

"Borders and Borderlands: explorations in identity, exile, translation and transition"

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Linguistic Borders and Bureaucratic Mazes: The Refugees' Integration Experiences in Lisbon

Sandra Mateus (ISCTE - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, Centro de Investigação e Estudos de Sociologia, Lisboa, Portugal)

Paulo Santos (ISCTE - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, Centro de Investigação e Estudos de Sociologia, Lisboa, Portugal)

Introduction

Four years have passed since asylum applications in Europe reached their peak with a registered number of 1.3 million requests. Since then, there's been a consistent remission of the influx. While numbers might contribute to a political rhetoric claiming that the so-called *European migrant crisis* has come to an end, the critical scenarios regarding asylum seekers and refugees are far from being over.

After a challenging journey, in host countries, forced migrants must not only overcome linguistic and bureaucratic obstacles, but also deal with the inefficiency of organizations in providing support, which demonstrates how highly bureaucratized systems act as a further frontier that refugees must somehow cross. In the effort to do so, forced migrants have to wait years in a condition of statelessness and disempowerment, in order to have the right to be more than a stranger. Such state of abeyance is socially produced and constitutes a significant dimension within power structures.

In this chapter, we shall focus on the obstacles and challenges faced by forced migrants and how welcoming practices and integration policies of hosting countries generate further barriers and borders. Drawing from the results of 14 semi-structured interviews to asylum seekers and refugees hosted in Lisbon, we outline and explore linguistic boundaries and bureaucracy as state-generated borders. This study is part of a greater body of research within the framework of the PandPAS project (Mateus et al., 2019).

1. Borders as inequality reproduction mechanisms

Closing borders has been a political measure of control frequently applied by Western nations, to contain the emergence of phenomena closely related to processes of globalisation and their effects.

Between 2014 and 2019, Europe was challenged with an influx of refugees and asylum seekers, while 2020 kicked off with the spread of COVID-19, leading to a global pandemic. In both cases, the enforcement of borders together with the set-up of assessment mechanisms, served as a strategy to deal with a “threat”. However, though the latter has proven to be a great risk to global society with a total of 1.1 million deaths so far (WHO, 2020), the same cannot be said for the former. In fact, the erection of borders has only aggravated the so-called *European refugee crisis* as the recorded deaths of 32.516 migrants in the Mediterranean Sea (IOM, 2020) testify, for instance.

Governments, particularly those where nationalist-populistic discourse gained momentum, have demonstrated who’s to be protected and who’s not, deeming the civilised and the savage and drawing a boundary separating ‘us’ from ‘them’. The predisposition to adopt such an approach, is upheld by a constructed cultural imaginary of the Other and can be defined as *a necropolitical stratification and selection of who can be left to die* (Mbembe, 2003) by those who exercise sovereignty and restrict access to fundamental domains of integration such as healthcare, employment and education.

Borders and boundaries aren’t so different in their substance, if there’s any difference at all. Borders are usually referred to as a line separating nations from one another, while boundaries are considered as the limit or edge of something, either real or imagined. When juxtaposed though, definitions get blurred as we soon come to realise that borders are a product of political (dis)agreements to settle where one territory ends and the other begins. This is especially the case once we realize that there is no such thing as a natural, real border. As a matter of fact, borders are strictly symbolic and can only be seen in world maps or perceived by the presence of national authorities and surveillance architectures built at designated coordinates. Thus, *borders are first and foremost imaginary, a social artefact, product of intersubjectivity*.

In the wake of 2015’s migrant influx and its subsequent years, media channels and political institutions were prompt to frame the phenomenon as a crisis that was striking Europe. From a statistical point of view, it’s arguably difficult to classify the European scenario as critical since out of the first ten countries with the greatest share of refugees per 1.000 inhabitants, only two were European: Sweden, holding the 7th place with 25 refugees, and Malta, on the 9th with 20 refugees. Meanwhile, Lebanon and Jordan headed the list with 156 and 72 refugees respectively (UNHCR, 2019).

What’s being called into question is whether 21st century societies are still supposed to face global crises as local phenomena and if worldviews are still meant to be Eurocentric. All the more so if globalisation is seriously considered one of the main traits of present-day society.

2. The social production of internal borders

Borders are created through processes that involve not only spatial and social but also temporal dimensions. The dimension of temporality is observable, for instance, through the duration (expansion or contraction) of legal and administrative procedures related with the regularization and integration of forced migrants.

