



SOLIDARITIES IN TIMES OF TURMOIL: NOTES FROM CRITICAL HUMANITARIAN AND REFLEXIVE MIGRATION STUDIES

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ISSN : 1662-744X

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Abstract

This Working Paper is the outcome of a joint seminar conducted in 2025 by Janine Dahinden (University of Neuchâtel) and Sabine Strasser (University of Bern). The papers published here are revised versions of contributions presented at the student conference held in November 2025. In this seminar, we discussed and theorized the question of solidarities through the lenses of critical humanitarian and reflexive studies. Why this topic and joint seminar?

In the early 2000s, scholars identified humanitarianism as a powerful force in the world. Remarkably, notions of humanitarian reason – understood as forms of governance aimed at alleviating human suffering – remained widely prevalent even in societies that were otherwise openly hostile towards migrants. Twenty years on, the enigma of humanitarianism must be re-examined: although the humanitarian approach was always in danger of reinforcing rather than combating inequalities, its aim was nevertheless to prevent misery. Today, the commitment to engaging against humanitarian disasters and promoting asylum is confronted with a growing number of nation-states pursuing hardline anti-migration policies, anti-democratic governance and an authoritarian consensus. Consequently, in Europe and beyond, asylum seekers and people on the move are criminalised and confronted with highly repressive discourses on ‘integration’, deportation and family reunification.

Against the backdrop of these political upheavals, critical humanitarian studies and reflexive migration research aim to contribute to an academic debate that advocates for a society based on solidarity despite profound differences. The contributions to this working paper - based on student conference papers - consider political solidarity as a significant concept in the face of rising anti-migration rhetoric and attacks on migrants, whilst also aiming to critically examine solidarity itself. The authors explore the rise of deterrence, deportation and the surveillance of migration, whilst simultaneously seeking reflexive approaches to practices of solidarity and humanitarianism. They thus address the ambivalences of solidarity through the lens of critical humanitarian and reflexive migration studies.

Keywords

Critical Humanitarian Studies, Reflexive Migration Studies, Political Solidarity, Ambivalences, Knowledge production.

Acknowledgement

We want to warmly thank all the students for their great contributions to the conference which was, in our eyes, a full success, in terms of intellectual debates, creative co-thinking and human exchanges. We are especially grateful to Louise Hombert, University of Neuchâtel and Martin Sökefeld, Ludwig-Maximilian-University Munich for their valuable contributions and active engagement with the students’ papers.

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Introduction: Critical Humanitarian and Reflexive Migration Studies in Times of Turmoil

Sabine Strasser (UNIBE) and Janine Dahinden (UNINE)

In the 2000s, academics in Europe were often surprised by the humanitarian responses to refugee movements in societies that, even back then, were otherwise openly hostile towards migrants. This was particularly evident during ‘the long summer of migration’ (Kasperek and Speer 2017) in 2016. Humanitarianism is an expression of compassion for human suffering and a motivation to alleviate it – and is therefore, regardless of political considerations, seemingly neutral. It reflects a concern for humanity and humaneness (Fassin 2012). Drawing on critical approaches within humanitarian studies (Pandolfi 2003, Ticktin 2011, Feldman 2011, Redfield 2013, Mittermair 2024), humanitarianism perpetuates the illusion that ‘doing good’ can improve aspects of human existence and, despite its depoliticising effect, transcend national, ethnic, religious and political boundaries. However, the fundamentally non-reciprocal nature of humanitarian measures often exacerbates inequality and blurs the line between care and control. Critical humanitarian studies have therefore examined how human rights discourses and Western moral frameworks have been mobilized as instruments of geopolitical dominance. This scholarship has shown how values and norms associated exclusively with the West - such as freedom, autonomy, and equality - have been invoked to legitimize humanitarian interventions and wars (e.g. in the context of the ‘war against terror’) in the name of humanity.

Twenty years on, the enigma of humanitarianism must be re-examined: even though the humanitarian approach was always in danger of reinforcing rather than combating inequalities, its aim was to prevent suffering. In our times, the concept of humanitarianism has been condemned or transformed, and we asked in this seminar what the critique of humanitarian interventions can contribute to our analysis of the presence. We raised the question whether even the illusion and the discourse of shared humanity have become largely meaningless. Whilst, not so long ago, humanitarianism was often criticised as merely a pretext for concealing and covering up the real power struggles, inequalities and self-interest at play, in many cases such a pretence is no longer deemed necessary today – power and self-interest are now openly displayed. Fassin (2012) highlighted a tension between humanity and security, between ‘compassion and repression’. Scholars recently discuss a historic juncture where this tension has finally shifted in favour of security and repression, and security only for the so-called ‘Global North’, not for others, and certainly not for humanity as such.

The actual meaning of the term humanitarian has shifted, forcing researchers in the field of humanitarian studies to rethink the limits of humanitarian language and practice, including within the field of migration studies: the Azerbaijani army had besieged the Armenian enclave Nagorno-Karabakh and described the only possible escape route as a “humanitarian corridor”. When ceasefire in Gaza was called a “humanitarian pause” and food distribution points were regarded as humanitarian spaces, even though people were repeatedly shot when they attempted to obtain food from the Israeli NGO *Gaza Humanitarian Foundation*, the language of humanitarianism was clearly “hijacked” (Berg 2025). The question that concerns us in this Working Paper, is how reflexive migration studies and critical humanitarian studies are still contributing to this conceptualisation of violence and war in humanitarian language (Berg 2023). Questions posed in reflexive

migration studies can also help to rethink research in the humanitarian space. Academic and political engagement regarding humanitarian interventions in border crossings and asylum, conceptualized as humanitarian border (Walters 2014), already demonstrate the entanglement of care and control in this field.

These recent developments show that the fields of critical humanitarian as much as reflexive migration studies are now confronted with a growing number of nation-states pursuing a hardline anti-migration stance, anti-democratic governance and violent border regimes. Thus, in Europe and beyond, asylum seekers and other migrants are criminalised and confronted with highly repressive discourses on ‘integration’, deportation and family reunification. Migration and refugee studies are failing to counter these hegemonic power relations and the associated forms of social and political exclusion. In addition, migration studies have been criticised for failing to reflect sufficiently on their own contribution to these policies and for not succeeding in establishing alternative narratives about migration (Dahinden 2025; Stierl et al, 2025). In the context of this normalization of right-wring anti-migration discourses, migration studies are simultaneously no longer seen by the public as a relevant contribution to the debate due to their criticism of deportation and practices of migration control. Amid these ongoing turbulences of political, economic and humanitarian debates, migration studies and humanitarian studies continue to critically question their own role in the face of these challenges and call for greater reflexivity, as well as a rethinking of their theoretical and methodological approaches.

An anti-humanitarian movement (both in the sense of anti-humaneness and in the sense of the fragmentation of humanity) seems to be omnipresent. Still based on moral sentiments (of fear, anger and indifference) we observe the enforcement of violent responses to migrant solidarity, transgender and climate movements. Increasing numbers of radical right and anti-democratic regimes and their constituencies belief in the legitimacy of their prosperity that is directed against anything that could thwart selfish well-being. In their view, the notion of “the unwanted others” is represented not only by non-citizens such as refugees and enemies at war, but also increasingly by citizens such as transpeople, academics, feminists and leftist political or climate activists. On the other hand, despite adverse policies and even of criminalization of activism, scholars also observe highly determined practices of solidarity that decidedly oppose these developments and that try to practically keep up the idea of shared humanity and cohabitation in one world.

Janine Dahindens’s expertise in reflexive migration studies and Sabine Strasser’s long term interest in critical humanitarian studies allowed us to bring together two relevant strands of knowledge production to think through challenges of de-democratization and anti-migration stances in our present times. We suggested these reflections to our students in Bern and Neuchâtel to discuss them with two cohorts of students, both of which emphasise reflexivity in their study programs. Critical humanitarian studies and the concept of solidarity was less familiar to many of our participants and enabled them to find new ways of engagement with migration research. We consider “contested solidarity” as a meaningful concept to study counter-hegemonic practices against the growing anti-migration rhetoric and attacks on migrants and to contribute to academic reflexion. The contributions in this Working Paper thus examine the rise in deterrence, deportation and surveillance, whilst simultaneously seeking reflexive approaches to solidarity-based and humanitarian practices. The essays address the ambivalences of solidarity in different fields of reflexive migration and critical humanitarian studies. The articles published in this MAPS Working Paper are a selection of revised papers presented at the Students Conference in November 2025.

The papers presented in this volume

Johanna Bühler examines the practices of writing asylum appeals within the European asylum regimes. Based on auto-ethnographic reflections from volunteer legal work with a Swiss NGO she engages with her own solidarity practices and shows how asylum appeals navigate tensions between solidarity, resistance, and complicity. She argues that legally persuasive appeals often rely on narratives of vulnerability and credible suffering and thus are inherently ambivalent, as they operate within and against increasingly restrictive European migration regimes.

Manuel Lanwer explores how street fundraisers use language and rhetorical strategies to persuade pedestrians to donate to humanitarian causes. Based on a qualitative analysis of fundraiser interactions, he examines how moral responsibility, innocence, and solidarity are constructed in these everyday encounters. The findings suggest that these interactions aiming at acts of solidarity and framed as benevolent, often reproduce unequal power relations and commodify or rather monetarize narratives of suffering and vulnerability.

Anna Rapaud builds her argument on a long-term study of an urban agroecology initiative in a socially marginalized neighbourhood of Marseille. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, she asks whether sustainability initiatives can foster community and reflexive forms of solidarity. She argues that, despite significant efforts, these practices of solidarity repeatedly fail to collaborate with their neighbours due to dynamics of race, class, and belonging, as well as the predominantly white and well-educated positionality of the activists vis-à-vis their racialized counterparts.

In July 2025, around ten people protested outside a migrant reception centre in French-speaking Switzerland to denounce migrants' living conditions and Swiss deportation policies. Morgane Rossel analyses the ambivalences of solidarity within this collective of activists. Her contribution examines how the group seeks to move beyond humanitarian aid toward a more egalitarian and political form of joint struggle whilst prioritizing migrants' own actions. Finally, it critically reflects on the risks asylum seekers face when participating in protests, showing solidarity as a fluid concept that must constantly be re-examined to avoid reproducing domination.

Jonah Vythelingum explores how algorithmic tools in asylum processing have expanded globally, supporting migration management, surveillance, and even legal decision-making. This paper examines how these technologies may contribute to the rationalization of violence, dehumanization, and the diffusion of responsibility in asylum governance. It also explores how AI enables new forms of necropolitical border management. Finally, it considers the rise of "predictable borders" and suggests that these predictive systems signal new forms of colonial border externalization.

Student conference: Solidarities in times of turmoil: Notes from critical humanitarian and reflexive migration studies

November 27-28, 2025, University of Neuchâtel

Day 1: November 27, 2025

10.15-10.30 Introduction by Janine Dahinden und Sabine Strasser

10.30-12.00 Slot 1: Politics of Violence in the EU Border Regime

Chair: Janine Dahinden

- **Annina Mullis** (U Bern): Rightlessness at Europe's Edge: Pushbacks and the Politics of Impunity in the Aegean Sea
- **Panos Kakasadellis** (U Neuchâtel): Solidarity in Crisis: NGO Responses to the Moria Camp Fire During COVID-19
- **Jonah Vythelingum** (U Neuchâtel): Governing, Sifting, and Dehumanizing with the Help of AI: The Implications of AI in European Asylum Policy

Discussant: Sabine Strasser

12.00-13.00 Slot 2: Institutionalized Humanitarianism

Chair: Sabine Strasser

- **Michelle Flückiger** (U Bern) Health Centres for 'Sans-Papiers' – At the Crossroads Between Humanitarianism, Institutional Bureaucracy and Solidarity
- **Franka Vartjees** (U Neuchâtel): Humanitarian Reason in the classroom: Insights from a "Classe d'accueil" in French-Speaking Switzerland

Discussant: Janine Dahinden

14:00-15.30 Slot 3: Solidarity among "Implicated Subjects"

Chair: Sabine Strasser,

- **Moé Altenberg** (U Neuchâtel): Requested Solidarity
- **Anna Rapaud** (U Neuchâtel): Who Belongs in the Garden: Lessons on Urban Solidarity from Le Talus, Marseille
- **Morgane Rossel** (U Neuchâtel): Acting in Solidarity Within Support Collectives for People in Migration Situations

Discussant: Janine Dahinden

15:45-17:15 Slot 3 Performing (Beyond) Humanitarianism

Chair: Janine Dahinden

- **Manuel Lanwer** (U Neuchâtel): Talking for a Cause: How Street Fundraising Performs Humanitarianism
- **Sebastian Luis Egli Santiago** (U Bern) The New Los Angeles: South-South Migration Towards Tapachula, Chiapas
- **Bruno Miguel Pereira Bornes** (U Bern): Reconquering Portugal: The End of Humanitarian Reason?

