Regimes of asylum: thinking deservingness, humanitarianism and solidarity between Italy and Brazil

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In this special issue our intention is to explore through in-depth ethnographies, the dynamics of production, maintenance, and transformation of regimes of asylum in Brazil and Italy, two countries that occupy very different locations in the geography of asylum and refugeness but that are among the ones where most asylum applications are filed in their respective regions.

The special issue is composed of five articles: two based on ethnographies conducted in Brazil, two in Italy, and one that focuses on the overall European framework around asylum. The articles revolve around two main foci: the first concerns the bureaucratic categories of asylum and their lived experience, while the second addresses humanitarianism as a form of subject-formation and governmentality. These two sets of questions are strongly interrelated, as the humanitarian apparatus follows the legal formalization of the right to asylum and refuge (Fassin, 2013; Ticktin, 2011).

The idea of reflecting on how local and global entanglements mold asylum regimes in Brazil and Italy came to us when discussing how juridical categories, asylum policies and practices of reception were decisive in shaping the trajectories of our main research interlocutors- in the case of Helena Palestinian-Syrian refugees in Sao Paolo and in case of Viola Gambian asylum seekers in Center Italy. In our exchanges, what emerged is how institutionalized or vernacular forms of humanitarianism (Brković, 2023), securitarian governance, broader regional political priorities and dynamics, historically layered modalities of racialization, local solidarity struggles as well as urban and labour political economies co-constructed

the figures of migrants and refugees in the two contexts and how simultaneously people were reacting to these conjunctures, reclaiming space and visibility, seeking strategical alliances and navigating the various forms of precariousness they faced. In particular, what was stricking was the almost specular way in which asylum seekers were governed through the humanitarian apparatus and perceived by the general population. While in Italy a state-based emergency reception system heavily determined people's fate and generated a mostly negative public discourse around their presence (Tarabusi 2022; Cammelli and Riccio, 2024), in Brazil the lack of an institutionally organized system of reception was counteracted by a strong civil and political solidarity towards specific nationalities of asylum seekers, which interlocked with already present grassroot struggles and diasporic networks. These reflections prompted us to broaden the discussion to other colleagues working in the same realm and context, which materialized in an international seminar organized by us and hosted by the Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento (CEBRAP) on September 29, 2021.

The anthropological and ethnographic comparison between Brazil and Italy allows us to investigate how universal legal frameworks—such as the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration—are actualized in local humanitarian practices (Goodale, 2006; Merry, 2006) and national policies, giving rise to specific configurations and categorizations around the right to asylum. We understand the figures of the refugee and the asylum seeker as being produced according to the specificity of such configurations, revealing the multiple and coexisting practices that translate a universal body of rights into empirical processes. In view of this, the publication sheds light on how Brazil and Italy produce different policies and treatments of this population, and how these figures are constructed at the intersection of race, ethnicity, gender, class, nationality, religion, and age (Holmes & Castaneda, 2016; Bohmer & Shuman, 2007). In this way, the contributions shed light on how public representations and categories of asylum shift from compassion to deservingness, or from vulnerability to illegality, according to different political configurations.

The contributions investigate the processes of subjectification enacted by the bureaucratic and juridical categories of asylum and articulated through the living conditions of people affected by those categories (Sorgoni, 2011; Cabot, 2014; Castellano and Riccio, 2023). Analyzing the legal, economic, and sociopolitical effects of asylum regimes, each contribution carefully considers ethnographically how material conditions of existence engender subject-making, as well as how people not only endure such conditions, but actively respond to them.

Why to relate Brazil and Italy?

The proposal explores from different angles how the spectacle of refuge (De Genova, 2013; Machado, 2021), as a global phenomenon, encroaches in Brazil and Italy's diverse processes of social production of difference and their migration policies. In this regard, these countries are also linked by entangled histories of migration and racialization, in which the political projects of nation-building, modernization and "whitening" of the Brazilian population were and are strongly present (Andrews, 1988; Seyferth, 2002; Ribeiro Corrassacz, 2015). The state-sponsored migration that would bring millions of white European immigrants to Brazil was a massive effort aimed at ensuring that landowners would not suffer the consequences of the end of the brutal enslaved labor regime in Brazil.

