

Value extraction through refugee carcerality: Data, labour and financialised accommodation

EPD: Society and Space

2023, Vol. 41(2) 191–209

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DOI: 10.1177/02637758231157397

journals.sagepub.com/home/epd**Lauren L Martin** 

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Abstract

In this article, we argue that modes of labour and value extraction have been under-researched and under-theorised in critical geographical research on migration, asylum and refugee humanitarianism. We examine data production, voluntary work programmes and financialised asylum housing as key sites through which value is extracted from asylum-seekers' unpaid and reproductive activities. We argue that specific forms of migrant carcerality are, firstly, grounded in migrants' and asylum-seekers' carceral conditions and exclusion from paid work. Secondly, we argue that subtle forms of coercion and conditionality at work in asylum hosting require asylum-seekers' invisible and unpaid labour. Thirdly, we show how financialised real estate firms further capitalise on government contracts for asylum housing, rendering accommodation as another site of value extraction. We thereby expand conceptualisations of carceral economies of migration control beyond detention and confinement and elaborate the specific forms of labour and value extraction emerging from migration, asylum and refugee governance.

Keywords

Refugees, humanitarianism, value, labour, data, extraction, carceral geography

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Introduction

January 2015, San Miniato, Italy: a group of seven asylum-seekers cleaning the streets without pay decided to stop doing that unpaid labour. This refusal points to, we argue, an under-appreciated terrain of struggle in migrant, asylum-seeker and refugee governance: the extraction of labour and time from refugees and asylum-seekers through the conditions of their humanitarian aid. The unpaid cleaning activity was part of a ‘volunteering’ programme promoted by the municipality and the Catholic non-governmental organisation *Misericordia* that housed them. Their collective refusal was motivated by the fact that they were not remunerated for the work done. Both the local authorities and *Misericordia* were upset about asylum-seekers’ collective refusal: in their view this work was the asylum-seekers’ opportunity to integrate in the local community. In Italy, asylum-seekers and refugees are encouraged to participate in ‘voluntary’ activities and, thus, in being good citizens without citizens’ rights. These activities have been designated by the Italian government as unwaged ‘socially useful jobs’.¹ Volunteering programmes for asylum-seekers have proliferated across Italy: municipalities and local authorities collaborate with cooperatives and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that run accommodation centres. The initiatives are presented as ways for promoting refugees’ integration, being accepted by the community and contributing to the local economy. Voluntary activities for asylum-seekers in different cities include cleaning the streets, collecting garbage, cleaning drainage canals and doing maintenance works in public gardens. The activities proposed are usually strenuous and unskilled. As such, refugees are encouraged to enter work as part of a clearly racialised labour economy (Lewis et al., 2015). Simultaneously, this volunteering work reframes them from people in need of protection to potentially productive labourers. Becoming workers in this way, however, refugees are expected to accept work as a gift, not to seek meaningful work that matches their skills or aspirations (Spathopoulou and Tazzioli, 2021). And yet, many migrants do not accept ‘volunteering’ because they perceive that they are co-opted into working for free. In turn, their active refusal is discredited by state authorities and NGOs as an act of ingratitude and as a proof of un-deservingness.

Asylum-seekers’ refusals teach us something critical: that the extraction of value from asylum-seeker and refugee labour, data generation and housing are under-appreciated in research on refugee governance. Pushing recent work on the carceral economies of migration control and the political economies of migration industries, we investigate modes of value extraction in refugee humanitarianism and how these are grounded in carceral practices of mobility containment. Drawing on examples from Italy, Greece and the UK, we show how the capitalisation of asylum-seekers’ lives can operate in context-specific ways, through ‘voluntary’ unpaid labour, data extraction activities and financialised housing. While each example illustrates a distinct assemblage, tracing the ‘contour lines’ (Katz, 2001) between them reveals under-theorised modes of extraction specific to asylum-seeker and refugees’ conditions of destitution, precarity and tenuous long-term integration. Second, and relatedly, we contend that processes of value extraction in refugee humanitarianism involve the socio-economic destitution and vulnerability of asylum-seekers, which is partly produced by the conditions of their accommodation. In this article, we ask: to what extent do refugees’ destitution and carcerality underpin mechanisms of value production? How are modes of value production reconfigured in refugee humanitarianism through data extraction, labour exploitation and financial real estate accommodation?

Since states declared a ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe in 2015 with the arrival of Syrian war escapees, the EU has progressively shifted towards a politics of sheer containment. Of course, border violence and measures aimed at preventing migrants from reaching Europe

did not start in 2015; over the last three decades the EU has consolidated border offshoring policies and measures to enforce deportations, push-back and detention. We observe a partial shift in states' blatant violations of human rights and international law in the Mediterranean Sea as well as at Europe's borders. Simultaneously, the so-called 'migration industry' has flourished and, alongside private contractors in charge of running detention centres, technology companies promote apps, data collection and digital innovation at the borders and in refugee camps. The refugee crisis has further boosted an asylum industry, specifically related to the confinement of asylum-seekers in camps, as well as in remote spaces, such as islands. Refugees' carcerality and their state-produced destitution have become sources and conditions of value extraction for different actors.

