Destabilizing Borders

Possibilities of solidarity in the encounter between volunteers and forced migrants

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ABSTRACT

With the recent closure of borders, which prevents asylum seekers' arrival to safer countries and their right to free mobility, international solidarity with refugees resonates as a call for action. In the name of solidarity, many forms of intervention and volunteerism have been mobilized. However, the question of solidarity between "forced migrants" and "international volunteers", – a widely debated object of study – within the context of the right to mobility, is hinged on an asymmetry and ambiguous duality that deserves closer attention. While one form of mobility is hindered and criminalized, the other is not only possible but also encouraged. In this paper, a group of Italian volunteers and displaced Syrians are analyzed together while they are traveling within a van on the streets of Lebanon, in a common attempt to exercise their right to mobility (which Syrians are not entitled to). I analyze what happened inside the van, where volunteers intentionally make use of their privilege in order to extend it to the refugee traveling with them. I look at both refugees and volunteers, in order to investigate how these two categories might actually co-constitute and re-produce each other. The van, as our "space of mobility", appears as painfully synonymous with whiteness, since the volunteers' presence went completely unquestioned, in contrast to that of the refugee. The incident allows us to think of borders, bodies, spaces, and whiteness together: borders cease to be mere national boundaries, becoming a constant radical distinction in visibility and privilege instead. Acknowledging and displaying this disparity and contradiction means calling into question volunteers' positionality. This reflection raises the question of how we can explain the feasibility, the very possibility of practices of solidarity across inequalities, and aims to orient us toward possible answers.

KEY WORDS

International solidarity, global mobility, privileges, positionality, whiteness

INTRODUCTION

From January to April 2017, I volunteered with an Italian organization in the north of Lebanon, inside a settlement of wood and nylon huts, where Syrians who fled from the war have been living for the last seven years. I was part of an Italian non-violent peace corps. This is a small organization of Italian volunteers living inside the camp. They aim to be side by side with the victims of conflicts and violence in order to defend and support them every day.

In this case, they live together with Syrian people displaced by war, and now stuck in unsafe informal settlements and considered illegal migrants. Being on their side, most of the time, means accompanying them during otherwise unsafe movements and travels within the country.

The context considered in this study, Lebanon, reflects the contemporary hegemonic national discourse on migration and security, where national borders are "sacralized" and any acts outside its regulation are hence criminalized (Simon 2007, Welch 2002, Sharham 2010). Within Lebanon, Syrians cannot apply for asylum since the country did not sign the Geneva International Convention, which means that its legislation does not provide asylum protection, and the State is relieved from all the duties it would otherwise have towards Syrian asylum seekers. Certainly, the mass arrival of Syrians has been a cause of social and economic pressures that tested the already poor and insufficient Lebanese resources and infrastructures (PAX & Alef 2016). However, this influx of Syrians has been associated by media with the threat of terrorism, increasing Lebanese fear and intolerance toward the neighbouring population. Moreover, in 2015, Lebanon changed its policies on border regulation, shifting from a position of indifference, almost blindness (Mourad, 2017), to one of closure and oppression toward Syrians. While before 2015 it was possible for them to enter the country visa-free and then apply for a residence permit, this law introduced category-based restrictions on border access, valid only for Syrians, and set new rigid conditions (and fees) on residence registration and renewal (PAX & Alef 2016, 18-20). After 2015, despite the enduring Syrian conflict, it has become almost impossible for Syrians to find any legal route to enter Lebanon. This law created the conditions to systematically generate illegal ingresses and criminalize Syrians who have no other choice but to cross the border via smuggling. Volunteers, conversely, get in and out of the country with a tourist visa that they can easily obtain at the airport.

Within this context, I report on a specific episode related to practices of solidarity between displaced Syrians and the European (Italian) volunteers that took place within a precise regime of border control and regulation.[2] In this paper, I aim to contribute to the debate on borders in two ways: on the one hand, I analyze how borders affect human encounters; on the other hand, I point at how certain encounters and solidarities across inequalities can destabilize such "b/orders" (Van Houtum & Kramsch 2005).