In 1880, Italy was unified through a process that triggered a severe economic crisis in the agricultural sector and pushed millions into poverty, leading many to emigrate. This agricultural labor force was absorbed through a subsidized migration policy that covered travel costs, land, and housing (Amati, 2005). With state incentives focused on creating a new national workforce, millions of Italian (and also German) immigrants who arrived in the country after the abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1888 began to compete for low wages with formerly enslaved Africans, but eventually came to occupy a significant portion of the urban labor force. Part of this population moved to rural areas, while others relocated to cities like São Paulo to work in the emerging industrial sector, which at one point was composed of 46% Italian immigrants. This precarious working-class population would go on to found the first labor movements, inspired by Italian anarchism. Echoes of this anarchist influence can be seen in the autonomist movements of the 1990s mentioned in one of the articles, which were of great importance to the national left. Some of these immigrants would rise socially, forming the Brazilian urban middle class, while a few would become leaders of national industry (Constantino, 2001).

While Brazil's nation-building process was deeply tied to immigration, Italy transitioned from being primarily a country of emigrants to becoming a destination—albeit often a temporary one—for people on the move via Mediterranean and Balkan migration routes. This does not mean that Italians stopped emigrating (the number of Italians leaving the country each year is roughly equivalent to the number of asylum applications Italy receives).However, the privileged mobility Italians enjoy as EU citizens, combined with increasingly draconian migration policies adopted since the creation of the Schengen Area[1] and the onset of the 2008 financial crisis, has turned the highly mediatized so-called "refugee crisis" and its aftermath into one of the central axes around which Italy's political and social identity has been reshaping (Ciabarri, 2020).

1 | The Schengen Area is a free movement zone for member countries, allowing the movement of people, goods, and services, and is composed of 29 countries, mostly EU members.

Brazil and Italy operate within distinct migration regimes that reflect their geopolitical positioning and institutional affiliations. Brazil, as part of the Global South and without external border obligations akin to those of the EU, has framed its refugee response—especially during the 2010s—around humanitarian discourse, particularly under Dilma Rousseff's government. The provision of humanitarian visas for Syrians (Normative Resolution No. 17/2013) and Haitians after the earthquake (Cavalcanti et al., 2020) exemplifies a political will to construct Brazil as a "welcoming" country. Italy, by contrast, is embedded in the European Union's migration apparatus, characterized by deterrence, externalization (e.g., cooperation with Libya), and the Dublin Regulation, which disproportionately affects frontline states like Italy (Kasparek, 2016; Tazzioli, 2020). These mechanisms reinforce a securitarian logic, where border management is prioritized over asylum rights.

Despite differing legal systems, both contexts reveal how paperwork and legal categorization become technologies of control. Italy's asylum system is marked by bureaucratic limbo, delays, and Dublin constraints that block secondary mobility. In this configuration, documentation becomes a form of carceral governance (Ataç et al., 2016). In Brazil, although laws are more permissive, informalization and delays in processing leave many migrants in a state of legal uncertainty—particularly affecting impoverished and racialized groups.

However, while the two contexts might initially seem very distant from each other, they also share some structural similarities. Most notably, both Brazil and Italy have experienced an exponential increase in asylum requests over the last 10 years (Jensen, 2023; Machado, 2021; Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021). In Brazil, asylum applications rose from 966 in 2010 to 29,000 in 2015—a 2,868 percent increase in five years (UNHCR 2016)—reaching 85,435 requests from Venezuelan nationals in 2018 following the state crisis, making Brazil the primary country of refuge for Venezuelans. In Italy, while 120,000 requests for international protection were counted from 2001 to 2013, in 2017 alone the number reached 130,000 (Sanò and Della Puppa, 2021). Both increases in asylum requests provoked opportunistic political rhetoric that framed them as a "crisis" and an "invasion," through speeches by right-wing parliamentarians and governments of border cities such as Roraima (Milesi, Coury, Rovery, 2018).

There are, nevertheless, significant differences concerning the positions these two countries hold in the global landscape of (im)mobility, as well as in the profiles of their respective groups of asylum seekers/refugees and the resulting policies. Italy is a direct gateway for people coming from Africa and sits at the crossroads of various migration routes due to its strategic position in the Mediterranean. However, it is often considered more of a transit country than a final destination, given that its economy and labor market were heavily impacted by the 2008 crisis

(Sorgoni, 2011; Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021). The pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and their geopolitical and economic consequences have further tightened (im)mobility regimes in both the European and Italian contexts, accelerating a process of border externalization already underway since 2016, through agreements with third countries such as Turkey or Libya (Degli Uberti, 2021; Giliberti and Quierolo Palmas, 2021).

