refugee

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Abstract:

“Huc pauci vestris adnavimus oris. Quod genus hoc hominum? Quaeve hunc tam barbarum morem permittit patria? Hospitio prohibemur harenae; bella cienque primaque vetant consistere terra. Si genus humanum et mortalia temnitis arma, at sperate deos memores fandi atque nefandi.”

(Publi Vergili Maronis, Aeneidos, Liber I, 538-543)

“A few of us swam here to your shores. What kind of people are these? What country allows such barbaric customs? That denies us even the hospitality of the sand; that declares war on us, and forbids us to come to rest nearby. If you fear mankind and the weapons of the mortals, believe at least in the gods, mindful of the just and the unjust.”

(Virgil, Aeneid, Book I, 538-543)

This entry explores the term ‘refugee’, focussing on the multifaceted construct of identity. Specifically, it will analyse how identity is initially formed on the recognition of an intrinsic common foundation to all human beings, and then how it is constructed ‘from the outside’, where cracks occur within this common foundation and other layers of political identity emerge to divide and often legitimise forms of discrimination against refugees.

These aspects remain constant in the way refugees are interpreted as being different, and make up for underlying components in the mediation of power dynamics that refugees are subject to.

It is by no means possible to exhaust the identity of refugees in a single category, culture or time period. The attempt of this entry is to offer a collection of viewpoints, narratives, inputs from different cultural and historical contexts, mainly through poetry and visual arts, in order to identify the similarities between them, whereby the contrast indicated above is particularly outstanding.

Etymology:

Rifugiato: individuo che, per ragioni essenzialmente politiche, ma anche economiche e sociali, è costretto ad abbandonare lo Stato di cui è cittadino e dove risiede, per cercare rifugio in uno Stato straniero. […]”

(Source: Enciclopedia Treccani Online: https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ricerca/rifugiato/)

Refugee: 1680s, “one who flees to a refuge or shelter or place of safety; one who in times of persecution or political disorder flees to a foreign country for safety,” from French refugié, a noun use of the past participle of refugier “to take shelter, protect,” from Old French refuge “hiding place,” from Latin refugium “a taking refuge; place to flee back to,” from re- “back” (see re-) + fugere “to flee” [...].

(Source: Online Etymology Dictionary: https://www.etymonline.com/word/refugee)
Problematization:

“A ny uprooted, homeless, involuntary migrant who has crossed a frontier and no longer possesses the protection of his or her former government. [...]”

(Source: Encyclopedia Britannica: https://www.britannica.com/topic/refugee)

In this definition, it emerges clearly how being a refugee cannot be an act of choice (as it can be that of an immigrant, for instance). It is rather an involuntary condition which consists in the deprivation of aspects of human life that are necessary to make it endurable as well as meaningful in a number of different ways, and the search for a safe place to live as a consequence of that. In light of this, two aspects of this word can be identified.

On the one hand, being a refugee is a condition that transcends the culture, nationality, place of origin, religion and so on of the individual, and just concerns them as “bodies” and as “human beings”.

On the other hand, it is a political status, which is subject to the rule of law:

“In contrast to earlier international refugee instruments, which applied to specific groups of refugees, the 1951 Convention endorses a single definition of the term “refugee” in Article 1. The emphasis of this definition is on the protection of persons from political or other forms of persecution. A refugee, according to the Convention, is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion”

(Source: https://www.unhcr.org/media/28185)

These two perspectives are intertwined and influence each other in the meaning of this word, as well as in the consequences and the relations of power that are linked to it.

In other words, the focus lies on the contrast between the need for a safe haven from danger and distress, as a fundamental precondition for leading a (human) life, and the political and social repercussions of holding refugee status from a legal standpoint. These aspects are always present in the way refugees are construed as being different, albeit to distinct and varied extents, and often constitute the underlying elements of divergence in the negotiation of power dynamics that come into place in the definition of their identity.

“Even though these bodies are deeply political, in that they emerge at the intersection of corporeal and geopolitical relations of power between the West and the global South, they lack civic status; their dehumanisation is, in this sense, an effect of these very power relations that claim to sustain them as human bodies, in the first place (Ticktin, 2011).” [Chouliaraki, Stolic; 2017].