So far we've seen that there's a double standard when it comes to crossing borders. It's acceptable that thousands of tourists safely arrive by plane to our country every day. On the other hand, though, it's unconvincing to grant migrants, coming from war-torn countries, the possibility to start a new life in our territory. Nevertheless, we keep on failing to recognise the moral fallouts of such mindset since our judgment is often shadowed by the ideology of the Law, a *prescription of reasonable order* (Badiou, 2012) which designates what's normal and what's forbidden.

In order to navigate the host countries' "reasonable order", forced migrants face a number of complex processes, part of what Turner designates as an immobility regime, "exercising surveillance and control over migrants, refugees and other aliens" (2007: 289). Governments enclose and immobilize migration flows through legal and bureaucratic barriers.

Governmentality is the generic term that designates these micro-power relations whereby bodies are controlled by the state through local institutions and authorities. It has been defined as 'the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics, that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target populations' (Foucault, 1991: 102).

Over a century ago, Georg Simmel claimed that the stranger, as a sociological category, is not to be considered in the usual sense of the term, as the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather as the man who comes today and stays tomorrow (1908). Another important contribution to what is today a vast literature about the stranger was Werner Sombart's *Modern Capitalism* (1902). For Sombart immigrants are bearers of innovation thanks to their specific personality traits. Having departed from his old habits and relationships, the stranger finds himself in a desolate land without past. In his brave new world, there's only future and every social interaction is meant to be instrumental, except for the members of his own community, with whom he shares the same adventure (Sombart, 1902). The fact that the hosting community doesn't recognise any sort of citizenship to the stranger, gives rise to a moral indifference between him and society, leading to a moral degradation which is often at the basis of violent acts towards this category.

From a social phenomenological standpoint, Schütz (1971) focuses on those cases in which the newly arrived is willing to be part of the local community and analyses the cultural obstacles that he has to face during the integration process. Under such circumstances, the stranger's social and cultural experiences create a cognitive maze due to the unsuitableness

of his old reference schemes in the new context. His thinking as usual doesn't seem to provide the necessary tools to overcome the challenges posed by social interactions with the new group. Ultimately, this inability to access the new world is seen by natives as a lack of will to adhere to the norms and values of local culture.

One fundamental trait that is particularly representative of today's subjects of forced migration¹ is an intrinsic uncertainty regarding the present and the future. The only certainty that forced migrants have is their past but even that will be often called into question in their daily self-presentation, especially when claiming asylum. In fact, forced migrants often have to wait years in a condition of statelessness and disempowerment, in order to achieve the right to be more than a stranger.

Waiting is a significant dimension in power structures. As stated by Khosravi (2014, w/p), it is "a common feature of bureaucracy (...) Keeping others waiting is also a technique for the regulation of social interactions. It is a manipulation of other's time". Khosravi articulates this notion with Turner's concept of liminality (1969), "the transitory stage between two social positions, between two stages of life". As Jacobsen & Karlsen note, liminality or limbo refers to a "sense of temporal disjuncture, suspension and stagnation". To the authors, waiting is thus "an analytical lens (that) offers new insights into the complex and shifting nature of processes of bordering, belonging, state power, exclusion and inclusion" (2014:2). We can therefore assume that waiting is a state-generated border; it is yet one of the many borders that forced migrants have to cross.

3. The research project and methodology

The present paper's empirical dataset is drawn from a social survey designed for the PandPAS project, which aimed at highlighting asylum seekers and refugees (AS&R) experiences, concerns, needs and expectations in terms of integration (Mateus et al., 2019).² Besides refugees, and in order to have well consolidated accounts of the subjective representations of each actor at play, two more categories were part of the survey: stakeholders and local citizens. For that purpose, qualitative tools were used for data collection within all three major target groups. The study was multi-sited and comprised 6

¹ We adopt the broader terms 'forced migration' and 'forced migrants' to refer to asylum seekers, refugees and other displaced people as a result of conflicts, natural or environmental disasters, or other human rights violations (DeWindt, 2007).

² The project PandPAS focused on research, implement and disseminate sustainable models for the reception and integration of migrants, and to contribute to further improving migration policies and practices in Europe. Carried out over a two-year period (October 2017-September 2019), the project was promoted by a partnership of six organisations in five countries (Croatia, Cyprus, Slovenia, Italy and Portugal), which included municipalities, universities and non-governmental organisations. In addition to the research that informs this text, the project also developed a video documentary based on the experiences of refugees resettled in project partners' cities, available at <https://youtu.be/GxVhL00HNpo>.