Emerging research on political economies of migration control has drawn attention to the privatisation of migrant detention and the border security industry and has investigated the economic profit made by private contractors (Andersson, 2014; Conlon and Hiemstra, 2022; Gill et al., 2018; Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019; Martin, 2021). Focussing on spaces of confinement, conceptualisation of these circuits of value assumed explicit confinement. Yet, the politics of protracted migration confinement requires that we take the 'carceralities of non-prison places' (Cassidy et al., 2020: 1082) more seriously. The capitalisation of migrants' containment takes place not only at the border and in detention centres but also in urban refugee accommodation (Sanyal, 2012), dispersal schemes (Darling, 2022), electronic monitoring (Boe, 2020) and refugee camps.

In this article, we emphasise carceral topologies: the multiple spatial formations made possible through new combinations of disciplinary practices, surveillance and mobility constraints. We draw on feminist economists LeBaron and Roberts' (2010) definition of carcerality, as

the various ways in which people's current and future life choices and possibilities are being locked into hierarchical and unfree capitalist social relations and, further, the ways in which the social and physical mobility of certain sectors of the population are being constrained through these relations. (LeBaron and Roberts, 2010: 19)

We bring this broader conceptualisation of carcerality into conversation with new work on value extraction in order to theorise value and labour beyond for-profit detention and confinement. To do so, we investigate how value production in refugee humanitarianism is grounded in practices that extract 'more from less' (Neilson and Rossiter, 2022: 12). That is, we argue that refugees are kept in a state of protracted dependency and socio-economic destitution which is essential for extracting value from refugees. We attend to modes of value extraction that do not necessarily generate monetary profit but, rather, work to produce needs or that are incorporated in data-driven economies.

More specifically, we draw attention to value extraction processes in refugee humanitarianism where the governing of human mobility and the control over social reproduction processes are strictly connected to each other (Rigo, 2022). The spatialities of this value extraction include but exceed fenced enclosures, producing modes of 'accumulation by immobilisation' (Achnich, 2022a). Accumulation by immobilisation, Achnich contends, is related to the kinds of movement that emerge as a result of immobilisation: a stop and go rhythm entailing struggles, evasion and the payment of money to move on and 'refers to the exploitation of indentured and unpaid labour, for specific durations, in a carceral landscape through which migrants have to move' (Achnich, 2022a: 110). Such a conceptual framework offers analytical tools for exploring multiple extractive operations at stake in refugee humanitarianism and modes of value extraction that cannot be fully captured by focussing

on privatisation or the migration industry. This approach expands previous work on carceral economies of migration control to include (in)voluntary labour, data extraction and rent. We contend that these practices constitute processes of valuation in refugee humanitarianism: value extraction *is grounded in* and *builds on* asylum-seekers' destitution and carceral economies. This article thereby contributes a novel conceptual approach to research on political economies of humanitarianism, migration control and labour exploitation.

The article first articulates our countertopographical approach and then reviews existing literature on migration industry and refugee economies: drawing on that work we point to modes of value production that are predicated on refugees' destitution and carcerality, and do not necessarily generate profit. We develop the argument over the three subsequent sections that focus on, respectively, labour extraction, data extraction and extraction of value from financialised asylum accommodation. We conclude by arguing that a critique of the carceral topologies of refugee governance must take seriously the mutual entanglements between carceral mechanisms and the multiple processes of value extraction.

Methodology

In this article, we draw connections between places and, in doing so, trace contour lines between the extraction of data, labour and rent in refugee humanitarianism. This article emerges from the authors' ongoing conversations since 2014 across separate research projects and an ongoing collaboration between the two authors spanning 2017–2023. Our projects have included: 12 interviews with 12 Greek and international NGOs (Athens and Lesvos), interview with the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum, interview with UNHCR Greece (Athens), site visits to Greek hotspots (Lesvos) and refugee camps (Ritsona, Malakasa) and Italian reception centres (Bologna, Pisa); interviews with settled refugees (UK); visits to hotel accommodation (London, UK); drop-in centres, employment programmes and asylum support coordination forums (Northeast UK); analysis of parliamentary hearings with housing contractors (UK), media and NGO reports (Greece, Italy, UK). These projects drew our attention to the changing spatialities of enclosure, constraints on moving around and, especially, conditions on the receipt of cash assistance. Moreover, it drew our attention to alternative logics of accumulation, quite distinct from profit or rent accumulation theorised by political economists.

To make sense of these emerging practices, we work through Cindi Katz's (2001) countertopographical approach, which analyses the situatedness of distinct places and how global processes work to produce that distinctiveness. Katz refuses the opposition between local and global, the tendency to valorise one over the other, or the choice between particular and generalisable case studies. She replaces this dichotomy with her analysis of 'contour lines' between places. Countertopography 'necessarily situates places in their broader context and in relation to other areas or geographic scales, offering a means of understanding structure and process...to see their intersections with material social practices at other scales of analysis' (Katz, 2001: 1228). This approach allows us to trace the localised manifestations of universalising discourses and global processes and to ask what work those universalising discourses do (see also Tsing, 2005).

Where Katz analyses globalisation and the transformations of social reproduction, waged work and household labour that accompanied it, we analyse the transformations in refugee humanitarianism, itself predicated on claims to human rights and a global jurisdiction for those rights (even if that remains aspirational in practice). As Mount (2011) and Conlon (2011) have shown, asylum-seekers' differentiation works to produce the geographies of enclosure, mobility and sovereignty that place, materially, people in sites that are

‘neither here nor there’, neither in state territory nor outside of state authority, neither arrived nor on the move. For this reason, Katz’s countertopographical approach offers a methodology of connection between spatial practices of refugee and asylum-seeker assistance and, moreover, a way of theorising how the proliferation of local initiatives is precisely how refugee humanitarianism operates. For refugee humanitarianism, this approach allows us to theorise similar practices at work in different places (such as post-distribution monitoring (PDM), asylum-seeker and refugee volunteering) and connections between them (such as policy transfer, INGO programming, or global outsourcing firms).