Before moving onto the next section, it is important to make clear the key distinctions between the terms ‘refugee’, ‘migrant’ and ‘asylum seeker’ which are often used interchangeably – sometimes on purpose, as will be illustrated in the examples provided further in the text - but which are actually quite distinct.

Migrant – An umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons [...].

Asylum seeker – An individual who is seeking international protection. In countries with individualized procedures, an asylum seeker is someone whose claim has not yet been finally decided on by the country in which he or she has submitted it. Not every asylum seeker will ultimately be recognized as a refugee, but every recognized refugee is
initially an asylum seeker [...] .

(Source: International Organization for Migration (IOM):  
https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms)

Communication strategies:

In recent years, Italy has been the main gateway for migrants reaching Europe from the African continent as well as Middle Eastern Asia, and has seen a progressively growing number of refugees arriving at the first port of call in the southern coasts.

In attempting to understand how the ‘otherness’ of refugees is discursively constructed, it is interesting to focus on their representation in the context of Italian media discourse.

In particular, research has shown how they are often represented as dehumanised by means of impersonalisation, passivisation and objectification (Cerase and Lucchesi, 2022), or they are portrayed in a caricatured and derogatory manner, with allusions and implications that label them, purposefully without contextualisation, often as a pretext to assert a political stance on other matters, such as the criticism of institutions, of other European countries, etc. (Materassi and Pezzoli, 2021).

Although the definition of a ‘voluntary migrant’ and that of a ‘forced migrant’ is intrinsically blurry, from a legal point of view it is necessary to identify a boundary between the two, in which the subjective right of asylum seekers to find refuge is different from that of other migrants who may have legitimate interest moving to a new country, but are not forced to do so by constraint of immediate danger.

According to international law, the right to asylum is unconditional because of the protection regulations in place towards people that belong to this specific category [1]. On the contrary, for those who choose to come voluntarily and unforced there should be different bureaucratic procedures to follow.

In Italy this channel of accessible and truly effective procedures to welcome and guarantee economic and social integration to those who come voluntarily is not yet implemented, which leads to a great number of migrants who wish to enter the country regularly, to do so through asylum applications, even though they do not fall into this category. This produces mechanisms of distortion in the reception system, which in turn create and maintain an indefinite ‘state of irregularity’, as well as altering the asylum application process, which ultimately degenerates into social marginality and the exploitation of these people (Schiavone, 2021).

This can be identified in the social and political discourse reported on the media, where ‘refugees’ or ‘asylum seekers’ are often not referred to as such, but fall under the more generic denomination of ‘migrant’ or ‘clandestine’ (in Italian: “migranti”; “immigrati”, “clandestini”) as an undifferentiated population whose specific identification is not known, reported, or given mediatic relevance, thus contributing to creating an ‘identity’ that is left fluid and vague.

Moreover, this description is usually combined with demeaning vocabulary, generally relating to the animal world, such as ‘parasites’, ‘leeches’, ‘scroungers sponging off the welfare state’ (Perocco and Della Puppa, 2023), or in the expressions such as ‘migrants are swarming’, ‘migrants were herded’.

These kinds of frames have a twofold effect: on the one hand the legitimization of the status quo, without having to act on the implementation of effective legal measures against these kinds of irregularities, thus perpetuating a system of reception and integration that is fundamentally flawed.

On the other hand, they are instrumental in fostering in the public opinion the fear of a great number of people invading the country, who take advantage of the welfare state whilst causing social distress and being a threat to the political order.
This is however contradicted by the actual data reporting that, in the face of a rapidly growing phenomenon (see the UN High Commission's "Global Trends" report on World Refugee Day, 20 June, 2022), the number of refugees in Europe is rather low compared to the population (a ratio of 5 asylum seekers per 1,000 inhabitants), and that Italy is the country with the lowest number of asylum seekers in Europe.

Another interesting and powerful way the ‘otherness’ of refugees is portrayed as fluid is identifiable in the water metaphors and measure-words associated with the word ‘refugees’ (e.g. flood of, influx of, tide of, wave of ~) (LTD Collocation Dictionary, 1997).

Dry land, the human place by definition, that of stability, cities and homes, is contrasted with the instability and unpredictability of water as an element that cannot be grasped, contained and controlled. In this sense, the water-related semantic field is particularly effective in conferring an identity to refugees that seem to lie outside the realm of people and the human consortium, belonging instead to the wilderness of nature.
intentionally shocking pun, which aims to provoke insufferable feelings of injustice in the viewer.