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[2] For the purpose of my argument, as for the success of volunteers' intervention, volunteers must be understood as white Western, thus privileged, citizens, more than just Italians. As I will show in the following sections, volunteers accrue the necessary authority to defend Syrians by making evident their provenance from the white Western world. Moreover, I consider them firstly as European, to recall European historical production of the image of global citizenship in regard to its citizens, and the dispatching of volunteers around the globe, in opposition to the problematized migration of migrants come from the "Global South".

Firstly, I will present the case: Italian volunteers and displaced Syrians are captured together while they are traveling within a van through the streets of Lebanon, in a common attempt to exercise their right to mobility (which Syrians are not entitled to). Secondly, the incident will be unpacked as many borders will come to the surface. I consider how national borders intervene on the bodies of Syrians who cross them outside their regulation. Then, I follow the traveling of borders themselves, their continuous slippage and reproduction in public space. This movement raises questions about where and how borders are reproduced and become embedded in everyday life. Moreover, it shifts our attention from national borders to other divides that, over time, have informed an understanding of the world as hierarchically nationally ordered. In the second section, drawing on theories of the racialization of mobility, I look at the convergence of borders, bodies, and space in the case of the two differently legitimized but co-present bodies of volunteers and of refugees within the van. What does the co-presence of European volunteers and Syrian refugees tell us about the different possibilities for visibility while traveling and about the politics of mobility which define such possibilities?[3] Finally, and most importantly, I ask how the volunteer's and the refugee's bodies implicate each other in their visibility.

In this paper, I assert the necessity to consider volunteers and refugees together in borders and migration studies. As these subjects are already hierarchically ordered in their encounter, I propose that their position needs to be dialectically understood. As Gaztambide-Fernández writes: "the subject positions are largely enforced – yet sometimes contested – through the manifold human encounters that are the definitive marker of the complex social world at the turn of the 21st century" (R. Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012, 45). This investigation engages with the ambivalence that arises in discussions of borders and migration. Borders legitimate and naturalize the control of movements of people around the globe by closing to some and opening to others; that is, not everybody who crosses borders is made migrant – others are prized as volunteers. The work of analyzing this contradiction prompts me to question my positionality as a researcher and as a volunteer. I will focus on this task in the last part of this paper. This paper, however, actually originated from reflections on my position, on what allowed and legitimized my travel and my presence there. I thus adopt reflexivity and positionality as necessary methodological means to deal with questions of borders and mobility in our global, asymmetrically interconnected present.

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[3] Here, I refer to Syrian as "refugees" even though they do not have the legal status in Lebanon. I do not use it as a legal category but I adopt the emic definition of 'refugee'; in the understanding of volunteers and organizations operating with refugees, Syrians are recognized as entitled to asylum protection.

DISOBEYING "B/ORDERS" – PRACTICES OF DESTABILIZATION

One of the main responsibilities of the volunteers in Lebanon is to accompany refugees during their movement through the country. The main offices and hospitals are situated in the bigger cities, Beirut and Tripoli, located in the center of the country – a geographically central position which reflects the politically central position of these cities as symbols of the state and its authority. As such, travel toward these central places is regulated by soldiers at checkpoints positioned on the main roads, with more checkpoints closer to the city. These checkpoints stand as deterrent barriers around the capital, filtering who is allowed access and who is considered a threat. Cars can drive through them undisturbed, but a soldier can randomly stop any of them and inspect the documents of its passengers. Syrians without documents would be arrested. Volunteers accompany Syrians mainly in order to prevent their arrest, or, if this is unsuccessful, to quickly activate an aid chain of lawyers and activists working to monitor arrests and to assist in getting people released.

One day, I was traveling with A and F, two other volunteers, and Q, a twenty-four-years-old Syrian man living in the same camp.[4] As usual, we were traveling on a communal van, part of the public transportation in Lebanon. Together with five or six other passengers, we were speeding toward the city, where Q had an appointment at a hospital. He had no regular residence permit and no documents with him, except for Syrian documents. Once at the checkpoint, the soldier stopped the minivan, opened the door, and asked for all men's documents – women were never asked for documents according to the social norm. Q handed over his Syrian ID card; the soldier asked Q to exit the van and follow him. Until that moment we were sitting silently, one row in front of Q. Then, before Q got up, F said to the soldier, "Don't worry, he is with us". We would explain that he was "with us" to assure the soldier that Q's travel was in a way allowed, legitimized.