Katz’s countertopographical approach thereby enables us to perform a double move in this article: to identify translocal practices and rationalities *not yet recognised* as constitutive elements of emerging political economies of refugee humanitarianism. To extend Katz’s work in this way, we draw on Mezzadra and Neilson’s (2019: 162) analysis of the operations of capital, which works across two levels of analysis: first, a ‘grounded, detailed analysis of how operations of extraction. . . interact and collide’ and second, ‘commonalities and underlying logics that manifest themselves in the many resonances that emerge among operations of capital’. Drawing from feminist political economy and methodology, we ask how universalising conceptions of deserving refugees play out through unpaid and underpaid work programmes, data production and extraction and valorising migrants’ time as rent.

Analysing extractive operations through a countertopographical approach, this article moves between ‘concrete abstractions’ of value, labour and economic operations and specific, place-based examples of refugee humanitarianism in Europe. Methodologically, we do not claim our examples to be indicative, paradigmatic nor exemplary, but use them illustratively, to show the multiple ways that labour, value and data extraction can operate in refugee humanitarianism. As such, we do not offer a full ethnographic account of extractive operations *in situ*: rather, the common practices we observe only became visible through our collaboration and analysis across distinct places. In other work, we detail humanitarian data extraction and carceral economies in specific sites (Coddington et al., 2020; Martin, 2021; Tazzioli, 2019, 2022) and we know of similar practices, discourses and rationalities in refugee responses in Jordan, Lebanon and the European response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Tracing contour lines between practices and sites, we identified examples of value extraction that were not well captured by recent literature on migration industries or privatisation. Individually, these examples appear localised, particular and anecdotal and, for this reason, remain under-theorised. Connecting them brings, we argue, novel and hidden modes of extraction into view.

Labour, value and data extraction in refugee humanitarianism

In this section, we position our argument in relation to three key problems mobilising current research on the political economies of state efforts to control and extract value from people on the move: (1) the emerging role of the for-profit security sector in state responses to refugee mobilities; (2) the concomitant growth of data-based and digitised asylum processes through state outsourcing to the private, for-profit sector; (3) undocumented migrants vulnerable to exploitation in precarious labour arrangements. To be clear, this previous research has been important to documenting and theorising changing power relationships between states, mobile people and capital. These strands of research have mapped the capitalisation of rights regimes by offering services that states are no longer willing to implement themselves. In this sense, the literature has tracked the neoliberalisation of border and immigration enforcement, which has occurred alongside the privatisation of social housing, elderly care, healthcare, education and other public services. In some

work, political economy terminology is used to metaphorically describe the assemblage of actors, institutions, circuits of value and modes of extraction at work (e.g. Achtinch, 2022b; Andersson, 2018).

In other work, capitalism is a driving logic, not a metaphor, a force that explains the direction of travel in the increasing carcerality and datafication of migration management. In either case, core concepts from political economy are imported into political geographies of migration without de- and reconstructing them in relation to economic relationships specific to refugee contexts. With exceptions discussed below, this research does not tend to ask if these concepts capture the power relations at work in asylum, refugee and migration control in particular, but to presume that because private actors are involved, the same private sector or profit-oriented logics explain changes in the migration control sector. To better understand the political economic relationships under construction, we argue that both labour and extraction deserve more attention alongside privatisation and profit. However, these concepts require some further specification to fully account for the juridico-political position of asylum-seekers and refugees, in particular.

We point to three main problematics that drive research on the political economy of migration. First, literature on carceral economies of asylum-seekers' care/control have emphasised the outsourcing and *privatisation* of detention centres (Campesi, 2018; Hiemstra and Conlon, 2017; Ferrer-Gallardo et al., 2015; Gilman and Romero, 2018; Golash-Boza, 2015;). Likewise, the 'migration industry' literature has pointed to how private actors play a crucial role in the humanitarian-security complex; and the implementation of new technologies of control is the result of the partnership between states and private actors in containing migration (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sorensen, 2013; Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019). Scholars who focus on migration infrastructures, 'the systematically inter-linked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility' (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014: 124), have analysed how brokers and labour recruiter companies capitalise on and extract value from migrants on the move (Leurs, 2019; Lindquist, 2017). According to theories of the immigration-industrial complex, value extraction processes are not narrowed to the economic profit made by private actors involved in the prison sector. Rather, these processes include a wider array of actors and, crucially, contextually-specific racialised differentiation and political ideology (Conlon and Hiemstra, 2022; Doty and Wheatley, 2013; Golash-Boza, 2015). Meanwhile, some refugee host countries leverage their situation to gain foreign aid and investment, using refugee populations as assets – and threats – in negotiations (Freier et al., 2021). Recent World Bank initiatives, promoted by migration studies scholars, have recommended the creation of Special Economic Zones to attract foreign capital to employ refugees (World Bank, 2022; see also Castle-Miller, 2018). In these scenarios, special territorial zones are created in which refugees can work, but employment is limited to jobs offered there.