Discussant: Sabine Strasser

17.30-18.30 Keynote: Louise Hombert (U Neuchâtel): Associative Intermediation in Citizen Hosting. Everyday Governance between Care, Control, and Integration.

Day 2: November 28, 2025

10.15-10.30 Introduction by Sabine Strasser and Janine Dahinden

10.30-11.30 Slot 1 Reflexive Approaches on Solidarity and Citizenship

Chair: Sabine Strasser,

- **Martin Oggier** (U Neuchâtel): The (Hidden) Meanings of Solidarity and an Overt Access
- **Zacharyya Arifi** (U Neuchâtel): Citizenship at the Flashpoint: Understanding the Riots of October '88 Through Critical Migration Lenses

Discussant: Janine Dahinden

11.30-13.00 Slot 3 Beyond Humanity

Chair: Janine Dahinden

- **Anna Piazza** (U Neuchâtel): Sexual Humanitarianism and Queer Narratives: A Critical Analysis of *Out of Uganda* (2022)
- **Sarah Wiedmer** (U Fribourg): Learning from Fungi to Rethink Solidarity

Discussant: Sabine Strasser

14.00-16:00 - Slot 4 Humanitarianism and Grassroot Solidarity

Chair: Sabine Strasser

- **Mohamed El-Hajj (U Bern):** Humanitarian Sentiments and the Politics of Exclusion: Rethinking Solidarity Through the Pikett Asylum Project
- **Annina Rohrer (U Neuchâtel):** Creating Solidarity Across Movements Through Interspaces
- **Johanna Bühler (U Bern):** Acting Politically Through Humanitarian Narratives? The (Anti-)Political Ambivalences of Writing Asylum Appeals

Discussant: Martin Sökefeld

16:15 – 17:15 Keynote Martin Sökefeld (LMU München): Ending Migration, Ending Humanity: Germany's Humanitarian Admission Program for Afghans

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The (Anti)Political Ambivalences of Writing Asylum Appeals: Between Resistance and Complicity

Bühler, Johanna (UNIBE)

Abstract

European asylum procedures require refugees to fit into narrow legal categories and produce credible narratives of persecution within increasingly mistrustful asylum systems. Drawing on the concept of “humanitarian reason” (Fassin 2012), in this paper I examine the ambivalent political effects of humanitarian narratives in the practice of writing asylum appeals. Based on auto-ethnographic reflections on my own volunteer work drafting appeals for a small Swiss NGO providing legal support to asylum seekers, combined with informal conversations and observations within the organisation, I analyse how appeal writing navigates tensions between resistance and complicity.

The paper shows how the production of legally persuasive appeals often requires reproducing narratives of vulnerability, credible suffering, and dangerous countries of origin: narratives that reinforce the exclusionary logics of the asylum regime. At the same time, the practice can also function as a form of strategic resistance by contesting the reasoning of asylum authorities and challenging negative decisions. Drawing on Fleischmann’s distinction between political and antipolitical action, I argue that these practices cannot be understood as purely transformative or solely depoliticising. Instead, they reveal how solidarity practices are embedded in the very structures they seek to contest. The analysis highlights how legal refugee support operates within shrinking political and legal spaces for solidarity, making its practices inherently ambivalent under increasingly restrictive European migration regimes.

Keywords

Humanitarian Reason, Asylum Appeals, Solidarity Practices, Credibility, Ambivalence.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply thankful to the team at AJP and to Laura for giving me the opportunity to reflect on the process of appeal writing and for her insightful input. Also, I would like to thank the students on the course “Critical Humanitarian and Reflexive Migration Studies: Solidarities in Times of Turmoil”: the conference in Neuchâtel, the presentations and the discussions were an unforgettable experience. Lastly, I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Sabine Strasser and Janine Dahinden for giving me the opportunity to publish this paper, as well as for their helpful suggestions and the time they devoted to supporting me throughout the process.

1. Introduction: The Ambivalences in (My) Appeal Writing

European asylum procedures force refugees to fit into narrow legal categories, perform authentic refugeehood and establish credible narratives in the face of increasingly mistrustful asylum systems (Affolter 2021, Fassin 2012, Strasser 2022). By assessing whether individuals are worthy of protection based on racialised and gendered notions of vulnerability and innocence (Strasser 2022; Ticktin 2011), these practices align with what Didier Fassin (2012) has called the logic of “humanitarian reason”: the management of precarious lives through practices and discourses driven by compassionate motivations to alleviate human suffering, rather than a desire to change the structural causes behind it (2012, 1-6). As Fassin highlights, despite its claim to treat all suffering equally, this humanitarian impulse has deeply ambivalent effects. It reinforces inequalities and makes some lives more valuable than others. Asylum processes are one site where this is particularly evident.

Scholars have examined the humanitarian paradigm within diverse actors: Initially, studies on humanitarianism focused mainly on international NGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) (Fassin 2007; 2011) or the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (Malkki 2015). However, more recently, scholars began to look at new forms of small-scale humanitarianism, conducted more informally by ‘ordinary citizens’ (Brkovic 2017; Rozakou 2017; Sandri 2018). While this literature examines how volunteer-driven initiatives acted in response to the so-called refugee crisis with humanitarian motivations, I want to shed light on the ambivalent workings of humanitarian logic at a different site: the practice of writing appeals against asylum decisions within a small local NGO giving legal support to people seeking asylum.

Interested in the political ambivalences that come with employment of humanitarian narratives in refugee support, I draw on Larissa Fleischmann (2020) who suggests the terms “political action” and “antipolitical action”, not as mutually exclusive but coexisting in tension. She suggests that solidarity practices can challenge the conditions of exclusion and discrimination and work toward alternatives (political action), and simultaneously reinforce marginalisation and discrimination, depoliticize structural causes, and expand the power of the state (antipolitical action) (2020, 16-23).

In addition to contributing to debates on reproduction and subversion of power hierarchies in refugee support within the field of migration studies, I also trace the development of my critical reflections about my practices as a volunteer in this paper. The starting point of my examination is thus auto-ethnographic reflections (e.g. Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011) of my personal experiences as a volunteer appeal writer: I explore and analyse my practices working on appeals, the narratives I am (re-)producing and the doubts, contradictions and frustrations I experienced in this process.

Methodologically, the analysis combines these auto-ethnographic reflections with qualitative insights from informal conversations with staff members and observations within the organisation, here referred to as the Access to Justice Project (AJP). It further draws on a longer conversation with one employee, Laura. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms, and some contextual details have been modified to ensure anonymity.

Based on this material, I will explore the question of how the practices of writing asylum appeals at AJP navigate the ambivalent scope for action between complicity and resistance, between humanitarian rhetoric, legal effectiveness, and political effects.

2. Writing My First Appeal

In late 2024, I began volunteering with AJP, a small non-profit organisation that relies on volunteers to draft appeals against negative asylum decisions. During my introductory meeting, Shirin, the coordinator explained the structure and content of asylum appeals to me, as well as providing me with basic information on Swiss asylum procedures. In Switzerland, people receiving a negative asylum decision from the SEM¹ have the option of lodging an appeal with the Federal Administrative Court (*Bundesverwaltungsgericht*), the highest court for asylum decisions. Of course, not everyone is able to draft their own appeals, as doing so requires access to legal processes, an understanding of them, and the knowledge of where – and the resources with which – to seek support. Asylum seekers² with negative decisions approach AJP, often referred by other organisations, because it is known for supporting anyone free of charge, even when there is little chance that an appeal will be successful. “We believe that everybody has the right to appeal against the asylum decision”, Shirin explained. Cases the staff cannot take on themselves are distributed to the volunteer pool. Although I have no formal legal training, the coordinator assured me that I would learn by doing and could always consult them if needed.

2.1. *Appealing Against Asylum Decisions*

Before writing my first appeal, Daniel, an employed lawyer, told me how to proceed, encouraging me to read the interview transcripts and the SEM’s asylum decision thoroughly. The task was to understand the SEM’s reasoning and look at the relevant passages from the interview for each argument. Did they accurately reproduce the complainant’s statements, or were there flaws in the argument? Could certain statements also be interpreted differently? He explained to me that if, for example, the asylum seeker’s credibility was questioned, I would have to check: Did the person really contradict themselves or were they just misunderstood? Could there be other reasons for the discrepancies in the statements? In addition to the specific, case-related arguments, I should also include a section in the appeal that presented the human rights situation in the client’s country, to argue for the inadmissibility and unreasonableness of the deportation, even if the persecution cannot be sufficiently proven.

Without having met the person whose asylum documents I was about to scrutinize, I started with my first appeal. In fact, I never met any of the people for whom I wrote appeals, which made the process feel both intimate and distanced, and at times almost intrusive. I learned from the documents, that this was a young man from Ivory Coast named Samuel. I learned about his migration and the reasons he presented for it. The loss of a loved one, being persecuted, hiding, uniting with others to set off for Europe. For reasons of confidentiality, I will not cite directly from the documents containing Samuel’s statements and the asylum reasonings.

The practice of anonymisation also raises broader questions about the ethics of representing asylum seekers’ narratives in research. In a way, it certainly has a similar effect to what Shpresa Jashari (2026) calls “naming the research object”: the practice of anonymising research participants, which she critically compares to the importance given to referencing established researchers by surname (2026, 41). While anonymisation practices should be critically reflected upon, the specific context of legal assistance makes considerations of

1 State Secretariate of Migration SEM

2 I will use the term “asylum seekers” interchangeably with “clients” for the people seeking support at AJP as it moves the specific context of the asylum application in the foreground.

data protection and the principle of “do no harm”³ particularly important. I will therefore not be able to fully avoid reproducing logics of extractivist knowledge production, but I will try to proceed with care and what Parvati Raghuram and Gunjan Sondhi (2026) have called “epistemic humility”: recognising the limits to my knowledge and restricting my claims to that (2026, 81; cf. Tobi 2020).

With these thoughts in mind, I turn the focus of this paper toward my own practice and attempt to reflect on how my work on asylum appeals involves both forms of complicity and resistance in the reproduction of hegemonic narratives of the Swiss asylum system.

2.2. Credibility, Vulnerability and Humanitarian Reason

I began drafting Samuel’s appeal with the section about the client’s country of origin, where I argued that his deportation is unreasonable and inadmissible, even if the persecution cannot be sufficiently proven. I looked at reports from Amnesty International and travel advice from the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) about the country to find out more about the human rights situation there, the conflicts that might be occurring and the prospects available to young men. My aim was not to provide a nuanced or balanced overview of the situation but instead focused on facts that hinted at danger and conflict in order to frame my client’s country as life-threatening. Additionally, in this part, I argued that the client would be in danger also because of individual reasons if he were to return to his country of citizenship. I emphasised that Samuel could not count on family support, had no social network whatsoever, and would therefore have to make it on his own without any help regarding education, employment or place of residence.

The second part of the appeal was supposed to challenge the SEM’s core argument, their assessment of my client’s credibility. In the SEM’s decision, it had described his account as unrealistic, stereotypical, and lacking emotional detail or insignificant background information which would have indicated genuine experience. I reread the asylum interview line by line, compiling passages in which he described his surroundings, emotions, or shared seemingly irrelevant details. All elements that the SEM considers to be indicators of authenticity, as I understood from their reasoning in the assessment of his lack of credibility. To explain inconsistencies in his stories, I also pointed to his statement that he was taking medication for mental health reasons. The process was rather technical: I moved back and forth between the draft of my appeal, the asylum decision and the interview transcripts, searching for inconsistencies in their reasoning, just as they had searched for inconsistencies in his narrative.