Brazil, in turn, has increasingly become an alternative destination to Europe or North America for people on the move from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, especially in a global context of increasingly closed borders and stricter migratory legislation (Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013; Henderson, 2020). In this scenario, Brazil has also become a relevant route for migratory circulation within Latin America, as it continues to impose fewer restrictions on the entry of migrants and refugees and provides documents that enable this population to circulate across the continent. Although it is a longer and more laborious path, it has emerged as an alternative route to the North for both South Americans and Caribbeans (Handerson, 2020), as well as extracontinental populations. On the other hand, the high dollar and the economic decline resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have led many people to move out of Brazil toward other Latin American countries.

The individual contributions in this proposal reflect the global dimension of the regulation and hierarchization of the right to move. They do not isolate the right to asylum from the broader framework of transnational mobility regimes and national migration policies; rather, they explore how this entanglement shapes people's presence within the social fabric. In this sense, Stefania Spada discusses how the category of asylum and the right to international protection have, over the last decade, become devices of exclusion rather than recognition, in the context of Europe's obsession with regulating mobility. The ethnographic focus of Giuliana Sanò explores how asylum categories affect subjectivity and generate emotional responses in those rejected by the asylum apparatus, who live in the rural South of Italy in a condition of existential immobility. Similarly, Mirian Alves de Souza closely follows the trajectories of two Syrian families in Brazil to document how the process of becoming a humanitarian subject intersects with gendered ideologies and religious infrastructures. Helena Manfrinato analyzes how Palestinian refugees from the Syrian conflict make sense of their living and working conditions in São Paulo in light of the available "refugee frameworks," and how they rework their political subjectivity within pre-existing grassroots solidarity networks and political struggles. Finally, Osvaldo Costantini draws on his ethnography in Southern Italy to discuss how humanitarianism contributes to reproducing neoliberal capitalism and the exploitative dynamics on which it relies.

Overall, this special issue seeks to contribute to the literature on the topic by opening an ethnographic window onto the differences, possible analogies, and interdependent assemblages that the two contexts reveal in dealing with asylum and displacement. This is paramount to complexifying the binary categorization of the Global South and Global North, especially in relation to the nexus between human (im)mobility and the right to asylum.

On one hand, the special issue highlights how the dynamics of globalized migration are increasingly polarized along a North-South divide, marked by a sharp rise in deportations, rejections, and the violent externalization of borders in Europe and the United States targeting people on the move from the Global South. Externalization creates a layered infrastructure of containment, where wealthier nation of the North use their economic and political leverage towards southern countries to prevent the arrival of undesired migrants. Northern European countries do it with Southern European countries like Italy and Greece, which in turn make deals with their Southern neighbors as Libya or Turkey to stop people. Such layered mechanism of obstruction not only reinforces existing racializing dynamics but also expands them in a multi-scalar way, where countries delegate to contain are also hierarchically arranged. On the other hand, the special issue also documents South-South migration and experiences of refuge, revealing internal mechanisms of exclusion, displacement, and racialization. Finally, it sheds light on solidarity movements that seek not only to demigrantize people on the move, but also to reframe the broader social and political issues at stake, along with the intersectional struggles they generate.

As a guiding image, we chose that of a resonant web, where each context is imagined as a network of interdependent threads that vibrate with varying intensity depending on their arrangement. Each interaction creates a tension that is redistributed throughout the web, resonating in distinct ways and reshaping the structure even as it responds to it. The articles in this issue capture these resonant effects from a specific perspective—whether through the lens of individual or family decision-making, the political economy of humanitarianism, or the role of emotion in shaping visions of the future amid immobility. The resulting composition reflects the simultaneous activation of these interconnected threads, which themselves form part of the discontinuous assemblage of human mobility and border regimes in today's global conjuncture.

The crisis of the right to international protection, racialization and selective solidarity

In putting these two contexts into dialogue, we aim to draw unexpected connections within the global landscapes of asylum—which, as we write this introduction, are shrinking by the day. While the sociopolitical consequences of the mediatization and weaponization of the so-called refugee crisis continue to unfold in Europe, we argue for the importance of de-exceptionalizing irregularized mobility and the so-called refugee crisis by adopting a perspective that recenters attention away from Europe as both the primary destination for asylum seekers and the central actor in mobility regulation

In the last decade, the humanitarian/securitarian nexus (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015) that defined the initial post-2015 "long summer of migration" European response is giving way to an increasingly militarized approach. Frontex's role has expanded exponentially—mirrored by its rapidly growing budget—and Europe is not only externalizing its borders through agreements with the security forces of so-called "transit" and "origin" countries, but also processing asylum claims offshore (Cuttitta, 2023).