The second problematic driving political geographies and economies of migration is the datafication and digitalisation of border inspections and refugee processing. Scholars have foregrounded the centrality of high-tech companies and financial actors in refugee humanitarianism (Cheesman, 2020; Tazzioli, 2022), and the increasing 'data craving' in the refugee market (Lemberg-Pedersen and Haioty, 2020). The partial digitalisation of asylum procedures in some countries – such as Greece – turns often into a barrier for migrants who want to claim asylum (Aradau, 2022). Scholars have interrogated the extent to which the use of digital technologies in refugee governmentality has reshaped digital borders and transformed the ways in which surveillance and tracking of unruly movements are enforced (Jacobsen, 2015; Leese et al., 2022). For instance, the use of digital identity tools in many refugee camps and the systematic implementation of biometric technologies for refugees'

identification purposes, raise questions about the blurred boundaries between privacy and protection on the one hand, and control on the other hand (Weitzberg et al., 2021). The so-called ‘digital innovation’ and modes of humanitarian experimentation through biometrics contribute to generate a new range of harms (Sandvik et al., 2017). This article pushes this debate further by illustrating how migrants are invited to contribute data about their destitution, thereby generating data whose value relies upon the reproduction of that very destitution.

The third problematic animating political economies of migration focuses on the il/legal-ity of migrant labour. Immigration, citizenship and mobility control regimes have been central to the institutionalisation of racial difference and colonial hierarchies (Picozza, 2021) through the binding of ethnicity to nationality to citizenship and the multiplication of labour migrant categories (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). In relation to labour, differentiation allows some groups to be systematically paid less than others, to work in more harmful and riskier conditions, to live in precarious or poor conditions and to face violence in and between these spaces. In this respect, deportation ‘is not designed to remove all unauthorized migrants. Instead, it is designed to remove surplus labor and to keep labor compliant’ (Golash-Boza, 2015: 145). This is labour made and kept cheap (De Genova, 2013) and surplus value is extracted precisely from the gap between what migrant labourers and their legalised counterparts might be paid. In this strand of research, anti-migrant and anti-refugee policies are interpreted as operations of capital insofar as they create hyper-precarious conditions (Lewis et al., 2015) for migrants. Scholars have shown this labour exploitation of illegalised migrants across different job sectors, such as agriculture (Peano, 2017), construction (Hanieh, 2010), logistics (Cuppini et al., 2015) and care (May et al., 2007).

Thus, political economic approaches argue that immigration law *serves* capital, but they generally do not theorise asylum reception, migrant detention or border enforcement as productive in themselves, nor how they are capable of producing new or unique relations of labour, value circulation or extraction. Nor is immigration enforcement understood in those studies as a conduit of value itself. This has methodological and theoretical implications: treated as a background condition, rather than practices capable of reworking power relations or generating novel modes of extraction. These approaches theorise migration and asylum regimes as derivative of a capitalist state. As a result, migration scholars use capitalist logics to explain the privatisation of border, asylum and immigration enforcement practices without interrogating whether and how those logics operate in these contexts.

Conceptualising extractive operations in refugee humanitarianism

In this article, we push other critical migration scholars to utilise more nuanced approaches to capitalism, specifically to ask what novel forms of labour and extractive operations – which may or may not be directly productive or explicitly profit-oriented – are at work within refugee and asylum contexts, rather than how those contexts serve capitalist operations elsewhere. Migrants’ continual exposure to illegalisation, combined with their dependence on humanitarian actors, turn asylum-seekers into sources of value extraction. In other words, any commodification, valuation or rents rely on administrative and bureaucratic practices that categorise people as subjects of migration and border control, as detainable, potentially excludable and legally destitute (Coddington et al., 2020; Martin, 2021). For asylum-seekers and refugees, their conditional recognition as vulnerable people makes them dependent on humanitarian organisations and state agencies to meet basic needs.

Following Mezzadra and Neilson, extractive operations are at stake ‘not only when the operations of capital plunder the materiality of the earth and biosphere, but also when they encounter and draw upon forms and practices of human cooperation and sociality that are external to them’ (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019: 188). Rather, they show how humanitarian logics can enable contextually-specific recombinations of economic operations of value production (Ouma, 2016): exchange, production and circulation. These economies are not always fully driven by capitalist or profit logics: rather they constitute new ‘frontiers of capital’, that ‘register both the sense in which something always remains beyond capital’s grasp – some activity or substance that has not yet been appropriated or capitalised’ and ‘the dependency of capital on conditions that are not its own’ (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019: 33–34). The following sections highlight three modes of extraction in refugee humanitarianism (though we remain ambivalent about the extent to which they are inherently capitalist). We argue that these efforts to valorise refugee life operate in and through the very conditions that keep asylum-seekers and refugees destitute. Below, we explore how various forms of invisible and reproductive labour, data production and housing simultaneously valorise migrant data, labour and time and thereby reproduce the carceral topologies that enable their destitution.