The horrifying picture taken by a Turkish press photographer in this case deliberately brings the tragic implications of this dehumanized and impersonal identity to its climax: the face of the little one is not visible, the photo anonymously captures his body from behind, against the background of the open sea. Here, such a controversial and appalling image (made worse by the fact that we are looking at a dead child) interacts with the two-word provoking headline (which reinforces the reference to childhood) in a jarring way, playing on the emotional appeal, as it immediately arouses emotions of anger and indignation in the mass reader.

The use of images to convey specific meanings and trigger emotions in the viewers has been widely analyzed as, for example, in Susan Sontag’s On Photography (1977) where the philosopher discusses both the ethic and the aesthetic elements of the visual impact of photographs and their role in the construction of a specific representation and interpretation of social reality. For more theoretical sources on this, see Media Discourse by Norman Fairclough (1995) and Elements of Semiology by Roland Barthes (1967).

In this case, the underlying intent of the newspaper’s front page is to criticise the European Union and its inadequate reception policies for refugees in the face of an emergency (the full article can be found at: https://ilmanifesto.it/edizioni/il-manifesto/il-manifesto-del-03-09-2015).

This is achieved by appropriating the political representation of refugees as dehumanized and impersonal, generally belonging to a right-wing political discourse, in order to highlight the unacceptability of this stance by contrast, almost suggesting that this child’s tragic death is the result of treating refugees not like all other human beings, that is, not granting them the protection and safety they deserve.

To conclude, a further consideration should be made. While the photo purposefully portrays the impersonalization of the little refugee, who then becomes a symbol of all the refugees dead in the migration crossings, the child had a name and a story, which has to be reported and remembered to avoid the risk that turning a human being into a symbol makes us forget his/her individuality and humanity.

The little boy was called Alan Kurdi [2], he was a Syrian refugee that, together with his family, was trying to reach Europe from Turkey. The Kurdi family had been attempting to enter Canada to join their relatives in Vancouver, but after they were denied the application for the asylum and thus an exit visa from Turkey, Alan’s father relied on a people smuggler to reach the Greek island of Kos. Several people lost their lives in that trip aboard an inflatable boat, and after the incident made the headlines throughout the world, the identified perpetrators were detained with charges of human trafficking.

Subversion:

In this section, a selection of examples from poetry and visual discourse aims to provide counter-reactions to the political representation of refugees’s identity more often than not portrayed as threats or as victims.

Here, the human aspect is made more salient and is critically contrasted with the political and social one, transcending the boundaries of nation, cultural background, state borders, rule of law, etc., to start from the primary condition of being human before any law is applied or enforce on it.
A Contextualized Dictionary to Problematize Otherness

The poem "Refugee Blues" by British poet W.H. Auden, was first released in 1939 on the verge of World War Two. It reflects on the condition of Jewish refugees who were compelled to flee Nazi Germany but were unable to find safety abroad (see also "We Refugees" by Hanna Arendt and Giorgio Agamben's comments on the same text).

The poem portrays the agony and suffering of having to flee one's home and being denied basic human rights. Particularly suggestive are those lines in which natural elements, untouched and untouchable by human laws, are posed in stark contrast with the circumstances of the protagonists, a German Jew and his family. As human beings, they belong to this same nature and life, broadly understood, where the only constraints are those of the body (e.g. the need for food, warmth and shelter), and yet they are restrained, discriminated against, persecuted for their 'political' identity.

The contrasts are for example: old yew blossoming anew every spring vs. old passports; the poodle kept warm and the cat left in vs. German Jews left out in the cold; fish swimming free vs. the metaphorical distance of the same freedom for the protagonist; birds in the trees singing at their ease vs. the human race; falling snow vs. soldiers marching looking out for them.

The lines that best capture and emphasise this contrast

Refugee Blues (1939)

Say this city has ten million souls,
Some are living in mansions, some in holes:
Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us.

Once we had a country and we thought it fair,
Look in the atlas and you'll find it there:
We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now.

In the village churchyard there grew an old yew,
Every spring it blossoms anew;
Old passports can't do that, my dear, old passports can't do that.

The consul banged the table and said:
'If you've got no passport, you're officially dead';
But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive.