Initially, we would speak in English, then a bit in Arabic, but we would switch between the two languages. The practice of emphasizing our Westernness served as our pass(port). We would rely on our physical aspect, our way of dressing, on the red cover of our European passport and, mainly, we would talk in English instead of Arabic (even when we could have) and Italian (our own language), even if the soldier could not understand English. Everything worked to manifest our privileged position as white Western Europeans. We would not mention the name of the organization, which would have sounded meaningless to the soldier, and would not have given us any legitimate role; moreover, the stamp on the passport actually labeled us as tourists.

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[4] Names are hidden to guarantee anonymity.

However, we could be perceived as fitting the image of the Western humanitarian worker, and we hoped this would give us the authority to continue our travel.

The soldier stood for a while looking at the four of us, then he turned to Q: "you should not leave the camp". And he finally let us go. "Next time do not leave the camp", he repeated, as a warning. The van left, we all breathed a long sigh of relief, and the fear that Q could be arrested left us. One of the passengers, a Lebanese man sitting in the front, turned to Q, remarking, once again, that as a displaced Syrian, he was not allowed to leave the camp.

BORDERS AT WORK

During this episode, national borders are dispersed everywhere: the Lebanese geographical boundaries, the camp, and the border recreated by the checkpoints toward the county's urban power centers (the capital, as well as government buildings). The very act of passing through any of them – even when unavoidable (fleeing from war, or having to go to hospitals) – marks Syrian bodies as "trespassers", as "transgressors", "culprits" and "threats" for the country and its inhabitants.

Firstly, let me briefly elaborate on how I understand this "criminalization" through (border) regulation. None of these borders exist physically, and they are not impenetrable. Syrians could always cross them. Not even the national boundaries have been completely closed to them, even if in 2015 the measures to limit the issuance of visas drastically reduced the number of Syrians eligible to apply for it. This law maintained few possibilities for Syrians to cross the border according to the rules – for instance, there are visas allotted for "humanitarian reasons", but only for "extreme humanitarian cases", in which compliance is highly discretionary and extremely unlikely (PAX & Alef 2016). The existence of this near-fictitious chance preserves the differentiation between a legal and an illegal order and shifts responsibility and guilt onto Syrians when they resort to smuggling. This border regulation systematically produced the crime and the conditions for Syrians to "commit" it – remember that, before 2014, Syrians could cross the border visa-free.[5] "To cross" a border turned into breaching or violating it. Syrians, more than fleeing subjects, transnational displaced people, become illegal migrants, criminals, violators.[6]

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[5] For more Information about the new legislation see for instance: https://lb.boell.org/en/2015/05/05/visa-requirements-syrians-lebanon-continues-destabilize.

[6] Police practices toward undocumented Syrians changed depending on whether they entered the country legally or illegally: so whether they crossed the border before or after 2015. Displaced Syrians who arrived before 2015, but could not renew the residence permit after, would also be arrested but detained to a lesser degree than Syrians arriving after 2015 who did not have any documented authorized entrance. Being "marked" by smuggling, they were subjected to much more suspicious controls if arrested. The problems thus appeared to be not so much having, or not having, a legal status in Lebanon (that almost no one had) but the very act of crossing the border.

 Similarly, the soldier and the passenger referred to the camp as a delimited, separated, closed area. But this camp, like almost any other in Lebanon, was an unofficial, informal camp, a self-arranged grouping of huts arising on a former farmer's land, with neither precise boundaries nor walls or fences. Still, refugees were expected to comply with this re-produced border separating citizens and non-citizens, as the soldier in the van reminded Q. Once again, crossing an imaginary border made Syrians responsible for transgressing the common order.

