bos on the workings of bureaucracy: ‘Where there is power, there is ink. And where there is ink, there is power’ (Ten Bos 2016: 11). The knowledge that deportation bureaucracy creates is literally a form of power in ink: bureaucratic evidence comes in writing. To put it in Foucauldian terms, knowledge is power. This knowledge spreads out, like the tentacles of an octopus in Ten Bos his comparison, rather than remaining in the center where it was initiated. This analogy hints, of course, at governmentality, too. But the foundation of this power as sovereign in character is fundamental.

Shaping revisable and provisional populations for deportation testifies to ‘de facto sovereignty, i.e., the ability to kill, punish, and discipline with impunity wherever it is found and practiced, rather than sovereignty grounded in formal ideologies of rule and legality’ (Hansen and Stepputat 2006: 296). To take it one step further, deportation practice not merely testifies to sovereign power, it does sovereign power. The power to make distinctions between populations as is required for, or rather, as is exactly what is done by deportations, transpires from bureaucratic practices that make the sovereign state. In deportation bureaucracy, ‘sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not’ (Mbembé and Meintjes 2003: 27). ‘State’ is therefore the collaboration of what is put to work to uphold that power. The knowledge that transpires from deportation bureaucracy is involved in this collaboration. Deportation bureaucracy thereby testifies to the fact that ‘[t]he belligerent opposition of “good and evil”, “freedom and hatred”, “civilisation and barbarism” is thus no mere rhetoric or the creation of enemy images, but has already entered the procedures of law and administration’
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(Eckert 2008: 22). The political project that deportation forms part of is that of defining belonging in the relation between bodies and territories, and violently guard the ever-contestable boundary that is made between them.

In a text titled ‘We should all be deported’, Vigneswaran writes: ‘[T]he primary outcome of immigration and border control policies has always been to spatially entrench unjust inequalities between the peoples of the world’ (2017: x). Or, as Heyman and Symons put it, ‘As part of this [social inequality], border regimes treat people differentially, a diversity that is shaped by and affects moral thinking about borders’ (2012: 543). The ways in which inequalities created by migration policies affect our relationship with borders is reflected in our behavior in border zones. Vigneswaran addresses the academic community specifically when he continues that ‘authorized’ people comply in entrenching this inequality:

While our unauthorized colleagues are mutilating their fingers, jumping over barbed wire fences, dying at sea and having their bodies seized, bound and forcibly relocated, we are […] creating a parallel spectacle, of willing submission to a judicious sovereign. Standing in line. Posing for the camera. Truthfully answering questions to the best of our ability (Vigneswaran 2017: x)

Vigneswaran continues by suggesting the possibility to refuse cooperation with the border system that is performed in, for example, identity checks. By refusing to comply, relationships of solidarity could be formed with those who now suffer most from the terror that is legitimated by such institutions. By partaking in these border rituals, obeying their authority, we form part of the relations that recognize and reproduce these borders, and which hence make their consequences real. Now this view touches on the sensitive point of joint culpability located in following the rules of a system like that of borders. Adhering to the rules mobilized by borders acknowledges — or performs, even — the knowledge that lies at their foundation.
Complying with border systems by following the rules of identity checks forms a useful parallel concerning the knowledge created in bureaucratic deportation systems. Is there an intrinsic difference between obediently showing our identity documents when requested to do so in order to receive a stamp on them, or adding a stamp on a travel document in a deportation file following your job description? Is it convincing at all that one would follow the rules in the first case, perform the border, but refuse to obey the rules or recognize that same border in the latter for the sake of morality? Differently put, the question becomes: is it convincing that the morals of bureaucrats drastically differ from non-bureaucrats, from academics? What makes you, reader, different from deportation bureaucrats?

I addressed this question to myself during my fieldwork particularly concerning the moral dilemmas I was confronted with in the field – a burden perhaps that is intricately related to the grim research topic that deportation is. I did act in line with methodological and ethical research guidelines. What I am talking about is thus not a research dilemma but a moral dilemma that unfolds around the recurring, guilt-ridden question: is it (morally) justifiable not to act upon the deportations that I witnessed being processed? This moral dilemma does not include me alone. It takes me in the direction of two more accomplices. Being informed about what happened in daily deportation practice connects me with the burden that bureaucrats too are charged with: how can they let this violence happen to fellow human beings? However, addressing this reproach to bureaucrats – or to a researcher, for that matter – is rather complacent, a too easy way to keep clean hands for those who are not physically inside of these practices. We are all inside the system that these practices perform. What is at issue here is the institutional world that we maintain in the name of ‘migration management’. Then what remains of the difference between bureaucrats, who may bow and scrape to keep procedures running, and other citizens? Do we not all already know that people are dying at our borders, that asylum procedures are devastating, as are dead-end detentions of non-criminals? That deportations, and the threat of them, have been destroying lives and continue to do so? We could all be bureaucrats. We are all complicit to the moral dilemma that arises out of
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institutional and political acts, the sovereign subjugations, that are justified under the term ‘migration management’ in our society.