It was only once I read through the first draft of my appeal that I fully comprehended what kind of document, what kind of knowledge I had just produced. The country description portrayed an image of a “zone of danger” (Andersson 2016), insecurity and terrorism and where it was impossible for the client, having no social circle, to survive. I felt uneasy reproducing these narratives, reinforcing stigmatizing, Eurocentric portrayals of the country and its people. The credibility section felt less uncomfortable, as I was content with the way I had suggested his statements were vivid and detailed. I struggled most with the part in which I framed his psychological state as relevant to the assessment of coherence. While this may even be accurate, scholars such as Miriam Ticktin (2011) have argued that a focus on mental and physical health shifts attention away from the structural and political

³ “Do No Harm,” AAA Ethics Forum, American Anthropological Association, accessed March 13, 2025, <https://ethics.americananthro.org/ethics-statement-1-do-no-harm/>.

conditions that produce displacement, individualizing the reasons for asylum. Further, to emphasise the client's need for protection, I had highlighted the parts of the description of the persecution in the appeal and portrayed him as traumatised. One could certainly argue, that by employing its narratives, establishing the client's "promising victimhood" (Welfens 2021), I contributed to the legitimization of the logics inherent in European asylum procedures, where asylum seekers must be considered vulnerable enough to be deserving of protection (Ataç 2019; Strasser 2022; Welfens 2021): I found myself reproducing rhetoric of a system I wanted to contest.

Also, my practice of assembling the narrative in some ways mirrors traits of the logic of decision-making in asylum applications itself. In her field research at the SEM, Laura Affolter (2021) describes how officials employ a technique she terms "digging deep" during interviews: asking the same thing multiple times during the asylum interviews to be able to draw comparisons and discover inconsistencies. This act of specifically looking for contradictions and indicators of implausibility, reproduces institutional mistrust, she argues. Paradoxically, in preparing the appeal I adopted a similar method: going back and forth between the asylum interviews and reasoning, looking for inconsistencies to argue against the SEM. This practice, however, can also be read as subversive: by "digging deep" into the SEM's reasoning, I mobilised their own methodology against them.

Overall, these initial experiences of writing appeals exposed an underlying tension I found difficult to navigate: my own views about what (my) political engagement and resistance in context of the repressive asylum system should look like and the rhetorical strategy I had to adopt to be legally effective, in which the humanitarian paradigm was omnipresent. But, as Fleischmann points out in the context of the German "welcome culture", subversive strategy, the possibility of political transformation, and the reproduction of exclusionary, regulatory structures, coexist (2020, 84). Just as refugee support cannot take place in a "apolitical vacuum" (2020, 13), there is no activist vacuum, no solidarity with refugees that is free from contradictions, hierarchies, reproductions of power inequalities. While my case differs in terms of the broader political-historical moment, as I will discuss further below, her considerations seem helpful to make sense of a similar coexistence of ambivalences in the legal support practices at AJP. In my draft of the appeal, I reproduced exclusionary tenets while also resisting them, which reflected the broader tensions shaping legal refugee support: strategic legal reasoning, normative and activist commitment, and the pervasiveness of humanitarian reason.

3. Strategies and Ambivalences in Appeal Work

Seeking to better understand the tensions I encountered in my own appeal writing, I approached Laura, a long-term volunteer and now employee at AJP. Our conversation shed light on how the organisation navigates the shrinking space of refugee support and became an important moment in the reorientation of my own assumptions about appeals as practices of solidarity and resistance.

I entered the conversation expecting confirmation of what I had implicitly assumed: That filing appeals was in itself a symbolic form of resistance, a political statement that AJP was fighting deportations and restrictive asylum policies. Laura complicated this view, she explained to me, that AJP is keeping the Federal Administrative Court (*Bundesverwaltungsgericht*) busy with the appeals and even overloading them with work. "So, this is also a strategic practice, overloading them?", I asked. She answered that, in general, she would not consider it a political strategy "because our people [i.e., the clients] also suffer when this

process drags on like this”. Only in specific situations, such as appeals against the argument that Greece is a secure third country⁴, did she identify the practice as symbolic resistance, because these appeals are always rejected. There, Laura considered the appeals to be more of a message criticising this implementation. Overall, however, a purely symbolic lodging of appeals would have too negative an impact on their clients.

I further shared my thoughts, my discomfort, at times, with reproducing the narratives of vulnerability with Laura. “I mean yes, appeals are good when they show that a person is not healthy”. “But” she continued, “we are working within a given system”. In her account, it seemed very clear that this was a compromise for the sake of more promising appeals. She gave another example, of the strategic adaption to the logics of the SEM: “[We] always tell the people that they have to go to a psychiatrist”. She reasoned that this was not primarily for the reason of their well-being, although this was of course important as well, but also because it was relevant for the appeals.

The conversation I had with Laura resonated with my personal experiences writing appeals. Antipolitical and political moments coexist both within the organisation and in individual volunteer practices, and Laura is aware of these contradictions, as her reflections show.

There is the general practice of filing every appeal regardless of its chances of success. The most hopeless cases are not signed on behalf of AJP in order to preserve the organisation’s credibility with the Federal Administrative Court, yet they are still drafted by the organisation⁵. There is the overloading of the asylum system with legal appeals, which prolongs the waiting time for their clients while it is simultaneously an effect of the decision to make every appeal possible. And there is the strategic employment of arguments related to mental health. These examples illustrate the ambivalences that must be navigated, when humanitarian logics are embedded in the very conditions under which solidarity becomes possible. In this sense, practices of appeal writing reveal how complicity and resistance coexist within the broader ambivalences of legal refugee support. They also show that even single actions or tactics are hard to categorise as either transformative or depoliticising, as they have varying effects on the lived experience of refugees, political structures and the asylum regime.

Given the particular historical moment, we are currently experiencing, the strategic navigating of political ambivalences in refugee support and migrant activism gains urgency.⁶ The current political climate has an impact on refugee support’s scope for action, as became clear in my conversation with Laura. “The success rate of the appeals we lodge has diminished since 2015.” While it used to be about twenty percent, internal statistics of AJP state that they are now at approximately ten percent, she explains.

Fleischmann urges to see refugee support as a prism through which to view social and political developments in European migration societies. The dominant paradigm in the asylum regime has to be reconsidered, as much as changed since Fleischmanns fieldwork after the so-called refugee crisis that inspired a wave of humanitarian solidarity. As scholars

4 Greece is considered a “safe third country” for individuals who have already been granted protection there, leading to numerous non-admission decisions and return orders from Switzerland to Greece (see assessment by Schweizerische Flüchtlingshilfe 2024).

5 By “hopeless cases”, I mean cases considered unlikely to succeed, such as what Laura called the “classic economic refugee” cases. Although interesting, this issue cannot be discussed here at length due to lack of space.

6 See for example Scheel (2017) on migrant’s appropriation of mobility through the seduction and marriage of European tourists or Korvensyrjä & Osa (2022) on activists adoption of monitoring strategies to resist deportations.

have noted, the border regime has become more rigid and exclusionary in the last ten years (Bueno Lacy & van Houtom; Korvensyrjä & Osa 2022). Rodrigo Bueno Lacy and Henk van Houtom (2020), for example, argue that the “border architecture” is increasingly designed to implement what they call after Giorgio Agamben (1998) “thanatopolitics”, the politics of death, as can be seen in the increasing criminalization of solidarity. Thus, in the meantime since Fleischmanns research, the “welcome culture” all over Europe has become more of a culture of isolation, or of deportation, as migrant-led activist groups in Germany argue (Korvensyrjä & Osa 2022), and the possibilities for solidarity are diminishing as the asylum regime becomes stricter, more exclusionary and more deadly.

4. Conclusion: Ambivalent Solidarities

In this paper I have brought my own auto-ethnographic reflections and the accounts of an AJP employee in conversation with Fleischmann’s framework of political and antipolitical action to examine how ambivalent moments come together in the practice of writing against the SEM’s asylum decisions. In doing so, I have aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of how the space of action for solidarity practices is negotiated within contemporary migration regimes, and how humanitarian logics are reproduced not only by state institutions but also within practices of legal refugee support.

Reflecting on these tensions reveals that appeal writing often echoes the logics of asylum decision-making by mobilising reductive narratives of credible vulnerability. This must be understood as a structural condition: legal support is embedded in, and constrained by, the regime it seeks to challenge. Its success is thus bound to humanitarian logic and dependent on it. Therefore, the discomfort that I feel in my personal practice of appeal writing can be seen as an inherent characteristic of solidarity efforts within the current migration regime. They also serve as a reminder that the narratives I strategically mobilise conflict with my ethical values, and precisely this friction, prevents me from normalising them.

As we have seen, the decreasing success rate of appeals reflects a broader transformation of the asylum regime itself: a shrinking political and legal space for solidarity under increasingly restrictive conditions. How exactly these developments have and still do influence appeal writing could surely be an interesting field of future examinations. Also, in this essay, the statements of those who are not affected by asylum decisions have once again predominated. Further studies need to shed light on how they experience the process.

5. Use of AI

I used Deepl.write⁷ for language purposes, for the linguistic smoothing of certain parts, suggesting synonyms and simplifying long sentences.

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Talking for a Cause: How Street Fundraising Performs Humanitarianism

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Abstract

This paper examines how street fundraisers use language and rhetorical strategies to persuade pedestrians to donate to humanitarian causes. Street fundraisers, often seen in train stations or other public places, are typically employed by third-party firms in order to collect donations and to raise awareness for charitable organizations. As a visible everyday form of humanitarian action, these encounters are a site where moral sentiments, narratives of innocence, and solidaristic rhetoric are performed, mediated, and monetized.

This study asks how street fundraisers use language and affect and how these micro-interactions reproduce or negotiate dominant humanitarian narratives. Drawing on qualitative, exploratory analysis of interactions with fundraisers, it identifies recurring linguistic strategies and patterns through which suffering is framed, and moral responsibility is produced.

The findings show that, although oriented toward benevolent causes, these interactions can reproduce narratives of innocence and reinforce existing power relations. These acts of humanitarianism also become entangled with commercial factors, as language of vulnerability and victimization is used to market a cause. This paper situates these findings within critical humanitarian and solidarity studies and places them in questions of politics of everyday humanitarian practice.

Keywords

Performativity, Street Fundraising, Humanitarian Discourse, Power Relations, Solidarity.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Prof. Sabine Strasser and Prof. Janine Dahinden for their valuable feedback and guidance throughout this seminar, as well as for the opportunity to publish this paper.

1. Introduction

As I pass by the Kirchturm in Bern, a fundraiser in a brightly colored vest approaches me: “do you care about human rights?”, and before I even get to answer she follows: “then listen to what we do...”. If I keep walking, does it mean that I do not care about human rights? Within seconds, I become a potential savior and defender of human rights, having the possibility to help distant others as helpless victims of human rights abuse.

These fundraisers, often employed by third-party firms, collect donations and recruit regular contributors on behalf of large NGOs. As a highly visible and routinized form of humanitarian practice, their work transforms humanitarian concerns into daily performances of empathy and persuasion.

This paper examines how street fundraisers perform humanitarianism through language and affect, and how these performances are embedded within commercial fundraising structures. Drawing on participant observation and conversations with fundraisers, two guiding questions are explored: (1) How do street fundraisers use language and affect to perform humanitarian narratives and (2) how are these performances embedded in economic and organizational structures?

2. Theoretical Framework

In this section, I outline the theoretical framework guiding this paper, focusing on two key dimensions: the concept of performativity, which helps to analyze how language and affect is used to enact humanitarian meaning, and critical approaches to humanitarian discourse, which situates these performances within broader structures of moral and economic power.

2.1. *Performativity and Language as Action*

To understand how language and affect do not simply communicate humanitarian meanings but actively generate them, the concept of performativity is essential. Language does not only describe reality, but it also produces it. To make sense of performativity, Austin (1962) introduces the notion of an utterance, a spoken statement that can either describe reality or enact it. He distinguishes constative utterances, which describe states of affairs, from performative utterances, which do something simply by being spoken (e.g. “I apologize”). For an utterance to have performative success, Austin outlines several felicity conditions: a recognized social procedure, appropriate participants and context, correct and complete execution and sincerity. Austin also shows that language can be performative even when it appears descriptive. “X needs your help” is functionally performative: it produces a moral hierarchy, an emotional response, and a justification for giving.

While Austin (1962) explains how utterances *do* things, Butler (1990; 1993; 1997) extends the concept of performativity, showing that it should not be understood as a single act, but as an ongoing process of repetition structured by social norms. Butler (1990; 1993) approaches performativity through gender and identity: identity is constructed through repeated acts rather than reflecting a pre-existing essence. Performativity, following Butler, means that identities materialize through ritualized repetitions that gain authority when they draw on accepted traditions and institutionalized power relations. Identities are formed within networks of power, and performativity works by repeating established actions or norms: actions of speech re-cite norms, which gain force through repetition. In the context of street fundraising, established humanitarian narratives (innocence, suffering, rescue) gain authority because they are repeated across global humanitarian discourse, as will be shown

in the analysis below. Butler (1997) also emphasizes that speech is not just expressive, but it is binding, harming and shaping the world, and it gets its authority from institutional conventions.