One stark example is the recent attempt by Giorgia Meloni's Italian government to move those intercepted at sea to detention centers in Albania, where group-based and accelerated asylum procedures are to be carried out, followed by swift deportations in the event of a negative outcome (Campesi 2023). Although residual constitutional and international rights intermittently obstruct these policies, the humanitarian aspect of the nexus is steadily vanishing. EU member states now openly violate human rights conventions, as seen in the repeated renewal of agreements with Libya despite extensive documentation of horrific abuses perpetrated by EU-funded security forces and facilities. The level of complicity and codependency between EU countries and their partners in border externalization has reached such heights that an International Criminal Court arrest warrant was recently disregarded to maintain the agreement with the Tripoli government[2]. The European Commission also financially and diplomatically supports Italy's renewed deals with Tunisia—even after human rights organizations, academic research, and international media have revealed that its immigration officers are pushing people back into the desert. This necropolitics echoes that of the Mediterranean: letting the "naturally enhanced" border landscape itself become a lethal deterrent for those who haven't yet moved.

In this context, Europe's image as a beacon of human rights upholding the values sanctioned by the Geneva Convention, inevitably collapsed—a crisis accelerated by the resurgence of ethnonationalism and a far-right drift toward

2 | Osema Najim 'Almasri' Habish, a senior Libyan officer, wanted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in prisons in Libya, was apprehended on 19 January 2025 in Turin, Italy, and allowed to covertly return to Libya after two days. The case sparked public outrage and an investigation by the ICC towards the procedure enacted by the Italian government. The key role of Almasri in the infrastructure of containment and detention funded by Italy and the EU has been indicated by humanitarian and activists organizations as the reason behind his release.

neo-authoritarianism, recently emboldened by U.S. politics and the systemic denial of the genocidal actions perpetrated by Israel's government in Gaza.In the latter case, the Zionist regime destroyed much of Gaza's civilian infrastructure and has continuously directed deadly attacks at medical teams, journalists, civil defense personnel, and the civilian population in general. Recently, it blocked the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza, putting the entire population at severe risk of widespread starvation. With US assistance, it has created food distribution hubs under the guise of suspicious NGOs, which require biometric scanning to determine who will and will not receive food, taking the distortion of the humanitarian concept of aid to the ongoing genocidal plan to another level.

In Brazil, migration regulation has historically treated migrants from a national security perspective, categorizing them as either desirable or undesirable. This approach dates back to the strict control practices of the colonial regime and continues through the decrees, laws, and statutes enacted throughout the 20th century. As we saw above, the so-called desirable migrants were white Europeans, brought in to prevent the "degeneration of the race"—a eugenicist principle popular among Brazil's political and intellectual elites (Wermuth, 2020).

The increase in migrant diversity within the country began with the Mercosur Agreements of the 1990s, which facilitated the movement of South Americans across Brazilian borders. These new flows of migrants intensified pressure for legal reform, largely driven by the lobbying efforts of Catholic charitable organizations working alongside the Brazilian state. It was only in 2017 that the new Migration Law (Law 13.445/2017) was passed, following a collaborative effort by NGOs, migrant social movements, and scholars. The goal was to align Brazil's migration policy with the 1988 Federal Constitution (known as the "Citizen Constitution") and international human rights treaties (ibid.). This legislation marked a decisive step in expanding the rights of migrants, refugees, and stateless persons, and in advancing the creation of more inclusive reception policies. Brazil allows entry through its borders and provides a temporary document that grants access to public services. However, access to housing and employment remains the greatest social demand—one that even NGOs are unable to fully meet (Pereira, 2016).

It is crucial to document how the construction of international protection is not the exclusive prerogative of the Global North. In fact, the vast majority of the world's refugees are hosted in countries of the Global South, which often bear a disproportionate share of the responsibility despite having fewer economic resources and institutional capacities. According to UNHCR (2023), approximately 76% of refugees are hosted in low- and middle-income countries, with nations such as Turkey, Pakistan, Uganda, and Colombia hosting some of the largest refugee populations. This global distribution challenges dominant narratives that portray

Europe and North America as the primary destinations for refugees and highlights the need to critically examine the global asymmetries in the governance of displacement (Betts, 2013; Chimni, 2009).

Brazil occupies a particularly interesting position in this regard, having opened its borders to Syrians, Venezuelans, and Haitians, offering legal entry pathways—but not always adequate assistance—while also acting as a node in the broader migration route toward the Global North.