Both the checkpoints and the camp show that national boundaries, defending the integrity of the nation, have been moved "from the 'edge' to the 'center' of public space" (Balibar 1998, 111). They operate not only as lines to (not) be crossed but as filtering systems (Balibar 1998) and isolating zones, hiding and removing the presence of undesired Syrian refugees from sight. However, it also suggests that borders are not relevant as physical, visual objects. As Henk Van Houtum and Olivier Kramsch notice, in their physical morphology, they are, instead, relevant because of the "representation and interpretation that they embody" and their "objectification and realization through everyday social practices" (Van Houtum & Kramsch 2005, 3). Borders are entrenched through their daily reproduction operated by different actors. We see the border divide being accepted and naturalized, and people drawing a constant division between an "us" and a "them" (in this case, for instance, by the soldier and by the passenger). Borders thus become matrices informing our everyday orientation toward who is perceived as other. These "decisive borders" (Balibar, 111) operate in several domains of our everyday lives. They affect the possibilities for solidarity – as the prejudice towards the passenger might demonstrate. It is of great importance to consider how borders are brought into the terrain of daily life, because here they can be negotiated, reinforced, or conversely destabilized, as volunteers' acts can show.

Thus, I am looking inside the van, where the soldier who opened the door starts asking for documents. A "border gaze" reverberates within the van: an invisible, impenetrable border (Sharham 2010, 75). Toward this border gaze, I now turn my attention. Volunteers and Syrians are crossed by this gaze. But, even though they are both foreigners in the country, their presence in the van is questioned in a different way The soldier's gaze positions volunteers and refugees and their belonging in that space of the van differently. What (other) kind of "b/order" is at work here? Which matrices inform and enable the volunteers' practice, as well as the soldiers' decision?

In this regard, the van, both a means of movement and a space of control and restriction, is understood as a metaphoric space of human mobility. Sitting in the van means actualizing the effective feasibility of global mobility, being able to exercise our freedom to move once we

have crossed the borders. The "border gaze" exerted in the van filtered who was entitled to global mobility and who was not. Volunteers' legitimacy and authority result from a precise regime of global border control. The soldier's gaze did not only evoke and reproduce a national border which separates national citizens and "foreigners", but also the very imperial border that defined who can move over the globe and who can't - who can be a "global citizen" and who is cut out (Mignolo 2000, 2006).

VOLUNTEERS AND REFUGEES AT THE CONVERGENCE OF BORDERS, BODIES, AND SPACES

Consider Shahram Khosravi's words: "[the border] gaze is not an innocent act of seeing, but an episteme determining who/what is visible and invisible" (Khosravi 2010, 76). The issue of visibility/invisibility, if cautiously applied to this context, can offer important insights. Khosravi refers to a border gaze exercised on migrant's bodies especially inside Europe, where they are objectified by racial modes of seeing. They are invisible because they are not recognized as an equal social and political existence, but they are always noticeable and observed. Questions of visibility and invisibility have also been central to studies about the systematic whiteness of contexts such as the academy and the airport, as Sara Ahmed discusses in her "A phenomenology of whiteness" (Ahmed 2007). Whiteness, more than just a characteristic or property of these bodies, is the starting point, "the background", "the behind". Whiteness makes non-white bodies stick out while guaranteeing white bodies un-noticeability. This invisibility reflects and allows bodies' access, orientation, and movement in the space, by making these bodies feel familiar or alike with it.

Making necessary distinctions, I think it is possible to draw a parallel between these theories and the episode of the van. In the van, it is Q's invisibility that allows him a safe passage and, in fact, until the checkpoint and the control of documents, the body of Q, as well as of other Syrians, does not stand out; is not visible. Conversely, the volunteers' presence is mainly noticed, depending on their physical appearance or clothing. However, I suggest that the volunteers' attempt to be recognizable, in particular as white Europeans, as well as the request to pass and its verbalization in English, in order to make their white privilege explicit, all demonstrate that the implications of visibility/invisibility are overturned. When volunteers kept on using a foreign language (specifically English), they did not mean to engage in dialogue or to be understood, but to gain the legitimization to travel, and to extend that to the (potentially) criminalized body of Q. We spoke English (not Arabic or Italian) to display our privileged presence and positionality within the global matrix, reminding the soldier that "white" (and English-speaking) entails an entitlement to safe and undisputed mobility. Volunteers knew that,

when "caught" in this space of mobility, the co-presence of their phenotypical characteristics and their visibility would make the difference, simply for how they "belonged" in the van.