Performativity here is not understood as conscious acting or theatrical display, more closely related to the concept of *staging* (Goffman, 1959). How I understand and employ the authors cited above is how speech and practice bring social realities and subject positions into being, meaning that donor, beneficiary and humanitarian actor are not pre-existing roles, but that they become intelligible through repeated citation of norms. These humanitarian norms (compassion, responsibility, vulnerability) gain their authority through this repetition. This perspective makes it possible to analyze street fundraising not simply as the expression of humanitarian values, but as a site where humanitarian realities and moral subject positions are actively constituted in interaction (Butler, 1993; 1997).

Another important point is that these narratives can reproduce social categories. While these provide a frame for classification, they can also be responsible for unwarranted normative expectations about categories and provoke generalized stereotypes and prejudice (Vasilyeva et al., 2018). These categories have a performative character, meaning they do not simply describe reality but actively shape how individuals and groups are perceived and treated (Dahinden, forthcoming).

Building on these authors, we can see how language shapes social reality and thus offers a lens for the analysis of street fundraising in order to understand how humanitarian narratives gain legitimacy, enact moral hierarchies, and reproduce normative categories through repetition.

2.2. *Critical Humanitarian Discourse and Moral Economies*

While performativity can explain how language acts and produces meaning in street fundraising, critical humanitarian studies help situate these performances within the broader moral and economic structures that shape and legitimize them.

Fassin (2012) argues that moral sentiments (emotions that direct our attention to the suffering of others and make us want to remedy them) have become a central force in contemporary politics. These sentiments shape political discourse and legitimize its practices, particularly when directed toward the disadvantaged and the dominated. He describes *humanitarian government* as the deployment of moral sentiments within governmental and non-governmental institutions. It includes all practices that manage, regulate, and support human lives through compassion. Fassin conceptualizes *humanitarian reason* as the dominant moral economy through which societies make sense of suffering and justify intervention. It links emotions and political action, transforming compassion into an object of governance and uses moral sentiments as a form of political legitimacy. One of Fassin's key arguments is that the politics of compassion is a politics of inequality. Compassion always presupposes asymmetry, and when compassion is exercised, it is always directed from above to below, from the more powerful to the weaker. Precarious lives are thus not defined in the absolute of a condition, but in relation to those who have power over them. Fassin argues that this humanitarian discourse produces categories (victims, innocents) that justify assistance but reduce people to their suffering.

Adding to Fassin, Ticktin (2020) argues that innocence plays a central role in modern discourses and practices of humanity. She claims that humanitarianism and human rights have the tendency to use innocence to create moral distinctions. Innocence works thus as

a boundary concept: it helps to imagine humanity, but also fills the notions of deserving and undeserving, the innocent and the guilty. Ticktin argues that humanitarian and human rights regimes create hierarchies of humanity. The notion of innocence distinguishes between those who help and those who are helped: it frames the victim as unable to take responsibility for themselves, reinforcing power relations in which the helper possesses knowledge, agency, and moral clarity.

Drawing on Fassin offers a framework for understanding how humanitarian discourses shape the moral and political dimensions of everyday interactions, providing a conceptual foundation for analyzing how appeals to compassion and responsibility gain authority within street fundraising. Using Ticktin's framework allows us to see how narratives of purity and vulnerability operate within humanitarian communication and offers a lens for examining how distinctions about worthiness and care are discursively produced within street-level encounters.

While Fassin and Ticktin help us understand the moral and political logics that shape humanitarian discourse, it is also important to understand how the practices of street fundraisers become entangled with market logics. NGOs and other humanitarian practices are deeply connected to economic structures, often relying on third party (profitable) firms for their street fundraising efforts (Birrer, 2013). Scholars describe this trend as philanthrocapitalism, where humanitarian and philanthropic action increasingly adopts market-based logics and profit-oriented structures. These initiatives seek to combine the aims of the for-profit sector with the goals of nonprofit organizations (McGoey, 2012; Edwards 2009). Third-party fundraising companies illustrate this shift: they turn humanitarian outreach into a commercial service and transform affective encounters into numbers.

3. Methodology

This section explains the methodological approach used to explore how street fundraisers perform humanitarianism through language and affect, based on participant observation and informal conversations conducted during fieldwork in Swiss cities.

To explore these dynamics, I allowed street fundraisers representing humanitarian NGOs to approach me and participated in their dialogues. For the first interactions I declared myself as a researcher writing about humanitarian work and asked if it were okay to have these interactions recorded. This did not affect the content of the material, but recording showed some sort of hesitation and presented itself as unnatural. The remaining interactions were not recorded, and I took precise notes after the dialogue. I always declared my interests and my work on this paper after the dialogues. Interestingly, after introducing myself, conversations turned into discussions about the motivation of fundraisers, leading me into my second research question. In total four interactions were analyzed.

I tried to stay open to all sorts of information and not guiding the conversation. I interacted minimally and only asked questions like: "what do you do exactly?", "who are the people helping?", "where does my money go?". During the discussions about their motivation, questions focused on "why are you doing this work?", "how do you feel about having to convince people to donate?" and "how do you feel about your salary being dependent on donations?". It was important to stay reflexive during the conversations, not having any influence on the dialogue or leading it into a direction which fits my analysis. I tried to ignore my critical humanitarian approach and focused on what was said during the interactions, not only on the parts which seemed useful to my analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of my fieldnotes revealed several recurring patterns in how fundraisers performed humanitarianism in everyday encounters. In what follows, I outline the main themes that emerged from the interactions, before turning to the structural dimension of street fundraising that appeared during fieldwork: its entanglement with commercial practices.

4.1. *Scripted Performativity: How Street Fundraisers Construct the Encounter*

My data showed that street fundraising encounters follow a highly ritualized and predictable script. I was always approached in a friendly, recognizable way by fundraisers wearing a bright jacket, and immediately engaged with a moral question like “Do you care about human rights?” After stopping, I was asked what I knew about the NGO and given explanations of its work, usually illustrated with morally loaded examples, such as references to vulnerable children lacking access to education or communities suffering from war. Once my questions were answered, I was promptly asked to donate. These dialogues followed a clear sequence (approach → opener → narrative of suffering → explanation of NGO actions → request for commitment) that made the interaction structured and predictable. Following Austin (1962), these interactions can be understood as performative acts: they actively produce moral hierarchies, evoke emotional responses and generate a sense of obligation. Street fundraising thus meets Austin’s felicity conditions, meaning the requirements under which performative speech acts are considered successful: it is a socially recognizable procedure, the participants occupy appropriate roles, the script is correctly executed, and fundraisers display the expected emotions (urgency, compassion). The performative force of the encounter depends on this alignment of procedure, role and affect. This means that when fundraisers talk about what an NGO does or describe suffering, it might seem as if they are only giving information, but these utterances have an effect: They produce a moral hierarchy (donor = capable helper, beneficiary = suffering subject), they evoke emotion and they create an obligation to act.

Butler’s (1990; 1993) understanding of performativity helps explain how these interactions gain authority. Fundraisers draw on established humanitarian narratives (innocence, suffering, rescue) and by citing these norms repeatedly, they produce and stabilize the categories they depend on. In these encounters, fundraisers enact the role of humanitarian intermediaries while pedestrians are positioned as morally responsible actors. The legitimacy of the interaction comes from the constant repetition of the script across cities. Through this repetition, humanitarian norms become solidified and naturalized. This explains why these speech acts have authority: by using established narratives, repeated across humanitarian discourse and across street fundraising, they become norms, meaning they feel true, natural and morally compelling. This means that fundraisers aren’t just describing suffering, they are citing a norm, and by citing it, they are reproducing it. The repetition of these scripts does more than only structure the interaction. They stabilize expectations about who is responsible and who is vulnerable. The pedestrian is positioned as morally capable whilst the distant other becomes intelligible as suffering, and in between is the fundraiser, who becomes an authorized mediator. These positions do not precede the interaction, but emerge through its repetition, which gives humanitarian norms their apparent naturalness. Performativity here thus operates as a normative force that produces social relations and norms, rather than as the mere acting out of predefined roles.

Speaking on behalf of distant suffering others was also a central part of the encounters. Fundraisers frequently described situations of distant others in ways that positioned them as intermediaries. Statements such as “We get them out of prison”, “We write letters so that innocent people get released”, or “We bring food, shelter and schools” present the fundraiser as someone who can speak on behalf of people who are not present and also adds a layer of *we know what they need*. These moments suggest a form of representational authority. Following Butler (1997), this is less shaped by individual intention but enabled by institutional and discursive norms that authorize some actors to speak while rendering others representable but silent. At the same time, this form of mediated voice reflects what Fassin (2012) describes as humanitarian government. Fundraisers define suffering and justify intervention by positioning themselves and pedestrians as morally responsible subjects as these examples show: “We are standing here for the people, we want to support the people there”, or “We go to governments and do lobby work.” Taken together, these statements show how fundraisers’ speech enacts authorized representation and produces moral asymmetries as a condition for making suffering meaningful.

Speaking for others is thus not only representational, but also productive. It shapes who can appear as a speaking subject and who appears primarily as an object of concern. Within these interactions, beneficiaries become mainly visible through their suffering, while pedestrians are addressed as moral agents capable of action, and fundraisers occupy the position of the authorized intermediary. These subject positions are not simply given but are established through repeated discursive practices. This dynamic illustrates how humanitarian norms contribute to producing particular forms of subjecthood and relational hierarchies in everyday encounters.

4.2. Narratives of Innocence and Hierarchy: Producing Moral Distinctions

Fundraisers’ narratives of innocence, vulnerability and lack of agency resonate with Ticktin (2020), who highlights that humanitarian stories often rely on innocence to make suffering visible and morally compelling, playing a central role in humanitarian discourse. Women and children were particularly prominent figures in the encounters. Phrases such as “(...) children are also sent to war,” “Women in Afghanistan can’t even go outside” or “We want to give children a future because they don’t have one” mobilize innocence to frame beneficiaries as deserving victims. These narratives render suffering legible and morally compelling, but they also reduce people to their vulnerability.

At the same time, these utterances enacted clear moral hierarchies. Fundraisers frequently contrasted my situation with that of distant others: “We are doing well here, we have to share with people who are not doing well,” or “They are not as privileged as we are here” or even “1 CHF here is not worth a lot, but there it is worth a lot.” This aligns with Fassin’s (2012) notion of the politics of compassion, where compassion presupposes inequality and where assistance flows from the powerful to the powerless. Through these narratives, pedestrians are framed as morally responsible donors, while beneficiaries are positioned as passive recipients. This gesture, which is supposed to grant them recognition, reduces them to what they are not by reinforcing their status as victims and muting their voice, not enabling them to shape their own narrative.

Essentialist assumptions were also reproduced. Fundraisers often framed certain groups as inherently lacking education, freedom or knowledge. Statements such as “We mobilize people who go there and educate them,” “Women who get genitally mutilated (...) we need to bring them education” or “We go into villages and educate them about the risks” present

entire populations as homogeneous and deficient. This resonates with the performativity mentioned by Dahinden (forthcoming) where categories are treated as having inherent, stable characteristics. These essentialist representations actively shape how individuals and groups are perceived and treated, reinforcing stereotypes, fixed roles and power hierarchies. These essentialist narratives are also not neutral, they position “us” as knowledgeable and modern and “them” as lacking or uneducated. These repeated, morally loaded narratives do not only describe suffering but actively create the social category of “deserving” beneficiaries, reinforcing hierarchical relations, but also reproducing power structures and western superiority. Also, through this, fundraisers repeatedly portray beneficiaries as vulnerable, innocent and dependent, reproducing hierarchical relationships in which donors and NGOs are active and morally authoritative (Fassin 2012, Ticktin 2020). The performative effects of these narratives are closely linked to broader humanitarian power structures.