In this decentering effort, we must recognize how globalized notions of race (Da Silva, 2007), as well as the historical conditions of nation-building, manifest in hierarchies of deservingness and in the moral and political economies that determine access to resources for non-nationals. As the contribution of Manfrinato and Spada show, it is is telling that despite racial and religious markers positioning Syrians differently in Brazil and Italy—being "whitened" in Brazil compared to Afro-Brazilians and Haitians, and "darkened" in Europe through Islamophobia and racism towards Muslims—what remains constant is the scale of deservingness and the selective empathy it engenders.

As a case in point, the contributions of Manfrinato and De Souza discuss the sympathetic response from Brazilian society to the media image of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian child whose body washed ashore in Turkey, which triggered an unprecedented wave of solidarity that did not extend to other nationalities and was mediated by secular and religious organizations. However in Europe Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism mixed with the rethoric of the "invasion" (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016), which configures people on the move as at risk (because of the dangers of the irregularized journey) and a risk (to the preservation of national sovereignity) reiterated the othering of Syrian refugees. This happened despite Alan Kurdi's death also sparked more empathetic reactions in the public and political sphere (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020) compared to the ones of the many Black children who systematically perish in the Mediterranean sea.

In this context, as Spada discusses, radically different approach emerged when Russia began its invasion of Ukraine. Ukrainian nationals fleeing the war were granted immediate international protection status—without going through the typical asylum procedures—allowing them free movement across the Schengen Area. The political reception was also markedly different: Matteo Salvini of Italy's Northern League claimed that Ukrainians were "real" war refugees[3], in stark contrast to people fleeing the war in Sudan, who continue to face the full extent of "externalized brutality" (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2017) of the EU in countries like Libya, Tunisia, or Niger.

The differential treatment of refugees from Ukraine based on skin color, as documented by the many cases of anti-Black racism (as well as the rejection of

3 | https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2022/02/25/news/salvini_letta_ucraina-339233962/

Roma refugees) at the border between Ukraine and Poland displayed globally how racialized is the right to protection and mobility, to the point that even governments of various African governments and the African Union itself officially condemned as racist the rejection of African citizens at the Polish border. But as Spada reminds us this differential treatment based on citizenship was also legally sanctioned, constituting a juridical anomaly—a suspension of the universal principles of protection. This, she argues, reveals how legal categories are often shaped by unequal power relations, undermining the principle of equal protection central to international law. Her notion of a "group logic" that erodes equality reflects both geopolitical interests (i.e., NATO-EU relations with Russia) and historically entrenched racialization processes, tied to the notion of whiteness as property.

Both Manfrinato and Spada argue that in the solidarity shown by Brazil to Syrian refugees, and the European embrace of Ukrainians media-driven representations of suffering helped construct a sense of proximity. These moments disrupted the binary between citizen and asylum seeker, rehumanizing people on the move and legitimizing their mobility. It is crucial, however, to ask along which axes this recognition occurred. As Manfrinato, Alvez, and Spada show, racialization played a decisive role. Yet, as they reminds us, race was not the only axis: class and civilizational assumptions also shaped the empathy extended. Syrians and Ukrainians were seen—by Brazilian and European civil societies respectively—as more aligned with bourgeois and whitened standards that structure their social hierarchies. This doesn't mean that Syrians and Ukrainians did not experience racism and stigmatization in other political conjunctures. The shifting and mobile logics of racialization and discrimination prove indeed how relational these processes are and how they change according to broader global and local power configurations.

To understand a scenario of increasingly securitarian and necropolitical measures regulating human mobility, where humanitarianism seemed to disappear, it is important to remark the fact that "humanitarian care for migrants is often located adjacent to, and intertwined with, enforcement efforts, making it contingent on their rejection at the border" (Turner and Mayblin, 2020: 134). Asylum, in this sense, is not only part of—but foundational to—the governance of EU borders (Novak, 2019; Tsianos and Karakayali, 2010; Hess and Kasparek, 2017; Pinelli, 2017). What emerges is how borders redistribute the potential for violence and death, becoming key mechanisms in the reproduction of racism—what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls the "death-dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies that organize relations within and between the planet's sovereign political territories" (Gilmore, 2002).