Data extraction

To illustrate how extractive operations work in refugee humanitarianism, we begin with refugee data and knowledge production. We focus here on the Greek refugee context, where Tazzioli conducted fieldwork between 2017 and 2021 on the Cash Assistance Programme for asylum-seekers. Greece is not an exceptional case study, nor a paradigmatic one, but rather an illustrative example of the way in which data extraction is repeatedly conducted in refugee camps and how these concern asylum-seekers’ conducts and activities as such – and not only their biometric identity. In 2017, the European Commission implemented a Cash Assistance Programme to support asylum-seekers stranded in Greece. UNHCR managed the Cash Assistance Programme until September 2021, after which time it was transferred to Greek authorities. The programme consists of monthly financial support given to asylum-seekers and uploaded on a Mastercard prepaid card. After receiving the monthly financial support, asylum-seekers are interpellated by humanitarian actors as card beneficiaries. UNHCR, in collaboration with NGOs, used to conduct PDM activities in Greece on a regular basis, following templates used in other countries as well. According to the UN agency, PDM activities serve as

a mechanism to collect and understand refugees’ feedback on the assistance provided by humanitarian agencies like UNHCR [...] to identify challenges and constraints experienced and seek refugees’ feedback on any improvements required to implement similar assistance again in the future. (UNHCR, 2018b: 5)

PDM activities include surveys, focus groups and individual interviews that ask asylum-seekers how they use monthly financial support, as well as about their life coping strategies. Asylum-seekers’ feedback is then framed and channelled by pre-established boxes.

Asylum-seekers in Greece receive a survey of 130 closed-ended multiple-choice questions, covering demographic data, basic needs, food security, education, shelter, livelihood, community relations and safety, dignity and choice. While some questions revolve around the use of prepaid cards and how asylum-seekers spend the monthly financial support, others concern their survival strategies. For instance, the survey asks ‘has anyone in your

household had to employ any of the following strategy in the past month, and if so how often?' The multiple-choice sections that asylum-seekers need to address are: 'have household members under the age of 15 in employment', 'household members above 18 years old accepting risky, dangerous or exploitative works' and 'asked for money from strangers (begging)' (UNHCR, 2018a). Hence, questions extract information about asylum-seekers' survival strategies: that is, asylum-seekers' behaviour and the conducts become objects of knowledge extraction. The results of PDM activities are published by UNHCR and are used for generating reports about refugee population profiles, for meeting donor accountability requirements, and for providing evidence of beneficiary feedback mechanisms.

PDM activities are not specific to the Greek context and are widely used by UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies across the world. PDM activities are a crucial example of the way in which data extraction processes concern multiple aspect of refugees' lives. In fact, the Greek case sheds light on a broader 'participatory turn' in refugee humanitarianism, through which asylum-seekers are interpellated and asked to contribute to their own governmentality by providing information about their life coping strategies (e.g., UNHCR, 2002). With little apparent benefit to recipients, refugee surveys are now key in refugee governance (Betts, 2014; Kaiser, 2004), operating more as extractive processes producing what we have called elsewhere *extractive humanitarianism* (Tazzioli, 2019).

Similar processes of data extraction from asylum-seekers take place in the UK: destitute asylum-seekers in the UK can apply for income and housing assistance under Sections 4, 95 and 98 of the Immigration and Asylum Act of 1999.² These sections offer assistance to asylum-seekers who can prove that they are destitute and have no access to family, friends or savings that may provide for their basic needs. If approved, asylum-seekers receive weekly top-ups on the ASPEN debit card and are assigned housing somewhere in the UK's asylum accommodation estate (which we return to below). Section 95 recipients, asylum-seekers with active claims, may withdraw cash at an ATM and purchase what they need with cash. Section 4 recipients cannot withdraw cash but must use the card in a shop. The ASPEN card is not linked to a bank account but operates as a prepaid debit card and financial transactions are processed via MasterCard. UK-based PrePaid Financial Services manages the point-of-sale transactions and shares transaction data with the UK Home Office.

The UK Home Office, the agency responsible for adjudicating asylum claims and enforcing immigration and border laws, monitors card usage to ascertain asylum-seekers' mobility. If someone stops using their card, the Home Office assumes that asylum-seekers have other forms of support and therefore do not qualify as destitute. If asylum-seekers use their cards too far from their assigned housing, the Home Office assumes that the asylum-seeker lives elsewhere, invalidating their need for destitution assistance (Poggrund, 2019; Privacy International, 2021). And so, while prepaid cards increase asylum-seekers' everyday consumer choices, those purchases produce their own surveillance, as transaction data are used to determine location and, by proxy, compliance with the conditions of destitution assistance.

While a data-driven economy and the partial digitalisation of refugee governmentality promised to decrease the need for confinement, as identity and mobility could be tracked remotely, scholars have nevertheless found an increasingly carceral approach to migration at Europe's borders (Mountz, 2020; Stierl, 2021; Tazzioli and Stierl, 2021). With the progressive closure of the Balkan route and the signature of the EU–Turkey Deal in March 2016, Greece re-introduced walled, fenced and barbed-wired facilities for women, men and children seeking asylum in Europe. Both refugee camps on the mainland and hotspots on the islands are increasingly turned into spaces of captivity, as the government decided to

fence and enclose most of the camps in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Spathopoulou and Carastathis, 2020). In the UK, the Home Office has opened the first new detention facility since 2009 in County Durham to contain asylum-seeking women.

Cash assistance programmes thereby incorporate multiple modes of data extraction that produce knowledge about refugee mobilities and livelihoods. In our Greece example, asylum-seekers are expected to contribute to the improvement of their own carceral conditions *for free*, by producing knowledge for humanitarian agencies. In the UK, assistance to asylum-seekers produces enforcement data automatically, so that sharing transaction data is a precondition for accessing Home Office assistance. Thus, refugee humanitarianism is increasingly predicated on extractive operations: data and knowledge are extracted from asylum-seekers' mobility, conducts and bodies. Data extraction in refugee camps takes place not only when asylum-seekers are registered and identified: it occurs throughout their residence in the camp and, more broadly, during their protracted waiting time before knowing the outcome of their asylum claims. The following sections explore two ways of making protracted wait times productive: unpaid labour and rental income.