4.3. The Instrumentalization of Humanitarian Work for Monetary Gain

Although not the initial focus of my research, conversations with fundraisers revealed an important structural dimension of street fundraising, which is the way it is embedded within commercial practices. All fundraisers I spoke to worked for third-party firms rather than the NGOs themselves, something that was barely visible on their badges or banners. Conversations with fundraisers revealed significant pressure and the emotionally demanding nature of their work. Many described the job as stressful since daily quotas had to be met: “I need one more person before I can go home.” Most of the fundraisers mentioned that it was only a temporary employment for them, but financially attractive, especially because good performance generates bonuses. Their pay structure incentivized them to maximize donations, turning humanitarian persuasion into a form of affective labor, where emotions such as empathy and concern are mobilized within a commercial context (Hardt, 1999).

They all openly acknowledged that their primary motivation was monetary but justified through the moral importance of the cause: “Yes I do this for money, but it is for something good, it makes sense.” They also agreed that sometimes psychological tricks are used to convince people but always justified by “doing good.” Interestingly, when I confronted them with the fact that they were working for profit-oriented firms, they often responded by emphasizing that outsourcing was more profitable for NGOs, arguing that while the first year the NGO does not make a profit, long-term donor commitments made the model cost-effective. In this way, the commercial model was framed as compatible, or even necessary, for supporting the humanitarian cause, and that in the long run it “helps people”. Connecting this to Fassin (2012), we can see how moral sentiment can legitimize practices that might otherwise seem problematic, as economic arrangements are framed as acceptable when presented as serving humanitarian ends.

One participant offered a more reflective account, describing her work as part of the broader capitalist system and acknowledged the broader colonial and imperial dynamics of humanitarianism. She explained that her contribution was to “sensibilize” people in Switzerland rather than working elsewhere because “that is what she can do.” Her reflections highlight how workers themselves navigate the tension between moral commitment and economic necessity.

This logic shows how humanitarian work becomes intertwined with market rationalities, where compassion is not only expressed but also strategically organized, optimized and monetized. These third-party firms operate for profit, yet their commercial model is justified

through the “greater good”, reflecting what McGoe (2012) and Edwards (2009) describe as philanthrocapitalism, the adoption of market logics to achieve humanitarian aims. My informal conversations with fundraisers revealed how these firms put considerable pressure on their employees in order to maximize donations, and thus revenue. These practices draw on the moral legitimacy of humanitarianism itself. Because humanitarian reason is broadly perceived as moral and necessary, commercial mechanisms can be framed as acceptable (Fassin, 2012). This illustrates what I describe as the instrumentalization of humanitarianism: humanitarian ideals and affective labor are used to generate profit. Whenever I mentioned these tensions in conversations with street fundraisers, they often ended with fundraisers reaffirming that the work was justified because “we are doing something good”.

This second empirical theme highlights how humanitarian outreach is embedded in commercial infrastructures that shape both the labor of fundraisers and the moral framing of their work. While separate from the interactional analysis, it reveals how humanitarian ideals are operationalized within a wider economy where affect, ethics and profit are tightly entangled.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, street fundraising can be understood as a site where humanitarianism is both performed and economically instrumentalized. The interactions documented in this paper show how fundraisers mobilize moral sentiments in scripted and socially recognizable ways. Through repeated narratives relying on innocence, vulnerability and lack of agency (often emphasizing categories such as children or women) fundraisers make distant suffering legible and morally compelling. These utterances do not only describe suffering and need, but they also actively produce moral obligations and position pedestrians as responsible, benevolent actors while framing distant others as victims needing rescue. In doing so, they subtly reaffirm notions of western moral authority and reinforce distinctions between those who speak and those who are spoken for. The performative character of humanitarian language shows how words not only mobilize compassion but also reproduce structural inequalities. An important note to add is that these effects are not the result of individual intent but of broader institutional and discursive structures that shape how suffering can be represented and mobilized.

The analysis also highlights how these discursive performances unfold within a commercialized infrastructure. Third-party fundraising firms monetize affective labor and strategically leverage humanitarian legitimacy to justify profit-oriented practices. The result is a form of philanthrocapitalism in which compassion becomes both a moral resource and an economic one.

Taken together, this study shows that street fundraising performs humanitarian values while also reproducing power hierarchies, all within a commercial system that makes this work possible. In that sense, it sits in an uncomfortable position, somewhere between genuine care, ongoing inequalities and the financial realities of how humanitarian work in street fundraising is organized today.

6. Use of AI

This paper has been written with the help of generative AI (Scholar GPT 5.1). AI was used to help translate examples from literature and data, to shorten paragraphs and avoid

repetitions, to review written paragraphs, and to mirror understanding of theoretical concepts.

When using generative AI it is essential to use it as a tool and not to write entire sections. I never copy-pasted direct propositions and when talking about theories I always verified sources myself. I also always double-checked propositions and literature.

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Growing Belonging in Marseille: Lessons on Urban Solidarity from Le Talus

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Abstract

This paper examines practices of solidarity and unintentional exclusion within *Le Talus*, an urban agroecology initiative bordering *Air Bel*, one of Marseille's most marginalized *quartiers prioritaires*. Based on two months of participant observation during an internship at *Le Talus* and subsequent field research, I observed how ecological activism intersects with issues of race, class, and belonging in a context marked by social fragmentation and migranticized urban populations. Drawing on the concepts of *critical humanitarianism* and *reflexive solidarity*, the paper explores how community, citizenship and a sense of belonging can be reestablished through targeted urban sustainability initiatives. By situating everyday ecological practices within the broader dynamics of urban inequality and humanitarian neglect, this paper contributes to debates on how reflexive, justice-oriented acts of solidarities can reframe environmental and social sustainability in European cities.

Keywords

Urban Agroecology, Reflexive Solidarity, Critical Humanitarianism, Urban Inequality, Belonging.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the team at Le Talus for their time, their warm welcome, and their precious insights. Their openness and willingness to share their experiences made this research possible and deeply enriched my understanding of the field.

1. Introduction

In the summer of 2025, I did a two-month research internship at the urban agriculture initiative of Le Talus in Marseille for a university course. Situated next to the QPV neighbourhood (Quartier Prioritaire de la Politique de la Ville) of Air Bel which fuelled my interest in the social dimension of sustainability and, more specifically, how the fragmentation of urban communities affects sustainability efforts. My role was to help with the daily management, to interact with members and neighbours, and to participate in the business aspects, such as cultural events. This paper is based on my observations and analysis of the centres dynamics as well as my role as an intern and researcher, through a critical humanitarian lens. This paper explores which forms of solidarity are visible within the third place of Le Talus and how are they influenced by their surroundings.

In the following chapter I describe my methodology before presenting the third space and its socio-geographic context. I also include a paragraph on my positionality as a researcher during my internship. Then I continue with theoretical insights followed by a topical discussion and a conclusion.

2. Methodology

This multi-method qualitative approach was selected to highlight how solidarity is put into practice and how it affects citizens and cohabitation. During the internship, I conducted participant observations, taking field notes on interactions with visitors and neighbourhood dynamics. I then analysed the data through thematic and reflexive reading including authors such as Flor Avelinos (2024) work on just sustainable transitions, David Harveys interpretation of the right to the city (2008) and Sara Safransky (2014) and Nathan McClintocks (2021) papers on vacancy and greening in cities, identifying recurring themes related to inclusion, power dynamics, and social inequalities. Ethical considerations included obtaining permission of Le Talus to publish the paper without anonymising its contents, allowing readers a specific insight into this field of research. Verbal consent by interview participants and conversation partners to remain unnamed and unspecified was respected and I focused on remaining aware of the power dynamics linked to my dual role as intern and researcher.

3. Presentation of Le Talus

Le Talus is a third place - the first place being the home, the second the workspace and a third place being a setting encouraging community where one can “hang out” (Oldenburg 1989) - in Marseille, whose mission is to introduce agroecology to the city. With five programs (agroecology, environmental pedagogy, sustainable food, recycling, and a socio-cultural programme), it aims to be an enriching place of socio-cultural exchange for locals (letalus.com). Established in 2018, it has grown to become one of Marseille's most important urban ecology initiatives. It is built on an old industrial waste unloading site, owned by *La Société de la Rocade*, an engineering firm maintaining the highway behind the association. The soil was highly polluted after many years of waste dumping and neglect. Over a period of 18 months, the umbrella organisation HEKO Farms, under which the Talus operates, developed various economic and social models to test the ecological viability of the space. The long-term aim was to create an urban farming project for as long as the space was unused by the firm (Denel 2017). Since 2018, Le Talus has become an important local sustainability initiative, with a large garden, a chicken coop and a biodiversity promoting pond. It hosts a variety of events throughout the year, from gardening workshops, to arts,

crafts and music events, to sustainability lessons for school children and their families. The activities are founded on the principle of open participation, which requires people who use the space to become members who help maintain the space, creating a sense of belonging and solidarity amongst members.

As a foreigner, I occupied an interesting in-between position within the team. My French allowed me to fully integrate in the team. However, my status as a foreigner became more obvious when meeting locals or visitors to the centre. Being a white, middle-class, university-educated woman - from Switzerland - I reinforced the homogeneity of the team. Le Talus has faced criticism for this, for creating a space that many perceive and experience as privileged, gentrified, and thus exclusionary. By being aware of my positionality and biases, I actively sought to limit their influence on my impressions and relationships with locals. I reflected critically on my motivations—questioning whether they stemmed from genuine engagement or unconscious tendencies toward sensationalism and white saviourism. Through conversations with my colleagues and friends, I gained valuable perspectives that deepened my self-awareness and challenged my pre-conceived notions of sustainability, gentrification and belonging. My academic background, including a thesis on anti-colonial governance and my current coursework on reflexivity and critical humanitarianism, further informed this process of reflection and ethical engagement. The limited duration of fieldwork and the small sample of interviewees represent constraints, but the immersive nature of the internship allowed for rich, contextualised insights.

4. Contextual framework: Le Talus and Air Bel

Le Talus is located next to Air Bel, the second largest classified QPV neighbourhood (« Quartier prioritaire de la politique de la ville ») in Marseille. QPVs are defined by the single criterion of per capita income, with the common objective being to reduce development gaps between these deprived neighbourhoods and their urban units (Cohen and Potin-Finette 2024). It was built in the 1970s, in response to population growth and the subsequent housing crisis and was praised as “la cité de la nouvelle generation” (ORS PACA 2019). With moderate-sized buildings, the neighbourhood differed from others dominated by tall concrete towers, supposedly favouring the cohesion of residents. The 1200 accommodations, currently accommodating approximately 7000 people, are social housing shared between three major French social housing organisations (Unicil, Erilia and Logirem) (ibid 2019).

Its geographical location was once praised as being self-contained and protected from traffic; however, it has led to an increased isolation of the neighbourhood. Blocked on one side by train tracks and a ring road, and on the other by an industrial area, the neighbourhood is almost entirely cut off. There are few bus lines connecting the neighbourhood with the inner city, little commerce and hardly any employment opportunities within the neighbourhood. The infrastructure rate of shops, health and individual services is three times lower than in the city of Marseille (ibid 2019). These factors contribute to a 50% unemployment rate amongst 15–24-year-olds and a 30% unemployment rate among adults (SIG 2024). In 2023, more than one in two residents lived below the poverty threshold. Most buildings have not been renovated since their construction in the seventies, or if so, then inadequately, exposing residents to health risks such as asbestos, humidity and persistent energy challenges not adapted to the Mediterranean climate (ibid 2024). In this decade-long practice of neglect by authorities, a well-known drug trade has been established, and Air Bel

is an emblematic trading hotspot. This organised crime goes hand-in-hand with a high level of violence and gang rivalry between the “quartiers nords” and the “quartiers suds.”

In its early years, Le Talus was largely unknown to most citizens of Air Bel. That has slowly been changing. Only in 2024, Le Talus created a designated post called “pôle médiation” to develop its relationship with the neighbourhood and dedicate more time and resources to local initiatives. Initiatives held at Le Talus include a Street Art Day, an international culinary day and an outdoor cinema evening. Other events, such as a sustainability games day or a workshop on active citizenship with local youth took place within the neighbourhood or at the local youth centre.

Le Talus’ efforts have not always yielded the desired result, presumably due to its lack of interaction with the neighbourhood in the early years of its creation. While the mediation team had more success last year, progress is slow due to Le Talus’ demography. Its predominantly white, middle-class team, mostly not from Marseille, creates an invisible obstacle to participation that many locals find hard to overcome. If they cannot identify with any aspect of Le Talus, why would they want to participate? During my internship, the events with the highest local attendance were those that catered to the needs and wants of the local population. These events were often suggested and planned by the mediation team and reflected planning and collaboration with interested local parties.