European cities: Padova and Venice (Italy), Maribor (Slovenia), Zagreb (Croatia), Nicosia (Cyprus) and Lisbon (Portugal). In this text we will focus mainly on AS&R and stakeholders within the Portuguese context.³

The Portuguese AS&R group included 14 interviewees including 9 subjects under subsidiary protection, 2 subjects with refugee status and 3 in other situations⁴. Out of those 14 subjects, 10 were male and 4 were female. Concerning the country of birth, there were 10 Syrians, 1 Iraqi, 1 Eritrean, 1 Palestinian and 1 Cuban.⁵

Portugal has historically received few refugees and for this reason is a unique case study in the context of southern Europe. Due to its peripheral position on migration routes, it was the EU country with the lowest number of asylum applications before 2015. In 2016, Portugal received 1.397 applications for asylum and 1.750 in 2017 (SEF, 2018). Eritreans, Syrians, Ukrainians and Iraqis constitute a significant part of this population. They have been hosted in facilities provided by municipalities, NGOs and other local organisations, with a very diverse set of outcomes. Despite this increase, the number of asylum requests per capita remains modest when compared internationally.

4. Borders of language

Forced migrants' integration is severely limited by linguistic boundaries, and by legal, administrative, and bureaucratic cultures of exclusion. Such obstacles constitute "borders of language" and "borders of bureaucracy", external barriers that are experienced and internalized by forced migrants in their everyday lives which limit chances of integration into wider society through linguistic and status exclusion.

As language capital becomes increasingly acknowledged for its role in mediating migration pathways, so does national language proficiency in stimulating social cohesion, even in multilingual cities and contexts. According to Baba and Dahl-Jørgensen (2013:61), language is a "boundary phenomenon that is used by institutional actors (e.g. employers, the State) to discriminate among migrants".

For forced migrants in Lisbon, learning Portuguese can be particularly challenging and difficult, despite the fact that language learning programmes have been organized. In fact, there must be minimum number of participants for the course to start, but since asylum

3 Data collection took place over an 8-month period between September 2018 and April 2019.

4 While two had a temporary residence permit, which had to be renewed every 6 months, and were still waiting for the subsidiary protection official document to be issued, the third one, who had recently been deported from Germany back to Portugal, didn't have any official documents and was waiting for his case to be analysed.

5 Some of the interviews were mediated by a suitable interpreter, selected according to each interviewee's own language and taking into consideration potential group affiliations that could symbolize oppression.

seekers and refugees are dispersed throughout the country, it is often the case that such requirement isn't fulfilled.

Portugal brought refugees in here, didn't teach them any language courses, and expected them to integrate and find jobs. [Interview no. 9, Syria]

Language difficulties emerged as one of the chief obstacles faced by forced migrants, as it restricts access to employment and hinders other daily life tasks. While interviewees recognized the importance of acquiring Portuguese language skills, they also pointed out the fact that it was particularly difficult process for adult learners due to of lack of training offers, and professional and domestic responsibilities, which impose time constraints.

[the problem is] The organizations working with refugees, the institutions that are handling refugees. Because to them, refugees are only a business and a commodity. This is how they are treating them. For example, they are saying that they don't provide adequate language courses.⁶ [Interview no. 6, Syria]

It's not enough for refugees to be prepared for the job market and life in general. Specially because they don't teach you Portuguese right from the beginning. It's only at the very end – in the last 3 months – that they teach you and it's only for 3 months. [Interview no. 9, Syria]

As stated by Kalocsányiová (2020:1905), “when a speaker moves from a known to an unknown place, which is particularly likely in cases of forced displacement, s/he is made (painfully) aware of the resources s/he does not have.” Forced migrants claimed that not knowing, or not learning, the local language can equally compromise the access to basic rights.

If he goes there, they would dismiss him and say «OK, you should make an appointment first», but he can't because he can't speak the language and in that sense he feels that he doesn't have the same rights as people who speak the language. [Interview no. 4, Iraq]

Interviewees also report that language training programmes don't meet specific needs of adult forced migrants, and lack adequate teaching tools and learning contents. The available courses are either too basic or too advanced. Due to a high heterogeneity of the class (different nationalities, different literacy levels, different language levels, etc.), the courses' structure doesn't promote an engagement from the behalf of students, leading to a loss of interest or a growing sense of frustration.