(Unpaid) labour extraction

We return to our opening example from Italy to highlight the invisible unpaid labour that asylum-seekers are encouraged to do.³ Indeed, 'what distinguishes the Italian case is that it relies so extensively on voluntarism' (Muehlebach, 2011: 65). There, the promotion of 'voluntary' works for asylum-seekers and refugees should be situated within a wider economy of voluntarism in Italy. In 2016, the municipality of Turin signed an agreement with Amiat, a private actor in charge of waste disposal, to involve asylum-seekers in activities of garbage collection: asylum-seekers were expected to work for free one day per week. Local authorities promoted the initiative as an opportunity for asylum-seekers to give something back, in exchange for being hosted and helped in Italy. In Tuscany, where programmes for refugees' 'volunteering' have mushroomed, the NGO Odissea has launched the programme 'Volunteers for common good'. As part of this, asylum-seekers housed by Odissea are offered the opportunity of engaging in a series of unpaid activities such as pruning and cleaning public spaces and general maintenance works. Across these examples, refugees' waiting time becomes folded into a strange gift economy, in which voluntary labour shows gratitude for being hosted during the protracted wait times that render their time problematically under-utilised.

Although, in principle, asylum-seekers' and refugees' employment are regulated by the same contracts as citizens', in practice, enterprises in Italy receive many waivers when hiring asylum-seekers and those with humanitarian protection (Calvellini, 2019). These waivers enable enterprises to hire asylum-seekers and refugees on precarious and low paid contracts through apprenticeships and training activities. Thus, asylum-seekers 'cannot be considered workers, nor can their activities be classified as a work relationship; and, therefore, they cannot benefit from workers' rights' (Topo, 2016: 182). Italian authorities present unpaid labour activities as an opportunity for asylum-seekers to 'reactivate personal resources' and who 'will be prevented from developing passive behaviours and a dependency culture'. As a result, asylum-seeker assistance has become conditional on unpaid 'socially useful works' (Meltingpot, 2017).

Thus, we see a slippage between 'volunteering', waged work, activities remunerated with a minimal 'reimburse of expenses' and hyper-exploitative jobs offered to – and expected of – asylum-seekers. Private actors and cooperatives that run accommodation centres manage both volunteering programmes and schemes to involve asylum-seekers into the job market.

Enterprises are encouraged to temporarily hire asylum-seekers through schemes that do not oblige them to guarantee a stable contract afterwards or that enable them to pay asylum-seekers a very minimal remuneration. According to the schemes promoted by the Italian Ministry of Labour, employers can choose between a range of contract formulas to hire asylum-seekers on a temporary basis and with no guarantees for the future – that is, without guaranteeing asylum-seekers that they will be hired afterwards.

Hence, the Italian case of ‘voluntary’ asylum-seekers’ activity reveals a fundamental ambivalence: voluntary as non-coerced and voluntary as unpaid. The conditional right to asylum and protection is enshrined more concretely in the special protection permit for ‘acts of high civic value’ that the Italian government introduced in 2018. Overall, a sort of ‘fictional citizenship’ narrative sustains the moral economy of refugees’ volunteering: that is, asylum-seekers and refugees are encouraged to work for free *as if* they were citizens who are expected to take part in a civic contract of collaboration to society. Far from being turned into citizens, some are turned into illegalised migrants when their asylum claim is rejected. Thus, the expectation that asylum-seekers should behave as virtuous citizens is at the core of the fictional narrative of volunteering and, at once, unveils its paradox: asylum-seekers are pushed to act as if they were citizens without any promise of getting rights and while many of them are in meanwhile legally and economically destitute (Marchetti, 2020; Yap et al., 2011). Thus, asylum-seekers’ rights have become *conditional rights*: they are expected to give back something to the hosting community, as a condition for being hosted (Marchetti, 2020). These conditional labour rights are also normative and disciplinary: access to support is conditional on participation in ‘voluntary work’, which mobilises a moral economy (Fassin, 2012) in which asylum-seekers earn the privilege of rights.

According to Denning (2010) ‘under capitalism the only thing worse than being exploited is not being exploited’ (Denning, 2010: 79). Yet, he stresses, ‘wageless life’ does not designate individuals who are turned into human waste: rather, they are sources of capitalisation through dispossession and expropriation. Denning questions the binary opposition between employed and unemployed workers, as well as between formal and informal work, pointing to the blurred and intertwined boundaries between these and highlighting continuities in the modes of accumulation (see also Mezzadri, 2021). The participatory confinement and in/voluntary work discussed above cannot be captured by categories of employment/unemployment nor concepts like ‘garbage’, ‘human waste’, or disability that describe populations beyond exploitation and expelled from circuits of accumulation.

In refugee humanitarianism, the boundaries between waged and unwaged work become blurred: asylum-seekers might do remunerated work and, at the same time, be pushed to ‘volunteer’ activities in order to contribute to the refugee community. Feminist literature has insisted on the ‘importance of moving beyond a “wage-centric understanding of exploitation” and has shown how unpaid labor activities are constitutive of global capitalism’ (Mezzadri, 2021: 1187). For Enrica Rigo (2022), analysing the intersection between the government of social reproduction and the control of (unruly) mobility shows how the racialised governing of mobility works by hampering autonomous social reproduction processes. Thus, Rigo’s work enables us to excavate the unpaid labour that underpins asylum-seekers’ ‘voluntary activities’, work they are nudged to do for their own good. In addition, feminist research on unpaid labour has shown how value is generated from unwaged work and social reproduction activities (Adkins and Dever, 2017; Bhattacharyya, 2018; Federici, 2013), pointing to the commodification of care (Gore and LeBaron, 2019).