5. Key concepts of critical humanitarianism and reflexive solidarity

Fassin’s notion of humanitarianism provides a central lens through which to interpret the practices and internal logic of Le Talus. According to Fassin (2012), contemporary humanitarianism constitutes a “new moral economy” in which compassion becomes the dominant framework for legitimising institutional action. Rather than addressing the structural causes of inequality, humanitarian actors often focus on alleviating visible suffering, thereby shifting attention from political responsibility to moral sentiment. This dynamic was subtly visible in the everyday functioning of Le Talus, where terms such as *inclusion*, *wellbeing*, and *conviviality* circulated widely as markers of ethical commitment. These moral markers shaped both internal decision-making and external communication, constructing the initiative as a benevolent actor bringing “care” in the form of accessible green space, community activities, and a third place to a marginalised part of Marseille.

However, as Fassin warns, this vocabulary risks depoliticising the deeper issues at stake - housing precarity, racialised discrimination, and long-term neglect by the state in the QPV of Air Bel - by reframing structural injustice as individual vulnerability. The French context intensifies these dynamics, particularly given the long history of racialised governance toward Muslim and postcolonial residents of working-class neighbourhoods.

Abu-Lughod (2013) argues that humanitarian projects often risk reproducing subtle hierarchies of cultural superiority by positioning local populations as lacking modern sensibilities, civic values or ecological awareness. During my fieldwork, interactions between residents and institutions (e.g. landlords, social workers, municipal agents) revealed patterns of suspicion, moral judgment, and bureaucratic violence. Examples included residents’ applications to government aid being delayed without reason, their appeals to authorities about indecent housing conditions (f.ex. mold, humidity, leakages) ignored for years on end or young men being treated with particular violence and suspicion by social workers or local police during the regular police razzias in the neighbourhood. While Le Talus presents itself as an inclusive community space, it sometimes inadvertently echoes

these broader assumptions; residents are occasionally described as insufficiently engaged or unmotivated, reinforcing distinctions between those who “help” and those who are “helped.” Ticktin’s (2020) work on “innocence” further illuminates how humanitarian actors create categories of moral deservingness, implicitly rewarding behaviours and attitudes that align with middle-class expectations of “good citizenship,” while marginalising those who do not. Most activities we organise are targeted toward young children, families and women, with teenagers sometimes labelled as too difficult or unmotivated to work with and no experiences at all targeted specifically towards the local men.

These tensions were also apparent within the organisation itself. Staff often struggled with the official stance of remaining apolitical - especially for funding, partnerships, and public legitimacy - in the face of the inherently political problems experienced by the neighbourhood. This complexity demonstrates that humanitarian reason is not monolithic; it is negotiated, contested, and sometimes resisted within a community.

A reflexive perspective, as argued by Dahinden & Pott (2025) and Jashari (2025), is essential for understanding how researchers but also staff participate in these moral economies. As a researcher-intern, I was inevitably implicated in the humanitarian framing of the organisation. My whiteness, educational background, and foreignness cemented the symbolic authority that shaped my interactions with both colleagues and residents. Despite doing our best to accommodate and welcome every demography, a large majority of events were unattended by Air Bel residents, which leads me to acknowledge the power of more subtle exclusionary mechanisms. The Talus is becoming an increasingly gentrified space. While members are actively seeking to resist this trend, it nonetheless represents a significant source of revenue. Given the organization’s ongoing financial difficulties for yet another consecutive year, this income stream cannot be disregarded.

Acknowledging this positionality allowed me to question how my presence may have reinforced the very hierarchies I sought to analyse. Moreover, the absence of demographic representation among the residents of Le Talus contributes to a perception of exclusion; individuals who do not see themselves reflected in its social composition may assume they are neither the intended audience nor welcome within the space. Raghuram & Sondhi’s (2023) critique of superficial “decolonial” gestures further underscores the need to move beyond self-awareness toward a more critical engagement with the structural conditions that shape solidarity practices. Through this reflexive lens, the humanitarian reason at work in Le Talus appears not as a fixed ideology, but as a negotiated and contested field.

6. Discussion: Establishing Community, Citizenship, and Belonging

Reflecting on my time at Le Talus, I realised that the initiative operated within a deliberately limited breadth of action. Although embedded in a marginalised neighbourhood, it is fundamentally an ecological and sustainability project rather than a humanitarian one, and this institutional framing shaped how the team understands its responsibilities toward the surrounding community. What Le Talus offers - access to green space, educational workshops, convivial activities, and a sense of shared place - is valuable, but it is also bounded by the organisation’s self-defined agenda. This results in a form of selective solidarity: the team engages with residents to the extent that it aligns with ecological goals but stops short of addressing the more structural issues - housing injustice, racialisation, or bureaucratic violence - that residents face daily. In other words, Le Talus often does as much as it wants to, rather than as much as it potentially could, however I am obliged to

mention the financial limits that limit the possibilities of most NGOs in France. This raises questions about the depth and nature of the community it aims to cultivate.

The positionality of the staff further shapes how this community is imagined. The team is predominantly composed of young, university-educated, white and middle-class individuals with broadly left-wing sensibilities. Many are familiar with concepts such as reflexivity, decolonial practices, and power awareness, and these ideas surfaced occasionally in internal conversations. However, despite this awareness, I did not observe these principles being structurally integrated into the organisation's agenda or daily routines. They appeared more as ethical references than operational commitments. This observation is not a critique of individual intentions - everyone genuinely cares about the neighbourhood - but rather of the broader pattern within many grassroots initiatives where progressive values coexist with organisational practices that remain unintentionally exclusionary. Given the socio-political context of Air Bel, one could reasonably argue that reflexivity and decolonial engagement should be more central.

Raghuram's (2023) orientation towards decolonial practice provides a useful framework here. She argues that decolonising solidarity requires shifting from simply helping to actively redistributing space, authority, and opportunities. This involves enabling minority partners to take the stage while those with privilege intentionally step back. In concrete terms, this might mean opening job positions to local residents, sharing ecological and organisational knowledge more intentionally, inviting residents into planning and decision-making processes, or simply creating more consistent avenues for them to shape the direction of the project. The principle is not self-erasure, but rebalancing: ensuring that community members are not positioned only as participants or beneficiaries but as legitimate co-creators of the space.

7. Conclusion

Taken together, these reflections highlight a central tension: Le Talus successfully fosters conviviality and offers a form of everyday community, but the deeper sense of belonging—one rooted in shared authorship and redistributed power—remains aspirational. Recognising this gap does not diminish the value of what the initiative provides, but it invites a more honest conversation about what community-building means in contexts shaped by inequality and racialisation, and about how solidarity can move beyond good intentions toward more transformative practice.

8. Use of AI

In this paper, I used the AI ChatGPT in the final editing stage. I used it as a tool to correct my punctuation and improve certain vocabulary, and I took its suggestions on shortening certain sentences. I have previously used AI to enhance the flow of certain documents and refine vocabulary, thereby learning to write more precise papers.

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Acting in Solidarity Within Support Collectives for People in Migration Situations

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Abstract

In July 2025, around ten people protest in front of a migrant reception centre in a town in French-speaking Switzerland. These individuals are part of a collective which mobilizes to denounce the living conditions imposed on migrants and, through this action, seek to challenge a state councillor to combat the violence and frequency of migrant deportations.

In this paper, I will analyse the forms of solidarity within the collective and explore the ambivalences that characterize these forms of solidarity. I examine how the collective attempts to move away from “humanitarian” aid methods toward a more egalitarian relationship of joint struggle. On the one hand, they are using a clear political position as a strategic tool to go beyond simple assistance and jointly pursue a more radical project by questioning the actual government and its practices that caused smuggling of people on the move. On the other hand, they aim to include the notion of solidarity in their discourse and practice, highlighting the actions of migrants as a central issue in dismantling power relations within and outside the collective and how this is reflected or not in the actions. Finally, I critically reflect on the action itself, considering the feasibility of such an action by asylum seekers, the potential risks and consequences they face. I understand solidarity therefore as a fluid concept that must be constantly re-examined. This analysis allows to avoid naturalizing solidarity and to explore the ambivalence in terms of the risk of reproducing relations of domination.

1. Introduction

In July 2025, around ten people protest outside a migrant reception centre in a town in French-speaking Switzerland. These individuals are part of a collective that supports migrants and, through this action, are seeking to challenge a state councillor in order to denounce the violence and frequency of migrant deportations. The term “migrant” is used in this paper as a social and political category rather than as a fixed or naturalized one. Here, it refers to people who are placed in a position of mobility and othering by immigration policies and state institutions and who intend to maintain residency in Switzerland. I will refer to this collective here by a fictitious name to preserve their anonymity: *Tou.te.s Solidaires*.

In this article, I attempt to understand how this collective, which is politically mobilizing to denounce the living conditions imposed on migrants, organizes itself and tries to act in solidarity. I will in particular focus on the notion and practice of solidarity and show its contradictions, ambivalences and challenges.

Indeed, the collective defines itself as “composed of asylum seekers and people who support them. It mobilizes against the degrading living conditions imposed on migrants by the implementation of emergency aid.”⁸ It offers various forms of support, including legal and administrative assistance for asylum seekers. It also organizes direct political action such as demonstrations and occupations with the aim of drawing the government's attention to the current situation of migrants in the town.

⁸ Quote taken from the collective's official website. I will not cite the exact source in order to preserve anonymity.

Solidarity appears as a central element in their presentation, yet the question how to practice solidarity is more complicated. Indeed, being in contact with several members of this collective, I was able to discuss this “solidarity in practice” with some of them. While the group describes itself on its website as consisting mainly of asylum seekers, most of its members actually hold a Swiss or European passport. This discrepancy between rhetoric and reality is a recurring phenomenon among activist and solidarity collectives working to support and defend the rights of migrants and exiles, such as “Asile LGBT Genève”⁹ or, on a broader transnational scale, “Sea-Watch”¹⁰ and “No Name Kitchen”¹¹. However, it does not invalidate their claims nor their importance within the political sphere. Relevant sociological explanations, such as privilege and access to social and financial resources, help to explain why individuals with regular legal status can act politically with lower risk compared to asylum seekers, who are already in a situation of vulnerability. Indeed, Sandra Mantu explains in her text that “(EU citizens) are much more protected than non-EU migrants who lack such a ‘constitutionalised’ right to equal treatment, and who enjoy a weaker position under EU antidiscrimination legislation” (Mantu, 2025, p. 138). The involvement of responsible citizens is therefore of fundamental importance for collective mobilization in the name of Asylum Seekers.

Nevertheless, I attempt here to examine how the collective responds to this gap between discourse and reality, and how it puts into practice different forms of solidarity in order to build a shared struggle. First, I examine how the collective seeks to distance itself from “humanitarian” aid methods by adopting a clear political stance as a strategic tool to move beyond simple assistance and pursue a more radical shared project of abolishing the current migration governance system. I will therefore analyse how the collective attempts to remain vigilant about the idea of the “white savior” (Bojadzije et al., 2022, p.29) by integrating the notion of solidarity into its discourse in order to move toward a more egalitarian relationship of shared struggle. Finally, I will engage in a critical reflection by examining the strengths and weaknesses of the July 2025 action, its discrepancy with the collective’s public discourse, and how it might be possible to imagine other forms of solidarity.

2. Methodology and Reflexivity

For the preparation of this conference paper, I relied primarily on media materials, namely newspaper articles, which I will not cite here as I have decided to anonymize the collective. Indeed, I struggled initially with the decision to anonymize it, as this could result in silencing their actions. On a closer reflection, however, this particular action had legal consequences for the participants, and I did not want to jeopardize members of the collective.

I also drew on discussions with two friends who are members of the collective. This is how I first became aware of the action and why I chose this event as the topic of my conference paper. One of my friends participated in the action, while the other did not. Both had previously expressed a critical perspective on this particular event. These two friends have been involved in the collective for two years. During a conversation, the friend who had

⁹ Asile LGBT Genève’s weblink: <https://asile-lgbt.ch>

¹⁰ Sea-Watch’s weblink: https://sea-watch.org/?utm_source=GoogleAds&utm_medium=Search&utm_campaign=Brand&utm_term=SeaWatch&utm_content=Spende&gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=22041261829&gbraid=0AAAAApIZxqrbm6oq5aGh7rMjoFXX3vFMM&gclid=CjwKCAjwuanRBhBSEiwAY5y6VwZ2qYCUHYndK578pGnJv1G47EjMvQNwcxbqBT5tY61wLRXkG8MAxoCZ40QAvD_BwE

¹¹ No Name Kitchen’s webkink: <https://www.nonamekitchen.org>

participated in the event shared her experience and her discomfort. She also told me, during the discussion, that she would not take part in this type of action again. She also shared her unease that the action had never really been discussed or reflected upon afterwards. However, she added that the collective is currently carrying out other actions that are successful in terms of media visibility, and the failure of this action strategy should not prevent them from acting.