The role of humanitarian infrastructures: deservingness, value extraction and politicized dissent

Humanitarian infrastructures feature in all the contributions, each addressing different aspects of their functionality, their relationship to asylum regimes, and the broader economic and social dynamics of the contexts in which they operate. In particular, Osvaldo Costantini's contribution explores the material consequences of humanitarian ideologies and practices, drawing connections between housing policies in Rome, the governance of residence permits, and the Italian/European reception system. He argues that a Marxist reading of the universalized values of compassion underpinning humanitarianism (Fassin, 2019) reveals how this framework acts as an "ideological validation of the social order," one that is "absolved of its responsibility in the production of suffering." His analysis suggests that humanitarian infrastructures reproduce this logic and extract value from people on the move, amplifying the continuation of the socioeconomic system that generates inequality. In this sense, the moral economy of humanitarianism—and the governmentality that frames migrants as passive victims—co-produces a docile and illegalized workforce that feeds into broader systems of labor extraction.

Costantini's argument that the juridical-humanitarian complex produces specific bioeconomies (Andersson, 2018), turning migrants' mere existence into a source of value, echoes what many migrants themselves express: a perception of the asylum system as a machine that monetizes their presence or treats them as "commodities in a new form of colonial exploitation." From a social navigation perspective, humanitarian actors are not radically distinct from those often vilified as cynical exploiters of migration—such as smugglers, traffickers, or security contractors—even if their methods and stated objectives (protection/assistance versus exploitation/ coercion) differ.

The victimizing and gendered logic of humanitarianism is also addressed in the contributions by Manfrinato and De Souza. While Manfrinato describes how Palestinian refugees from Syria reject the imposed victimhood assigned by UNHCR and other humanitarian institutions upon arrival, De Souza documents how these same institutions operate based on a presumed vulnerability that is often reserved for the "ideal victims"—namely, women and children. In contrast, men are perceived as autonomous agents and are often excluded from protective services. To access these services, they are expected to perform gratitude and subjection, which, as Costantini argues, serves to prepare them for labor exploitation during and after their (often failed) asylum processes.

However, humanitarian infrastructures are not the only ones available to people on the move in Brazil and Italy. As shown in the contributions by Manfrinato

and Costantini, migrants also encounter deeply unequal urban environments in São Paulo and Rome—both cosmopolitan cities marked by severe housing deficits and entrenched capitalist logic that reproduce inequality at a vertiginous pace. In these contexts, access to housing is often mediated by informal systems, and housing struggles become key sites of political contention.

Housing is a pressing issue for low-income Brazilians and Italians due to bureaucratic barriers and high costs, which makes occupations, shelters, and boarding houses unavoidable. In this gap, housing movements extend rhizomatic networks of solidarity, which both support and are transformed by the presence of migrants. These movements contest the extractive urbanism of late liberalism and seek to unite housing struggles across lines of citizenship.

Manfrinato's contribution reveals how Syrian refugees entered and reshaped existing political coalitions in São Paulo—where a state-run asylum infrastructure is almost absent compared to Italy. In particular, the arrival of Palestinians among Syrian refugees altered and, at times, strained solidarity networks. Costantini's work in Rome similarly shows that rent assistance within a welfarist framework does little to disrupt the structural dynamics of housing precarity and capital accumulation. Those unable to pay rent due to precarious employment are often seen as "incomplete" individuals, entitled only to one-time state support.

Both authors highlight examples of migrants being integrated into autonomist housing struggles. Manfrinato documents the occupation of the *Leila Khaled* building in São Paulo, where Palestinian-Syrian refugees aligned with local social movements. Her detailed ethnography shows how the arrival of refugees intersects with and revitalizes older struggles, such as the Palestinian cause in Brazil. Notably, in the absence of a robust state reception system, grassroots networks have become essential—so much so that even public institutions have relied on them, leading to legalization of occupied buildings to house refugees.

This vibrant environment—far more politicized than Italy's often depoliticizing humanitarian apparatus—is not without its own tensions. Processes of cooptation and racialized, class-based hierarchies of "deservingness" persist. As Manfrinato observes, Brazilians may be eager to support Syrian refugees but are less inclined to assist Palestinians or homeless Brazilians. This suggests that racialized and classed logics are not confined to institutions; they permeate even the most sympathetic communities.

Emotions and subject-crafting in asylum and migration regimes

The emotions experienced by refugees—whether as embodied affect or when captured and mobilized by journalists and allies—reveal how the moral aspects of humanitarian tragedies operate through emotional mobilization. These emotions also manifest politically, as they trigger feelings of outrage and injustice that are necessary to gather people around shared agendas.

In this regard, Abbas, the leader of the pro-Palestinian movement from Manfrinato's ethnography in São Paulo, told a journalist, "*People were moved because Alan was a white boy with nice clothes.*" His statement points out that people's compassion is directly related to race and social class—and that if the case had involved a poor Black boy, the public reaction would not have been the same.