By looking at how the bodies of volunteers and refugees respectively can inhabit the same space, that of the van, differently, we experience the politics of borders, mobility, and migration as intertwined and racialized domains. Indeed, "racialized borders" regulate the movement of people (Shahram 2010, 4, 40). Volunteers feel confident, almost familiar within that site of mobility and control. This familiarity recalls Ahmed's work on whiteness and the relation between spaces and bodies: as certain spaces have extended the surface of white bodies, these bodies can live, move, stand in this space unnoticed, unquestioned, unstopped. In contrast to Syrians, the volunteers' presence in the van was normalized by the marks of their privilege (Ahmed 2007, 149). The space of the van suggests that the terrain of global mobility (of which the van is a symbolic embodiment) is informed by a "default position" of whiteness and reminds us of the consequential "difference" once one does not happen to be white (or in the possession of the "right" passport).

The van is a space of asymmetric mobility, one characterized by two types of mobilities: one that is questioned and limited and one that is not. Consequently, Syrians are put in a position of need and dependency on volunteers. The very presence of European volunteers' bodies in the van evokes a history of coloniality (Bhimani & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2011), which separate volunteers and refugees on hierarchical, intertwined lines. The matrix operating in this daily practice confirms the contemporary consistency of colonial and imperial differences between different nationalities (Mignolo 2006). For this reason, when studying borders and migration, our attention should be focused not only on refugees as if they were the only "border-crossers": there are also the volunteers, who arrived in Lebanon and sat beside them in the van. Different nationalities come with different entitlements and privileges, uniquely regulating their right to mobility, giving one the "right" and possibility to help while putting the other in the (forced) condition of being helped.

ON THE VOLUNTEERS, THE FREE TRAVELERS, THE GLOBAL CITIZENS, ME.

As Anton Schutz points out, "through politico-juridical discourse and regulation, this [border] system" has "created a politicized human being (a citizen of a nation-state) and a ... 'no-longer-human being'" (quoted in Sharham 2010). I invite the reader to consider his words, to insist on the tight hierarchical, dialectic relation that keeps embedded together both the figure of the citizen, here an international traveler, even a rescuer, or fieldworker, and the figure of the "needy", the disempowered other. These two subjectivities are not only intertwined but implicated in a colonial present. A broad strand of literature has focused on how border

regulation, policies, and discourses have produced the refugee as a "de-politicized" subject. I suggest here, the need and importance to focus on the parallel creation of the figure of the "international volunteer" as a "global citizen", and its implication with the de-politicization of the other as "the needy".

The figure of "the volunteer" arises as a central mobile subject in the arena of global mobility. European governments and institutions and UN agencies promote several fellowship programs for young citizens to volunteer abroad in projects of international solidarity and social-economic development. For instance, in support of refugees trapped in refugee camps. The figure of the volunteer enters the same international order and regulation of global mobility that sets the conditions for asylum seekers and refugees to be vulnerable and dependent on others (Black 1994), and volunteers might be one of their "rescuers". The regime of border regulation has thus morally connoted two opposite mobile subjects: the illegal, needy migrant, un-free and dependent, and the voluntary helper, the rescuer, supportive and sympathetic. These figures are captured here in their dialectic dependency. Their encounter might maintain the dual system of "repression" and "compassion" (Fassin 2005) in which refugees are trapped inside camps. Finally, in this relation of dependency of refugees on volunteers, the border between "us" and "them" operates ordered on a colonial divide.

Volunteerism is particularly moralized in Western Europe (Muehlebach 2012, Rozakou 2016) as much as their global mobility: Europeans are not only endowed with the right to movement, but such mobility is framed as unproblematic, desirable, and even necessary. Therefore, there is an explicit necessity for volunteers, including myself, to engage with our positionality when going to volunteer in Lebanon: to consider what our privileged position as mobile volunteers – in my case also as a researcher – in such a racialized space of mobility not only is but, moreover, can be? How, in this view, might we be taking up this space, standing beside and supporting "illegal" travelers?