It is in this context that I situate myself: as someone who is supportive of the collective's projects without having directly participated, yet remaining closely connected to its members. I hope that, on my small scale, I can contribute to the collective's reflective process and support their efforts toward meaningful and socially responsible actions.

3. Moving away from the humanitarian model: towards an egalitarian relationship in the struggle

Through its actions and its discourse, *Tou.te.s Solidaires* positions itself within a radical political stance regarding migration-related issues. It seeks to alert the public sphere while calling upon government officials to address this matter. Drawing on Fassin's (2012) concept of "humanitarian government," this clear political positioning can be understood as a strategy to take distance from traditional "humanitarian" aid methods. According to Fassin, compassion implies unequal relationships, as it is always exercised by people in positions of power over others whom he describes as "precarious lives." He explains that "moral sentiments have become an essential driving force of contemporary policies" (Fassin, 2012, p.1). In this context, the collective aims to go beyond mere assistance - which inherently involves power relations - and instead pursues a broader shared project of abolishing borders without reducing those concerned to the status of victims, thereby avoiding the reproduction of new power dynamics.

In order to remain vigilant against the risk of becoming a "white savior" (Bojadzijeve et al., 2022, p.29) and the power dynamics this entails, the collective emphasizes solidarity as a strategic tool, alongside the assertion of a clear political position. Here, the notion of solidarity appears to be essential. In order to define it, it is useful to return to the text on "Solidarity" (Bojadzijeve et al., 2022). First, the authors draw attention to power relations within different groups and explain that "Solidarity is also frequently an explicit call to resist the hierarchies that underpin a humanitarian rationale whereby relations of 'care' or 'compassion' are enacted on pronouncedly unequal terms" (Bojadzijeve and al., 2022, p.28). The fight against these relations of power and domination—whether within the system or within the collective itself—is therefore a central issue. To address this challenge, *Tou.te.s Solidaires* attempts to create a horizontal form of organisation that limits hierarchical decision-making and encourages shared responsibility by taking migrants' voices into account in the organisation and actions of the collective, as well as by fostering reflection on internal power dynamics. Training sessions are organized to pass on knowledge from the most experienced members to newcomers, and meetings and working groups are set up to address these potential dynamics. In particular, a same-sex working group has been formed to discuss gender dynamics within the association, such as challenges when it comes to integrate and speak up. In this way, solidarity is expressed not only through support, but also through efforts to transform relationships within the collective itself, acknowledging that such power relations exist in all spheres of society and can also be reproduced within the collective. The collective's support sessions also function as spaces where individuals can articulate specific needs and seek assistance on their own terms. This approach

acknowledges and respects the agency of migrants by avoiding the imposition of support and instead responding to requests formulated by those concerned. These sessions furthermore provide opportunities for participants to share experiences and exchange knowledge with others facing similar situations, thereby fostering forms of mutual support and collective learning. However, despite these efforts, processes of categorization and unequal power relations cannot be entirely eliminated. In practice, those who possess legal and administrative expertise are often individuals who do not share the same migratory trajectories as the people seeking advice. As a result, asymmetries of knowledge and social position may continue to shape interactions within the collective, illustrating the persistent challenge of creating genuinely horizontal relationships. In the article, the authors also discuss the importance of migrants' agency and the need to create "mobile commons" (Bojadzijeve et al., 2022, p.27). This concept is used to describe the shared knowledge, resources, and practices that migrants collectively create and circulate while moving across borders. The collective, by presenting itself first as a space for asylum seekers and then for those who stand in solidarity with them, suggests that it also advocates these concepts and emphasizes migrants' action as a key element in dismantling power relations within the group. Finally, the authors define solidarity as "the practices of communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together" (Mohanty, 2003, as cited in Bojadzijeve et al., 2022, p. 30), demonstrating that it is not necessary to have a "coming together," a "common interest," or shared values and political objectives in order to work in solidarity.

However, *Tou.te.s Solidaires* is composed mostly of members who are not people on the move. It is therefore not an intergroup space (Ponzoni and al., 2025)¹², and power asymmetries are indeed present. This does not mean that the collective is dysfunctional or unable to fulfil its goals of mobilizing against current migration policies. Drawing on Ambrosini's concept of "active citizens", (Ambrosini, 2024, p.517) the collective can still function as a space of active citizens, as it enables its members—migrant or not—to assume responsibility toward those who are deprived of rights. It creates a space where solidarity fosters the development of responsible citizens engaged with those who lack legal protections by offering listening support, legal assistance and administrative help.

However, it is important not to naturalize solidarity as inherently pure and taken for granted. It is not an ideal concept, but rather a political and conflictual terrain. Here, Fleischmann's (2021) concept of "contested solidarity" is useful in accounting for potential power asymmetries and minimizing the risk of reproducing relations of domination within the collective. It is therefore necessary to remain reflective about the power relations between citizens and migrantised individuals. Within *Tou.te.s Solidaires*, power dynamics remain evident both during support sessions and internal meetings. In practice, the longest-standing members, whose experience and expertise have grown over time, tend to speak up more often and exert greater influence on decision-making processes. Gender dynamics have also been identified by members of the collective. Consequently, although the collective seeks to challenge power relations, it is not free from forms of inequality and exclusion that require ongoing critical reflection. The collective members' recognition of these dynamics does not prevent their persistence and reproduction within the organization.

¹² Ponzoni and al. (2025) define *interspaces* as intermediary social spaces where people can engage across differences, develop relationships based on reciprocity and solidarity, and distance themselves from dominant discourses that produce hierarchical categories.

I would argue that these internal tensions and contradictions do not imply that solidarity fails. Building a solidarity-based framework as the political foundation of the collective seems relevant and meaningful. However, it appears problematic to ignore the gap between the collective's discourse and the reality of its practices. The gap, that is observed within this collective, shows, on the one hand, the desire for an autonomous structure and independence for the people involved, and, on the other hand, the organizational reality—composed of the same members who, while possessing considerable expertise, also wield significant influence over final decisions and dominate discussions during meetings. Failing to acknowledge these asymmetries can indeed have very concrete consequences on the lives of people already in vulnerable situations, particularly during actions such as the one I present here today.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, the various forms of collective solidarity-based mobilization, although necessary, face limitations that I consider essential to highlight. Solidarity is a complex field of negotiation involving a plurality of actors with diverse realities and sometimes conflicting visions.

While solidarity is indispensable within the collective *Tou.te.s Solidaires*, it is equally important to understand how it is concretely enacted in practice. Adopting a reflexive perspective on the members' positionalities allows for a better understanding of their actions and the impact these actions may have on those concerned, particularly individuals in more vulnerable situations.

Solidarity is continuously constructed as it is lived. Providing a critical analysis of the different forms it may take is, in my view, crucial for moving toward non-humanitarian forms of resistance and shared struggle—forms that remain attentive to power asymmetries and centered on the agency of migrants. By integrating this reflexivity, acknowledging the gaps between discourse and practice, and imagining safer and more inclusive spaces for action, the collective can strengthen its political potential and contribute to meaningful and lasting social transformation.

5. Use of IA

I did use artificial intelligence for my work during the writing process. That is, for the translation and formulation of a few sentences from French to English.

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Governing, Sifting and Dehumanizing with the Help of AI: Risks of AI Implementation in European Asylum Policy

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Abstract

Since 2017, the proportion of asylum applications processed using algorithmic tools has doubled worldwide. The European Union Agency for Asylum (2025) underscores the growing reliance on these tools, emphasizing their contribution to administrative efficiency, more informed forms of “management,” and enhanced coordination through information sharing. These technologies serve a wide range of functions, from predicting migration flows to enabling mechanisms of control and surveillance, such as biometrics, voice recognition, and behavioral profiling. In certain cases, they are even employed as predictive instruments in the attribution of legal status (Ozkul, 2023). Although the legal frameworks governing their use have recently been standardized in the EU, the rapid proliferation of such initiatives continues to raise significant concerns.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines how, and to what extent, these emerging technological tools may contribute to the rationalization of violence, processes of dehumanization, and the diffusion of responsibility. It also explores potential transformations in the solidaristic practices of actors such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), whose future actions of solidarity towards asylum seekers dictated by AI may enable and create fertile ground for an evolving form of necropolitics continually enacted by the EU, in its “management of refugees” (Lacy & van Houtum, 2020). Finally, the paper analyzes the reconfiguration of borders through the notion of “predictable borders” (Baykurt & Lyamuya, 2024), developed through collaborations between governments and the UNHCR in the design of predictive AI systems. In doing so, it questions whether these developments signal the emergence of a new colonial form of border externalization (Dahinden, Jashari, & Moret, 2023), one that could potentially unfold within the framework of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) interventions when shaped or guided by predictive models (Baykurt & Lyamuya, 2024).

Keywords

EU Asylum Regime, Predictive-Generative AI, Necropolitics, Predictable Borders.

Acknowledgement

The idea for this paper emerged from an assistantship with Mihaela Nedelcu¹³, whose research examines the uses of artificial intelligence in migration contexts. I would like to sincerely thank her for letting me work on this topic.

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1. Introduction

A significant portion of the scientific and institutional literature addressing the deployment of AI in the fields of asylum governance and migration control foregrounds arguments centered on “efficiency,” “fairness,” and “accuracy” in decision-making. Within this perspective, the pursuit of technological progress is generally framed as a tool that could, and indeed should, serve the interest of bureaucrats but also of migrants. In this vein, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) (2025) highlights the use of new digital tools in terms of increased administrative efficiency, more informed forms of “management,” and improved coordination through the sharing of information (for example through systems such as EURODAC).

In light of these developments, I assembled a corpus of descriptive materials documenting the various uses of AI by governments and non-governmental organizations, primarily in Europe, within migration policies directed toward asylum seekers. In addition, I examined the position articulated by the EUAA (2025), as well as the regulations adopted in 2024 by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union establishing harmonized rules on artificial intelligence and amendments to existing regulations. These materials constitute the empirical basis from which I seek to interrogate some of the emerging implications associated with these technological developments, drawing on the analytical framework proposed by Lacy and van Houtum (2020), which analyzes the expansion of the EU’s security regime and border controls targeting undocumented migrants, as a necropolitics that criminalizes certain forms of solidarity.

Accordingly, this paper does not aim to provide a global overview of European algorithmic governance. It focuses on specific technologies (tested or implemented) whose capabilities range from control and surveillance (biometrics, voice recognition, behavioral profiling) to status determination or forecasting migration flows (Ozkul, 2023). More specifically, this paper focuses exclusively on the implementation of so-called “predictive” and “generative” AI by governmental actors. Following the conceptualization proposed by Jorge Garza-Ulloa (2024), “predictive” AI refers to statistical models that rely on historical data, such as machine learning or deep learning systems, to estimate probabilities, classify information, and generate forecasts. By contrast, generative AI refers to systems capable of producing new content from large sets of unlabeled data (that is, data not necessarily classified or qualified), for instance through large language models (LLMs). Nevertheless, this distinction remains both blurred and complex. Indeed, certain tools used within migration policies, such as *Foresight* migration forecasting tool or EUMigraTool (Blasi Casagran & Stavropoulos, 2024), operate primarily from their own databases rather than large models, yet ultimately generate the most probable scenarios, making them difficult to classify into a specific category. We won’t dwell on this distinction, but rather explore the specific challenges posed by these tools, which uniquely generate results based on vast databases.

In the following section, I show how processes of dehumanization and the dilution of responsibility could appear especially clearly in the deployment of these forms of AI within migration governance. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is not to provide a fully nuanced and situated analysis of a particular case study. Rather, it aims to identify similarities between recent transformations in asylum policies involving AI and the analytical elements developed by Lacy and van Houtum (2020). In doing so, the paper undertakes a critical inquiry into a set of developments that remain relatively underexplored within social science research.