As shown by the strong emotional sphere mobilizing empathy and feelings of proximity, emotions are often producers of events. Giuliana Sanò explores, in her anthropological analysis of emotions, a series of episodes in which her interlocutors displayed and expressed strong (and negative) emotions, which became engines for decision-making and change amid the constraints posed by the humanitarian-securitarian apparatus. As anthropological research on bureaucracy has demonstrated (Altin and Sanò, 2017; Giudici, 2021), people who enact institutional mandates—and in doing so reproduce the state—deal with complex emotional worlds, dominated by frustration, ambiguity, and an overall lack of meaningfulness and *telos*, which afflict both the rule enforcers and those subjected to them.

In her contribution, it becomes clear how emotions among asylum seekers connect the individual, the social, and the political. They compel people to navigate uncertainty, impermanence, hope, and despair, giving way to "actions that steered a given situation away from the predefined path dictated by regulations, procedures, practices, and migration policies." The rich literature on hope and migration, as well as on humanitarianism (Kleist and Torsten, 2017; Rozakou, 2017), has shown how emotions can shape individual and collective trajectories and play a decisive role in the formation of new political subjectivities. If emotions are an inevitable consequence of asylum policies and practices, as Sanò remarks, it is important to recognize their theoretical and cognitive potential in fueling self-determination.

If bureaucratic procedures in migration and asylum policies work to produce temporal dispossession and existential waithood (Ramsay, 2017; Khosravi et al, 2019), then frustration, anger, and hope become resources through which to resist and counteract these effects—while also shaping political subjectivities that both incorporate and exceed the subject-crafting produced by the humanitarian-securitarian nexus.

These emotions, together with long-term goals, help people navigate border regimes, as the contributions of Sanò, Manfrinato, and De Souza highlight. When people are forced to cope with border enforcement and immobility, they creatively reshape their expectations and re-route future-making toward places that may initially seem less obvious—such as Brazil.

As De Souza remarks, "*There were many reasons people affected by such [crises] did not initially view Brazil as a destination: the geographical distance, absence of economic support by the Brazilian government, the lack of previous relationships or networking in most cases, language barriers presented by Portuguese, Brazilian high unemployment rates, and a lot of social inequalities and urban violence.*" However, among these constraints, the safe route and access to necessary documentation emerged as pivotal factors driving the consideration of Brazil as a destination.

She quotes Malkki on the need to contextualize mobility within broader frameworks, such as the European border regime and what Besteman has called "the militarized apartheid regime" (2020), which curtails the undesired mobility of the working poor from the Global South into the countries of the Global North. Her contribution shows how individuals and families decide on mobility not only in response to displacement and survival but also strategically, based on future aspirations and desires for a better life. This highlights people's ability to orient themselves within a complex geopolitical, social, and cultural web of obstructions and possibilities, and to act within broader economic, political, and cultural dynamics.

A careful ethnographic attention to these trajectories and modes of navigation (Vigh, 2009) dismantles the legal and moral fiction between forced and voluntary migration, demonstrating how mobility is always the result of multiple forces and forms of agency by those who move.

Conclusions

Both the Italian and Brazilian contexts reproduce racial hierarchies that determine who is seen as "deserving" of care and protection. In Italy, scholars have shown how racialization and bordering intersect to render migrants—especially from Africa and the Middle East—as permanent outsiders (Tazzioli, 2016; Pinelli, 2019). The warm reception afforded to white, Christian Ukrainian refugees stands in stark contrast to the neglect experienced by Africans and Middle Eastern, exposing a racialized moral economy of asylum.

In Brazil, racial dynamics are shaped by histories of miscegenation and colorism. Middle Easterners, particularly Christians, may be perceived as white,

while Black and Haitian migrants face entrenched structural racism and exclusion. Abbas's reflection on the death of Alan Kurdi—that empathy emerged because he was a "white boy with nice clothes"—illustrates how perceptions of victimhood are racially coded, even within humanitarian responses. Although whiteness may be interpreted differently—an Syrian in Brazil may be seen as white, unlike in Europe—factors such as religion, nationality, and skin color consistently influence who is cast as a "desirable" or "undesirable" refugee.

These hierarchies manifest through unequal aid distribution, public discourse, and legal-juridical frameworks that either facilitate or obstruct access to asylum, citizenship, and mobility. Legal mechanisms themselves become tools of political selectivity, as shown in Spada's work on how Ukrainian refugees were favored over African and Syrian ones.

Despite different geopolitical contexts, Brazil and Italy reflect global patterns shaped by racial capitalism, humanitarianism, and urban inequality. These ethnographies indeed document how the so-called "refugee crisis" is not only about displacement but about how states assign value to human lives—and how migrants navigate, resist, and transform these structures.