There are some things that politicians need to improve. For example, learning the Portuguese language. And it can't be just 150 hours and say «That's enough» or wait until they find a teacher... 4 months, 6 months, 1 year without having language courses. I think that's wrong. Integration starts with learning Portuguese language. A person that doesn't speak Portuguese is never going to be integrated in local society. [Interview no. 10, Eritrea]

The organization said: “the program finished” (...) imagine, someone in one organization he saw me since 1 year ago and he asked me “do you speak Portuguese now?” and I told

6 Third person quotes stand for the interpreter's oral account of the interviewee's answer.

him “no (...) what you do for me to speak Portuguese?” he told me “I send you 5 weeks or 45 days” (...) but five weeks or 45 days is nothing... [Interview no. 6, Syria]

Although language training is usually part of the hosting organization’s programme, there were three cases in which interviewees had to seek for lessons themselves. The same happens when subjects finish the first course and want to continue learning Portuguese.

When he came here he was received by the Câmara Municipal [City Council] de L. and he was put in S. J. M. [another city], in a house with other people. He said that the situation wasn't all too bad at the time, however they stayed there for over 8/9 months and he said that the formal procedures were going very bad, too slow. They didn't receive residence cards, they didn't start language courses, they were just sleeping, eating, drinking, without doing anything. He went to the organization, asked for Portuguese courses and they told him to go to the streets and learn Portuguese. He didn't do anything, that lasted for 8 to 9 months. [Interview no. 9, Syria]

Speaking the local language is a strong predictor of a successful integration (Chiswick and Miller, 2015). Language is, therefore, an instrument in immigration policy-making, which reveals (or not) governmental strategic thinking. The absence of broad and effective language learning programmes together with obstacles to its implementation and lack of investment, produce borders of exclusion that forced migrants cannot cross nor overcome alone.

As a foreigner, when I went to the immigration services, I had to bear with everything. «You don't know how to read?», a clerk has the courage to tell someone «You don't know how to read? Are you dumb? Are you illiterate?». When that position exists it's because there's an institutional arrogance that allows the clerk to treat the foreigner in a pejorative way, because the government covers for the clerk. [Interview no. 5, Cuba]

Language proficiency is a critical factor affecting integration. The barriers for language learning are exclusionary tactics that stall the integration process of forced migrants. They also fuel negative perceptions and attitudes within the host society, and open space for segregation and discrimination in daily life. As noted by Peirce (1995:13), “it is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time”.

6. Borders of bureaucracy

The “borders of bureaucracy” delay and restrain integration through status exclusion. The waiting period or “suspended time” is widely reported in forced migration studies, and has been analysed as an intentional dismissive policy (Kobelinsky, 2014).

Generally, bureaucracy is the reason why the asylum request procedure and integration plan is slower and longer. Forced migrants have to wait many months, sometimes even years before receiving a final decision regarding their requests. In the meantime, their lives and possibilities to plan for the future are “suspended” until further notice. The decision on their

asylum claim is unknown and, therefore, uncertainty about the possibility of staying in the country often results in situations of frustration, anxiety, idleness and lack of motivation. In some cases, the discourse on uncertainty is replaced by a form of “cruel optimism” (Berlant, 2011).⁷

Where will you be after one year and a half as a refugee? You will speak a little bit of Portuguese, you're going to find, in my opinion, a normal work with a salary of five hundred or six hundred euro in some supermarket or restaurant. But that is not what people left their country for. [Interview no. 2, Syria]

After being admitted to the host country, forced migrants find themselves again and again in liminal areas. To cross these borders, they are dependent on third parties, entities, technicians, officials. Forced migrants end up putting pressure on institutions to accelerate the dynamics of institutional and social transformation. Yet, institutions aren't responsive. Their inaction pushes back and establishes new borders that perpetuate exclusion.

The organization (...) received us and put us in a hotel in Praça de Espanha. The hotel is very bad. But the problem is that they told us: «OK, have yourselves a good rest, that we will come back tomorrow» (...). The day before no one came, two or three days after, no one came. After 15 days, no one came. I was here for the first time, knew nothing about it. [Interview no. 1, Syria]

In Portugal, the access to public services and the labour market depends on having a valid temporary residence permit (ARP), which must be renewed several times until there is a final decision on the asylum claim. Despite the processing time being heterogeneous across regional offices, it has been regarded by all forced migrants as a hard challenge. The fact that “some people have been waiting for one year, some for two years” for an official decision either “about the social security number (or) about granting the refugee status.” (Interview no. 10, Eritrea) is an indicator of the delays experienced by forced migrants, caused by an institutional slowdown.