2. Dehumanization and dilution of guilt through AI tools

In Germany, a dialect detection and recognition technology known as Dialect Identification Assistance System (*DIAS*) was introduced in 2017 in order to “increase efficiency in procedures,” particularly in cases where economic considerations were invoked or where “supporting documents” were missing (Ozkul, 2023, p.51). The system was also intended to verify the “consistency of statements” provided by asylum applicants. Through such examples, we can observe how border-related forms of violence, such as cross-examination, become normalized within administrative and logistical devices (Lacy & van Houtum, 2020). These existing controls being further reinforced by AI-based tools embedded within procedures presented as delivering fairer outcomes precisely because they are supposedly more neutral, being “non-human” (Judijanto, 2025). Indeed, the claim that algorithmic systems may produce “better decisions than humans” is frequently promoted both by public authorities and by technological specialists. For instance in Switzerland, the software *GeoMatch* asylum allocation system, developed through a collaboration between the ETH Zurich and Stanford University, provides probabilistic forecasts intended to predict the most suitable canton to which an asylum seeker should be assigned. These predictions are generated through probabilistic models relying on personal characteristics (Ozkul, 2023, p.60).

Although, among the many generative and predictive AI systems that have emerged in recent years, several projects have faced strong criticism or have ultimately been abandoned. One prominent example is the *iBorderCtrl* project, which was heavily criticized by numerous organizations before being discontinued. Piloted between September 2016 and August 2019 in collaboration with Hungarian, Latvian, and Greek authorities, the system aimed to detect “suspicious behaviors” through facial and behavioral AI in order to assess individuals arriving at a border. Among the reasons cited for its cancellation, the developers themselves indicated that the system was “not fully ready to be implemented yet,” notably because of a high error rate (Ozkul, 2023, p. 48). Those cases appear emblematic of what Lacy and van Houtum (2020) describe as a paradigm of administrative efficiency, in which performance metrics may outweigh, or even override, moral considerations. Indeed, tools such as *DIAS*, with a sufficient error rate, have been implemented in the name of administrative efficiency.

Taken together, these examples suggest that when such tools are adopted by national authorities, they may contribute to an invisibilization of bodies and to forms of dehumanization, through the interpretations of data rather than complex human experiences (Judijanto, 2025, p.5), operating behind a veneer of numerical rationality. In this sense, algorithmic systems may function as additional administrative barriers: they intensify bureaucratic procedures, participate in forms of institutional violence through this increased bureaucratization, and establish new forms of bordering. These borders are enacted through the digital sorting of individuals considered acceptable or unacceptable or even categorized as more or less desirable. This dynamic can be observed in the Netherlands, where scoring systems classify asylum applications according to “chances of employment” (Ozkul, 2023, p.23). These systems rely on applicants’ personal data in order to evaluate their likelihood of accessing employment. In this regard, Everuss (2021) refers to the emergence of “smart borders” to describe processes in which human–machine interactions, or even machine–machine interactions, participate in the constitution and construction of borders themselves.

2.1. *Moral outsourcing and new AI legislation in the EU*

Furthermore, although the use of artificial intelligence in asylum procedures within the European Union formally requires human decision-making¹⁴, unlike in countries such as Canada or the United States, these developments nevertheless illustrate the continued rationalization of violence through technological instruments implemented because they are perceived as efficient by governance actors. If such tools are introduced primarily for reasons of efficiency and cost-effectiveness, it becomes difficult to imagine a significant increase in human oversight that would genuinely benefit asylum seekers (Memon, Given-Wilson, Ozkul, Richmond, Muraszewicz, & Katona, 2024). Instead, these technologies risk facilitating the delegation of certain forms of discretionary power to algorithmic systems. From the perspective of bureaucratic practice, when officials are primarily expected to follow established procedural rules, the central question becomes whether they agree or disagree with the outcome produced by a tool considered both efficient and reliable. Consequently, I argue that processes of moral outsourcing and the dilution of responsibility for violence within this procedural chain, already identified by Lacy and van Houtum (2020), may now also operate through the delegation of moral responsibility to AI systems involved in asylum decision-making.

At the same time, however, recent years have witnessed important legislative developments in Europe concerning the regulation of AI. In 2024, regulations adopted by the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament established the first binding harmonized legislation governing the use of AI in asylum-related policies. Contrasting with the United States, where the emphasis has largely been placed on principles of “ethical use¹⁵.” These regulations establish uniform conditions of use and require, among other provisions, compliance with the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as guarantees of “human oversight,” “transparency,” and “data quality.” Nevertheless, in with AI being an increasingly opaque form of governance (Judijanto, 2025), meaningful transparency remains difficult to achieve, just as the discriminatory biases embedded within existing AI systems appear equally challenging to eliminate (Judijanto, 2025, p.5). Even if new European legislation may improve the contestability of algorithmic decisions compared with previous frameworks, the effective respect of principles such as “non-discrimination”¹⁶ remains uncertain. Indeed, the AI systems implemented thus far tend not to correct human biases but rather risk amplifying them under the guise of rationality and technological neutrality. In this regard, Judijanto (2025) refers to a form of “epistemic coloniality,” whereby data is interpreted through a predominantly European analytical framework that further invisibilizes the knowledge and lived experiences of individuals originating from the Global South.

2.2. *Distancing techniques in AI bureaucratization*

We have seen several examples of the invisibilization of bodies behind processes of digital sorting, processes that may ultimately influence decision-making regarding asylum

¹⁴ 2019/2144 et les directives 2014/90/UE, (UE) 2016/797 et (UE) 2020/1828 (règlement sur l’intelligence artificielle), J.O., 12 juillet 2024.

¹⁵ <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2023/11/01/2023-24283/safe-secure-and-trustworthy-development-and-use-of-artificial-intelligence>

¹⁶ Article 10 : [Convention-cadre du Conseil de l’Europe sur l’intelligence artificielle, les droits de l’homme, la démocratie et l’État de droit](#), Série des Traités du Conseil de l’Europe, n° 225, 2024

applications. These decisions increasingly rely on digital frameworks that risk reinforcing Eurocentric biases in decision-making, while simultaneously enabling new forms of moral outsourcing through AI when it comes to decisions that may produce or legitimize violence. Altogether, these dynamics entail significant risks of deepening inequalities within an already complex asylum system further transformed by the integration of artificial intelligence. As Lacy and van Houtum (2020) argue, the complexity of bureaucracy, historically legitimized within the Western world, tends to reinforce its own legitimacy precisely through increasing procedural and institutional complexity.

This legitimized bureaucratization operates through a range of distancing techniques embedded within asylum procedures, including invisibilization, dehumanization, and the delegation of discretionary power. Such mechanisms contribute to the rationalization of violence and effectively “enable” forms of violence within the asylum system (Lacy & van Houtum, 2020, p.75). Furthermore, Lacy and van Houtum (2020) emphasize that these processes of distancing also occur spatially, thereby sustaining and reproducing systems of violence through geographic and institutional separation. This can be observed in the reliance on refugee camps, where people are displaced in Mediterranean islands for the possibility of violations of international laws (Lacy & van Houtum, 2020, p.80) and in failures to provide care in situations where people’s lives are at risk.

Building on these developments, the following section examines how artificial intelligence is involved in humanitarian collaborations between European states and NGOs, with new mechanisms through which such forms of spatial distancing can be further extended.

3. New Ways of Bordering: Predictive Borders

To further explore new dynamics of spatial distancing in asylum governance with AI, it is useful to examine how this can take shape in the form of international institutional solidarity. Certain NGOs have begun to employ predictive and generative AI systems such as *EUMigraTool*. This tool produces short-term predictions of “migration flows” and has been tested by seventeen NGOs operating in Spain, Italy, and Greece (Blasi Casagran & Stavropoulos, 2024). Its stated objective is to anticipate potential “risks” by calculating the probabilities of future “migration flows”. Framed through familiar arguments emphasizing “security,” “regulation,” and “management,” such initiatives invite us to reconsider the forms of collaboration highlighted by Lacy and van Houtum (2020) between NGOs and European states in the sorting of individuals considered desirable or undesirable. In doing so, these collaborations also raise important questions regarding the evolving meaning and practice of solidarity.

In this context, Baykurt and Lyamuya (2024) describe the emergence of what they call “predictable borders.” This concept is illustrated by technological initiatives such as *Project Jetson* migration prediction initiative, developed by technology companies in collaboration with the UNHCR, with the stated aim of predicting future migration movements in order to provide “better support” (Blasi Casagran & Stavropoulos, 2024: p.51). As in the previous section, such developments reveal a continued transformation of human beings into objects of management. The paradigm of performance and efficiency remains central, yet it is now intertwined with solidaristic practices that increasingly operate through new forms of distancing. Consequently, beyond the question of who is entitled to “solidarity”, we must now also ask who *will be* entitled to it, in the future. Indeed, predictive digital borders introduce a logic of anticipation that may produce very tangible consequences. For example, algorithmic predictions could shape decisions about whether individuals or populations are prioritized in

situations requiring humanitarian assistance. These anticipatory mechanisms are, in turn, justified by the argument that they enable more effective humanitarian assistance (Baykurt & Lyamuya, 2024), but whose effects may be very concrete.

For instance, if the actions of the UNHCR become guided or even dictated by predictive models, processes of inclusion and exclusion may occur before individuals ever encounter the “iron and paper borders”. For Lacy and van Houtum (2020), “iron borders” refer to the material and coercive dimensions of borders, such as walls, fences, and militarized controls, that physically restrict movement and make the violence of exclusion directly visible. By contrast, “paper borders” designate the bureaucratic and administrative mechanisms (procedures, documents, and legal classifications) through which mobility is filtered and controlled, producing more diffuse and less visible forms of violence while simultaneously diluting responsibility within institutional processes. In this sense, predictive borders could be understood as a new, digitally produced form of bordering within bureaucratic spaces (Baykurt & Lyamuya, 2024), anticipating events that have not yet occurred but are inferred through algorithmic projections. Thereby creating new spatiotemporal borders within migration trajectories.

To grasp the implications of this anticipatory governance, both in terms of time and territory, it may therefore be useful to conceptualize predictive bordering as a new form of externalization of “symbolic boundaries,” a concept developed by Janine Dahinden, Shpresa, Jashari, and Joëlle Moret (2023). If international solidarity actions towards refugees become structured by predictive models, these symbolic borders may begin to appear “around countries or regions” that are deemed unlikely to constitute future priorities for assistance (Baykurt & Lyamuya, 2024). In such cases, entire regions might be deprived of anticipated humanitarian support because algorithmic projections classify them as lower priority. This would effectively extend the externalization of European borders through digital policies operating within countries from which people have not yet emigrated (Dahinden, Jashari, & Moret, 2023).

Seen in this light, solidarity actions towards refugees conducted between the EU and international actors such as the UNHCR may become continuously more bordered from above through pragmatic technical policies (Ambrosini, 2024), a dynamic that predictive AI tools could further reinforce. Such technologies risk normalizing an already managerial approach to migration governance, in which human lives are increasingly subordinated to data-driven forecasts. In doing so, they may further entrench a system where solidarity becomes progressively more conditional and selective (Ambrosini, 2024), ultimately reinforcing inequalities rather than delivering the promised narrative of technological “progress” (Lacy & van Houtum, 2020).

4. Conclusion

Taken together, this article has sought to offer a critical analysis of both the current and emerging challenges surrounding the use of generative AI in migration policies. The ongoing reconfiguration of asylum policies and of institutional forms of international solidarity cannot be reduced to the mere implementation of new technologies; rather, it unfolds as part of a broader and continuously evolving process of border and migration control. Moreover, given the rapid pace at which these tools are developing, providing a fully up-to-date account remains inherently difficult. Nevertheless, it appears essential to situate their deployment within a migration system already marked by multiple and entrenched forms of violence.

More broadly, the developments examined in this paper, largely driven by imperatives of efficiency and cost reduction, do not appear to foster greater respect for the rights or humanity of refugees. On the contrary, they may contribute to the further rationalization of violence, operating under the cover of historical narratives that celebrate a “European modernity” (Lacy & van Houtum, 2020), a modernity that is now being digitally (re)constructed and framed as the only legitimate form of truth. In doing so, these transformations risk creating fertile ground for the continued legitimization of an evolving form of necropolitic within the asylum system. Namely “new” forms of governance which are always based on a necropolitic directed against people categorized as undesirable within a hegemonic Western system (Lacy & van Houtum, 2020).

5. Use of AI

For this paper, I used ChatGPT-5 (15.03.2026), for translation only. I asked for “a word-for-word translation that doesn't alter the meaning of the sentences, while making the phrasing sound more natural in English”. Therefore, it also corrected my grammar and spelling mistakes.

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