As young, white, able-bodied, cisgender, Italian citizens, me and the other volunteers of the van fit with a widespread public image that is fashioned by European institutions promoting a model of "active citizenship" (Rozakou 2106), and embodied by the figure of the young volunteer, moralized (white) figure, representative of European citizens. With the practice of accompaniments, the aforementioned group of volunteers takes their positionality into account and makes the first step towards realizing the possibility for solidarity within historically hierarchical and unequal relationships.

The Italian organization shows one way to critically engage with the problematic conceptualization of necessary and desired volunteerism, for instance when aspiring volunteers

apply to be part of it. The organization asks for their engagements beyond the request for skills or professionalism because such criteria easily and uncritically put volunteers in a position of superiority and power over the refugees. Requiring or claiming volunteers to have "professional skills" to be exported abroad, in fact, would mainly function as a justification for their travel, by assuming that such skills are lacking, needed, awaited, necessary – thus reinforcing the diametrical position of dependency in which those who cannot travel are fixed. Instead, their practices of solidarity start by acknowledging that volunteers' passports, and the privilege linked to them, are the very factor enabling their presence abroad, in the camp (and the van), more than particular personal skills. Thus, owing to their privilege, they can facilitate Syrians' safe mobility within the country. By accompanying migrants, volunteers respond to their privilege and subvert its exceptionality. They subvert the logic that classifies and categorizes different bodies, defining who can travel and who cannot, that governs the possibilities for global mobility.

CONCLUSION

Instead of studying the crossing of borders by refugees and volunteers as separate phenomena, in this paper, I looked at these figures as they appeared together in the shared space of the van. Firstly, I showed how our van, our space of mobility, became painfully synonymous with whiteness – how the volunteers' presence went completely unquestioned in contrast to that of the refugee. Secondly, by considering them together, we saw the emergence of a colonial divide underpinning the politics of global mobility which still affects the way in which different bodies can live, move and extend into different spaces. I considered, hence, how practices of aid can become highly problematic due to how the figures of the volunteer and the refugee are already intertwined in a historical, political, hierarchical relationship. These two figures are therefore ordered on a similar divide and re-enforcing a relation of dependency.

I thus proposed the urgency for volunteers to consider their positionality, a necessary precondition for the possibility of solidarity. By doing so, volunteers and refugees delve into the social and historical conditions, privileges, and inequalities which grounded their encounter, in order to find a different way to engage with them. Volunteers resorting to their passport is one possible outcome: it offers them "the possibility to develop discursive spaces" together with refugees, to "begin to explore [their] relationship with one another" (Sehdev 2011, 272) within an imperial and racist terrain.

This paper aimed to elicit questions not only on how to participate in practices of solidarity and support the other's movements, but also how to report on them without remaining embedded in Eurocentric, or better, modern/colonial categories of thought: without reproducing

the Eurocentric hierarchical framing of "us" and "them". The border I explored between volunteers and refugees is a matrix that would affect our understanding of solidarity by ordering solidarity relations on the axis us-them. However, we should acknowledge that volunteers and refugees' encounter is already embedded in this dilemmatic duality, bringing to a sterile point our queries on the volunteers' effective disruption or reproduction of hierarchies in practices of help toward refugees.

In a way, this volunteers' practice actually warns that "we are stuck" (Ahmed 2007), in showing volunteers acting as a pass for Syrians and enabling, solely thanks to their presence, their capacity to move in Lebanon. However, volunteers' practice brings this border – between them and refugees – to the surface, where the order that has been fixed can be destabilized. It aims to unmask the pervasiveness and implications of our privileges and bring them to the surface, to contrast their predisposition to remain on the background, where they turn invisible. Being concerned with how these two categories might actually co-constitute and re-produce each other means, firstly, refusing to accept volunteers' and refugees' unequal positions as a given, but instead as historically and politically produced. It also means challenging the idea of the need for "our" intervention and unmasking the invisible mark of privilege on which our position is hinged. It helps to keep open "the force of the critique" (Ahmed 2007, 165) toward this form of human encounter – between "international volunteers" and "forced migrants" – before it is normalized as an encounter that can be planned by one side, taking its unequal setting for granted; before we dismiss its facet of marker of the current regime of control over global mobility that reinforce and maintain colonial differences.

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