So what he was waiting for was this plastic official (residence) card which would entitle him for all of these things. And he's saying that in Greece they were promised to be handed this (residence) card immediately after they arrived here, but it took him 2 years so he feels like he was treated as if he entered the country illegally.” [Interview no. 4, Iraq]

When prompted about the negative aspects about Portugal as a hosting country, many of the interviewed stated that “there's a lot of bureaucracy and that documents are always delayed” (Interview no. 4, Iraq). These frequent delays in terms of institutional responsiveness towards an increased number of individual requests undermines the access to important realms of integration, such as the labour market. Additionally, a lack of institutional preparation is stressed. In fact, as one of interviewees claimed,

⁷ Berlant (2011) refers to a sort of patience that enables to suspend questions about the severity of the present time.

Public servants don't have that much experience with refugees. They are experienced in working with foreigners but not with refugees. (Interview no. 4, Iraq)

In other instances, it was possible to observe the dissonance that the specificity of these cases, together with the incapacity of institutions to adapt to the high speeds of change, produce on an institutional level. As illustrated in the following example, though theoretically speaking it should be possible to work with a temporary residence permit, technically the holders of this document are excluded from that possibility:

Before he had this residence card, he had a temporary residence permit for 6 months that didn't entitle him to many things. Although he was allowed to work, he couldn't get a social security number, he couldn't open a bank account. Many institutions didn't even recognize the document. (Interview no. 4, Iraq)

Examination of the process for acquiring refugee status takes between six and eight months, but can last for more than a year, during which time the refugee's life is put on hold. It is not uncommon for the temporary residence permit to expire several times and social support to cease. These situations, which ultimately translate into limitations in terms of individual self-determination, are further highlighted by the institutional delays experienced by subjects regarding the examination and drafting of legal documents:

They said «We have accepted the asylum, now you just need the card. Wait one or two months and you'll have it». It's been one year now. They have no system; you know? (Interview no. 7, Syria)

To 'have no system' is how interviewees assess the quality of institutional capacity to enact congruent policies and bureaucratic procedures. As stressed by Hoag (2011:82) "bureaucracies are always at some level opaque, inscrutable, and illogical to both 'insider' and 'outsider' alike. This opacity empowers bureaucracies and bureaucrats — they become gatekeepers, with control over the flow of information and resources". Instead of enabling access to important domains of social inclusion, such as work, it produces new borders and odd constraints. They prevent an individual and structural relief from situations of dependency. Governments are inefficient to readapt the bureaucratic system to a society that is increasingly complexified and contingent due to its accelerated nature.

Me and refugees don't need help. Refugees need opportunity. And it's really a big difference between them. I don't want to, like, touch on my shoulder and say «sorry, what to you need? ». I don't want that. I need opportunity (...) the basics to start your future. When I say future, it means work or education. Those two thing give you means for you to have a good life. [Interview no. 2, Syria]

Closing remarks

It has been our effort to demonstrate in this paper our initial proposition: that highly bureaucratized systems act as a further border that forced migrants must somehow cross. As we've seen through the experiences of forced migrants in Lisbon, what happens on an

institutional level is an inability to provide a timely response to the emergence of new social problems. Language and bureaucracy were used as dimensions through which explore “borders” within the host countries, in order to better understand how such dimensions, illustrate immobility regimes, and control exercises over forced migrants. It was shown that the inexistence of a stable and effective learning programme for Portuguese language and the long length and instability of the regularization processes function as external internalized borders hindering integration and decreasing connections with the wider host community.

The systematic inefficiency of institutions to translate refugee-hosting policies and integration programmes into practice, or the legalistic approach to welcome, are just a few of many other obstacles that lead to situations of limited autonomy and potential alienation (Scheibelhofer & Täubig, 2019). Bureaucracy continues to restrict the movement, the aspirations and the integration of people even after arrival to the hosting country. As noted by Povinelli (2011: 190), the ‘incitement to wait, to be patient, to bracket harm until the impasse has been resolved’ is a power exercise.

The inefficiency of organisations in providing support and developing more suitable welcoming practices has showed the limitations of highly bureaucratised systems in responding to the demands of increasingly complex and pluralistic societies. On the individual level, forced migrants are required to wait, continuously engage with the system and to manage precarious lives. Nevertheless, the temporalities of waiting must also be perceived as manifold. Waiting can be actively experienced. Povinelli (2011) reminds us that the necessary endurance to achieve integration and autonomy also allows migrants to be something else than simply defeated by the circumstances in their condition of entrapment and existential immobility: the waiting also holds hope. And hope can constitute a form of engagement with the future in contexts characterized by crisis, conflict, uncertainty and immobility (Kleist & Jansen, 2016).

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