Went to a committee; they offered me a chair;
Asked me politely to return next year:
But where shall we go today, my dear, but where shall we go today?

Came to a public meeting; the speaker got up and said:
'If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread';
He was talking of you and me, my dear, he was talking of you and me.

Thought I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky;
It was Hitler over Europe, saying: 'They must die';
We were in his mind, my dear, we were in his mind.
are:

“If you’ve got no passport you’re officially dead”

But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive.

Jewish refugees from Czechoslovakia being marched away by British police at Croydon airport in March 1939

Saw a poodle in a jacket fastened
Saw a door opened and a cat let
But they weren't German Jews, my dear, but they weren't German Jews.
Went down the harbour and stood
Saw the fish swimming as if they were free:
Only ten feet away, my dear, only ten feet away.
Went through a wood, saw the birds in the trees;
They had no politicians and sang at their ease:
They weren't the human race, my dear, they weren't the human race.
Dreamed I saw a building with a thousand floors,
A thousand windows and a thousand doors;
Not one of them was ours, my dear, not one of them was ours.
Stood on a great plain in the falling snow;
Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro:
Looking for you and me, my dear, looking for you and me.

Visual discourse

This is a popular image circulating on the Internet in 2015 the year of Europe’s refugees crisis.

Once again, here refugees are portrayed as victims, lacking individual identity, falling with no possibility of reversing their direction, being dehumanised (Malkki, 1996).

The very strong visual metaphor of the boat upside down instils an immediate sense of helplessness, while subtly inviting the spectator to a change of perspective. The ‘victimhood’ of the ‘victims’ in itself, the people are not drowning in the sea: under the caption making a point of their lack of choice in being refugees, the viewer is almost encouraged to make an active choice towards them, to virtually reach out to catch them.

https://www.20minutes.fr/culture/1681107-20150907-refugies-artistes-celebrites-appellent-solidarite
This documentary-film directed by John Haptas and Kristine Samuelson (2019) shows the case of refugee children in Sweden, suffering from the so-called 'resignation syndrome'.

This is a form of complex PTSD, originally identified in Sweden in the 1990s, which affects children and teenagers who have experienced psychological trauma after difficult and protracted relocation processes.

As application for asylum often take a long time to be evaluated before it may be possible to grant them and their family the protection they seek, they withdraw in a state of severe depression and diminished consciousness, as a reaction to the stress and the feeling of hopelessness.

There is solid research surrounding the effect that migration can have on the psychological and socio-cultural wellbeing [3] of human beings, but resignation syndrome seems to be a specific reaction to the trauma of refugees, who in most cases flee from dangerous situations in their country of provenience and are forced to wait, sometimes having to deal with their requests being rejected and issuing appeals over the course of years, before they are granted the legal permission to remain in the new country.


This picture comes from the exhibition Déplacé•e•s by
French photographer JR. The artist uses photography to elicit awareness on human rights and environmental issues: [https://www.jr-art.net/projects](https://www.jr-art.net/projects).

Among his projects, he made a series of installations that spread awareness about the millions of refugee children around the world.

This is a public art performance held in Piazza San Carlo, Turin, Italy, where hundreds of people took part in bringing five tarpaulins depicting the images of children encountered during visits to refugee camps from Rwanda to Greece as well the image as a young girl from Ukraine.

Drones captured the event, showing how the children’s figures collided providing an extraordinary spectacle.

Discussion:

The ambivalent portrayal and perception of refugees both as victims in need of protection and as threats to the nation order is an interesting starting point for developing the discussion further.

- What image and or idea comes up in your mind when you think of a ‘refugee’?
- How do you conceptualize the difference between ‘migrant’ and ‘refugee’?
- How are refugees portrayed by the media in your country? How are they portrayed in other written or visual sources (books, pictures, documentaries, etc.) that you have come across?
- How is the image of the Western world as ‘safe’ and ‘protective’ to welcome ‘others’ that aren’t part of it perpetuated?
- In your view, being a refugee is a permanent or a changeable condition? Think of the speech vietnamese actor Ke Huy Quan gave at the 95th Oscars ceremony when receiving the Oscar for best supporting actor [link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZ1SUKxSAi4].
- How many different types of ‘refugees’can you think of?
- Do you know any refugee? What is their story?

References/Further Readings:


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