By activating asylum-seekers’ labour time, asylum-seeking becomes a specific condition of labour-in-waiting. This shows, we argue, how migrants’ time is made valuable, not to themselves, but to those responsible for enforcing constraints on migrants’ everyday

mobilities (Coddington et al., 2020; Khosravi, 2010). These specific forms of labour rely upon carceral practices of discipline, spatial confinement and dispossessed time. The conditions of possibility for these modes of extraction derive precisely from the exceptional legal status of refugees and asylum-seekers, exceedingly long wait times for decisions, and conditional aid and enforced dependence of refugee reception. In short, refugees' lives become primary material for accumulation by dispossession (Hiemstra and Conlon, 2017).

Migrant time as rent: financialised asylum accommodation

We now turn to consider a third extractive mode in refugee governmentality: financialised accommodation. Accommodation, reception and detention produce some of the biggest infrastructural challenges and highest costs associated with asylum claims in the Global North and yet there remains little overlap in research on the financialisation of real estate, housing and infrastructure and asylum, immigration and borders. Here, we argue that cash assistance and shelter constitute a key source of value extraction from asylum-seekers, especially (but not exclusively) in systems that rely on private sector outsourcing. These modes of value extraction derive less from the expenditure of bodily labour, as in the surveys or voluntary work analysed above, and more from the reproductive labour of living. Specifically, housing for destitute asylum-seekers extracts value via rent, which is paid from state agencies to non-state entities subject to contracts for certain levels of occupancy.

While other services may also be subcontracted in these arrangements, housing relies on asylum-seekers' occupation of low-rent housing, which in turn relies upon asylum-seekers reproducing themselves in that housing. Through housing and cash assistance, non-state contractors collect rental income and transaction data, going on to engage in forms of finance that requires the continuation, if not expansion, of this revenue stream. Here, we examine how the ASPEN debit card and privatised asylum-seeker accommodation operate as two interlinked sites of value extraction in the United Kingdom. As described above, Sections 95 and 98 of the Immigration and Asylum Act of 1999 offer assistance to asylum-seekers who can prove that they are destitute and have no access to family, friends or savings that may provide for their basic needs. Called 'no choice' or dispersal housing in the UK, accommodation for destitute asylum-seekers has been entirely privatised and is currently managed by three property companies: Mears Group, ClearSprings Ready Homes and Serco. All three companies own and manage rental properties and social housing and may further subcontract to other housing companies to procure housing in particular areas. Prior to the centralisation and privatisation of asylum accommodation in the UK, local councils managed the dispersal process, allowing housing to be linked to social services and referrals (see Darling, 2022). All three companies specialise in providing contracted services and infrastructure to governments and all three further subcontract to other outsourcing firms. In this sense, the asylum accommodation sector follows broader trends towards the privatisation of public services throughout UK government, a shift unfolding since the 1980s. As in other sectors, privatisation has proliferated bureaucracy instead of streamlining it, as different actors are accountable to different objectives and mandates, profit only one among them.

Asylum housing contractors developed their expertise and relationships with government through public housing, emergency housing and elderly care sectors, and their growth models are similar to other real estate and public infrastructure companies. Mears Group PLC is a Real Estate Investment Trust (REIT) that has recently moved from the social care sector into social and public housing provision and property management, citing inadequate revenue margins in the social care sector (Mears Group PLC, 2021a, 2021b). As a REIT,

Mears' shares are predominantly owned by a range of investment and equity funds (Mears Group PLC, 2021b). ClearSprings specialises in furnished, short-term housing for the public sector, and Serco is a global outsourcing company. ClearSprings also runs the infamous Napier Barracks in Folkestone that was repurposed by the Home Office to host and confine asylum-seekers in 2020. As Horton (2021) has shown in the UK's care sector, the growth model of these companies tends to include the consolidation of small firms, followed by the separation of real estate from services. Mears Group's investor portfolio shares familiar names in real estate investment, indicating, firstly, that government contracts are considered a secure source of rental income. Secondly, this profile indicates that asylum accommodation is now part of the financialised real estate market and is therefore part of a larger portfolio of properties generating dividends for investors.

Asylum-seekers receiving this accommodation may also receive an ASPEN card, as discussed above. Receiving and using an ASPEN card can be fairly simple when it works well, but when it doesn't, the complex assemblage of outsourcing organisations becomes clear. In May and June 2021, older green ASPEN cards (managed by global outsourcing firm Sodexo) were replaced with new orange cards, managed by UK-based Prepaid Financial Services. Problems with ASPEN card usage go to MigrantHelp, a non-profit contracted by the Home Office to provide asylum-seekers assistance (MigrantHelp, 2021). They are severely understaffed, and so practical support for everyday problems can be difficult to access (O'Connor, 2021). When the new cards were issued, the Home Office estimated that one third of all recipients experienced problems accessing cash, many for weeks (Taylor, 2021; UK Visas & Immigration, 2021). MigrantHelp does not manage or distribute the cards, however: this is done by the other housing contractors. Thus, responsibility for distribution and troubleshooting are delegated to different for- and non-profit providers. The card itself is managed by PrePaid Financial Services, who provides point-of-sale transaction processing.