To better conceptualize this, we resort to the multisensorial experience of a resonant web. In São Paulo, for example, the arrival of Syrian refugees escaping from war and from the European border regime, touched different strands of this web: struggles for housing, pro-Palestinian activism, diasporic religious and cultural networks, Brazil's legacy of slavery, leftist social movements, and national migration policy. In other contributions we see how bureacratic, juridical and socially hostile environments reverberate on the emotional life of people on the move, prompting them to make decisions that go against the grain of compliance with the reception and asylum system (Sanò), how decision making for families in search for safety *and* future-building is made at the crossroad of legal, cultural, geographical and linguistic opportunities and constraints and is influenced by the gendered politics of humanitarianism (De Sousa), and finally how housing policies, the national welfare system, racialized labour markets, and state-led humanitarianism intertwine in turning mobile subjects into a source of surplus value (Costantini). These different geographies of reveberation generate specific sounds, which are still the product of an ensemble of tensions, vibrations and transmissions where the different elements cannot be completely isolated but exist only in relation to each other.

What is evident is how mobility, far from being simply constrained, actively generates new sociopolitical realities. It reshapes material conditions, alters power relations, and activates diasporic networks, new markets, and political alliances. This vitality challenges the fragmented and exclusionary asylum regimes, which are always lagging behind the creative, adaptive force of people's movements (De

Genova, 2017). The agency of people on the move should not be understood simply as a reactive counterpoint to structural oppression but as a constant force reshaping both space and society.

In this sense, Mmgration studies often participate in an anxious reification of migrants, reducing complex lives to racialized categories—and reproducing the gaze of the nation-state (Anderson, 2019).

But to truly understand asylum regimes, we must de-migrantize our analysis—moving away from exceptionalizing mobility (Dahinden, 2016). These regimes are not neutral; they impose ideological frameworks, reinforce economic hierarchies, and gatekeep access to resources. It's not just about what migrants do differently, but about how border infrastructures shape it and experiences. These constraints, in turn, forge alliances, generate new political subjectivities, and birth alternative moral economies.

There is nothing inherently exceptional about movement—it becomes exceptional only when made so by law and discourse. The co-production of people and their environments is dynamic. Mobility produces new institutions, emotional landscapes, economic networks, and sociopolitical forms—restructuring the very threads that constitute social life. It is a form of political ecology, shaped by global conjunctures such as the war in Syria or the dispossession of Palestinians. Even singular events—like the death of Alan Kurdi—can reverberate globally, becoming symbols appropriated in different local contexts.

But as De Souza reminds us, these symbolic ruptures are rooted in mundane, unexceptional desires: a better future for one's children, access to healthcare, stable work. To recognize the *mundanity* behind so-called exceptional mobility is to reckon with its actual causes and effects.

In anthropological research, when decision-making is contextualized within people's material realities, as well as hopes and aspirations for the future, their actions become intelligible and relatable—not driven by alien logic but by practical, layered strategies. This recognition dismantles the two-dimensional image imposed by border regimes, revealing the fictional core of those systems and the very real consequences they generate.

Overall, what these contributions show is how while global elites have been integrated into transnational networks, many others remain excluded or incorporated under exploitative conditions. Passport regimes and neoliberal globalization further entrenched transnational stratifications, destroying local economies without offering alternatives, and advancing the logic of racial capitalism. The current system of bordering reflects and reinforces these violent inequalities.

The very hierarchy of nationalities and the uneven capacity to exercise sovereignty is inherently intersectional—rooted in race and class, and driven by the

logic of wealth accumulation. In this sense, it is increasingly acknowledged that colonial empires of the 19th and early 20th centuries, headquartered in Europe and North America, gave rise to today's unequal global landscape, where power and mobility are differentially distributed (Favell, 2021).

Our intervention reveals how in this scenario asylum has become central to the political struggles of our time. The "refugee crisis" is inseparable from a broader European crisis of sovereignty and solidarity. The humanitarian border is not a fixed line but a malleable, sticky assemblage shaped by policies, ideologies, and power relations which are geographically and polically situated as well as globally influenced. Its presence varies across time and space, depending on the people and forces involved.

In this topological view, the border is not a singular place but a set of practices and encounters occurring at the intersection of migration control, humanitarianism, and forced migration (Kallio, Häkli, J & Pascucci, 2019). Understanding it demands attention to its dynamism: where it is, for whom, and under what conditions.

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