Receiving an ASPEN card is conditional on acceptance of dispersal housing from one of the companies listed above (or their subcontractors). Thus, carceral economies are dependent on state and international laws to produce hyperprecarious and dependent aid recipients and, in turn, that dependence is carved up into a range of services. Finely delegating responsibility for different aspects of destitution assistance multiplies the number of non-state actors involved in asylum-seekers' everyday lives and not to their benefit. Subcontracted housing providers, for example, answer to Mears, Clearsprings or Serco, not to residents. Complaints and problems bounce between various businesses and organisations; from asylum-seekers' perspectives, it can feel as though no one is directly responsible for them. Thus, data-based forms of disciplined mobility are interlinked with financialised public housing provision. This conditionality binds asylum-seekers to multiple value extraction practices, allowing multiple agencies, companies and organisations to extract value in and through the relations of dependency required by destitution assistance.

Conclusion

This article has shown that the context-specific practices of PDM, in/voluntary unpaid labour and conditional cash and housing assistance extract value from a double movement of 'emptied' refugees' time and occupied refugees' spaces. Unpaid and invisible labour are rendered available through legal prohibitions, suspensions and waivers on asylum-seeker and refugee work, and, elsewhere, financialised real estate companies' rent from the forced dispersal of asylum-seekers. Multiple extractive operations come together in refugee humanitarianism and take place within – and not in spite of – carceral economies. Conceptualising

these practices as extraction allows us to trace the circuits of value specific to refugee humanitarianism, where humanitarian principles and capitalist operations converge in context-specific configurations. Modes of value extraction should be investigated beyond the direct profit made by private actors in managing migrants. These economies require refugees' destitution and operate through localised, heterogeneous practices. Tracing multiple ways in which refugee governmentality is predicated on humanitarian destitution, we have drawn attention to the mutual entanglements between carcerality, value production and exploitation in refugee economies. We close by calling for further research on heterogeneous and specific operations of extraction at work in refugee humanitarianism and grounded on refugees' carcerality and destitution.

These entanglements continue to transform, demanding further countertopographies of their particular elements. In Greece, island reception centres may be open, but asylum-seekers cannot freely travel to the mainland and so undergo a *de facto* confinement (Spathopoulou and Carastathis, 2020) enforced by the materiality of the sea itself (Dickson, 2021). The pandemic provided Greek authorities with the context to enforce stricter mobility restrictions on asylum-seekers on the Greek islands. On Lesbos, asylum-seekers were confined within the new refugee camp and allowed to go out only twice per week. During the COVID-19 epidemic in the UK, the Home Office accommodated people in hostels, hotels and former army barracks, none of which fall under the category of formal detention and yet utilised curfews, quarantines and restricted mobility. Incidents of suicide and death revealed the detrimental impact of these conditions, particularly on traumatised people (Positive Action in Housing, 2020; Scottish Refugee Council, 2020). Despite the *formal* designation as accommodation or reception centres, these spaces – and the conditions placed on refugees living in them – exhibit familiar spatial practices of detention noted in political and carceral geography research, especially enclosure, categorisation, mobility, discipline and containment (Moran et al., 2018; Mountz et al., 2013). Moreover, as we have shown above, *conditionality* is key to the sorts of flexible carcerality at work in refugee reception: aid and housing are tied to refugees' participation in language, parenting and employment trainings. We argue that the multiplication of carceral-yet-not-detention spaces in refugee governance has also multiplied the economic configurations that enable them. This diversity requires attention to the details of these configurations, specifically the extraction of data in multiple ways, the extraction of unpaid and invisible labour and the valuation practices that quantify costs and profit margins for refugee accommodation. To capture both place-specific and shared practices, future research should simultaneously investigate the heterogeneous struggles against various forms of extraction in refugee humanitarianism and problematise new carceralities produced by alternatives to confinement.


Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by ESRC Standard Grant ES/S016643/1.

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Notes

1. The proposal of encouraging asylum-seekers to conduct voluntary works has been introduced by the Italian government in 2014, and it was promoted as a measure for tackling 'migrants' inactivity' during their protracted wait. In 2017, the centre-left governmental coalition pushed this forward by encouraging local authorities to involve asylum-seekers in 'socially useful activities' in favour of the 'local communities'.
2. Section 95 provides support to asylum-seekers who (1) can prove they do not have access to savings or family support and (2) have an asylum claim in progress. Section 98 provides emergency support for asylum-seekers in crisis while their Section 95 applications are processed. Additionally, Section 4 support provides cashless assistance to *refused* asylum-seekers who cannot return to their country of origin for certain reasons and cannot support themselves.
3. In terms of asylum-seekers' right to work, it is important to highlight the differences from country to country. Some countries allow asylum-seekers to work immediately following their claim (Canada, Sweden, Australia), after a month (Portugal), 60 days (Italy), 3 months (Germany), 4 months (Belgium) or 6 months (United States, Greece, France) (see Migration Advisory Committee, 2021; Migration Observatory, 2022). For instance, in Greece and in France, asylum-seekers are entitled to work 6 months after the full asylum registration; in Italy, they have the right to seek jobs 60 days after they lodged the asylum claim. In the UK, asylum-seekers can request permission to work after 12 months, if they have not received their asylum outcome, yet. If granted, asylum-seekers can only work in 'shortage industries', and only for as long as their claim lasts and appeals are exhausted (UK Home Office, 2022: part 11b).

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