

Sappers of Fortress Europe: Exploring the Micropolitics of Borders through the Occupational Culture of Asylum Caseworkers in Greece

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Abstract:

This paper considers borders as ubiquitous and pervasive social relations and as sites of struggles, which are shaped through and transformed by social antagonisms and contestations. While much discussion of border struggles focuses on migrants' resistance and various forms of activism, this paper provides insights on the micro-resistance of those who, instead of overtly opposing and contesting the biopolitical power of border regimes, are integral to their operation: asylum caseworkers who filter and select border-crossers. The paper presents data from interviews with self-identified *leftist* asylum caseworkers in Greece who, through their work, seek to create cracks in the so-called "Fortress Europe". By exploring the somewhat unexplored occupational culture of leftist asylum caseworkers, we show how, while trying to resist bordering regimes, leftist asylum caseworkers both critique and reproduce the power relations they seek to subvert. Essentially, we provide valuable insights on the limits of resistance due to the workings of powerful technologies of government- informed by neoliberal managerialism- that are operational in day-to-day life of the asylum process. The paper thus provides a novel exploration of the complex and entangled relation between technologies of power and micro-resistances within border regimes in the significant context of Greece.

Key Words: micropolitics of borders, asylum caseworkers, occupational culture, counter-conduct, Greece

1. Introduction

This paper draws on an understanding of borders as an array of ubiquitous and pervasive social relations and interactions in everyday life (Balibar 2010). As such borders also constitute sites of struggles that are shaped and transformed by contestations and antagonisms (De Genova, Mezzadra, and Pickles 2015). This is largely what we will depict in this article as the micropolitics of borders. While much discussion of border struggles focuses on migrants' resistance and various forms of activism (Dadusc, Grazioli, Martinez 2019), this paper by conceptualising borders as a series of everyday interactions provides insights on the micro-resistance of those who, instead of opposing and contesting the biopolitical power of border regimes, are integral part of its operation: namely, *leftist* asylum caseworkers, whose task is indeed the filtering and selection of border-crossers, but who seek to create cracks in the so-called "Fortress Europe".

Existing studies have provided fruitful insights on issues around credibility, discretion and dilemmas in decision making; institutional changes; the social construction of the refugee status and the complexities, emotional turmoil, confusions, improvisations and inconsistencies embedded into the procedures of the European asylum system (Dahlvik 2017; Sweeney 2009; Alpes and Spire 2014; Gill and Good 2019; Sorgoni 2015; Tuckett 2018). Little, if any research, however, has directly addressed the possibilities for resistance and the micropolitics of borders embedded in the occupational culture of caseworkers. There is also a growing literature on Greece as a key "gatekeeper" of Fortress Europe to halt and filter migration flows through its asylum system; and as one of the principle frontlines of the "refugee crisis", its management and accompanied multi-layered border-related harms (Papataxiarchis 2016; Giannopoulou and Gill 2019; Cabot 2018, 2019; Rozakou 2012; Iliadou 2020; Afouxenidis et al. 2017). However,

very few works in the Greek context¹ have placed attention on the perspectives, dilemmas, bureaucratic practices and micropolitics of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980), like Greek asylum caseworkers. This article aims to contribute to this area of research and to drive further existing literature on border struggles by providing insights into the micropolitics of borders in the day-to-day practices of caseworkers that usually remain behind closed doors.

Essentially, we regard caseworkers as agents of the biopolitical power² of the state in exercising control over migrant populations through restrictions, selection and filtering of a “complex administrative apparatus, both at the borders and in the interior” (Rozakou 2017, 39). Bureaucracy constitutes a core component of the European border regime, with asylum caseworkers being the “ultimate policy makers” (see Lipsky 1980) of the regime, due to their institutional position vested by the state. Namely, they exercise power by following the “Asylum Procedure” in defining eligibility of entrance and enforcing existent regulatory frameworks. The work of the caseworkers in reading “the letter of the law”, is demarcating which life is to be hosted in European societies and which should either be expelled, returned, or cast into the realms of illegality and constant persecution (see Gill and Good 2019; Cabot 2014).

Our paper however argues that whilst operating as vectors of the biopolitical power of states, caseworkers can also formulate their practices as resistance to border regimes. Indeed, while the powers to fortify and control borders seem univocal and overarching, there is a substrate complex of “micro-powers”, where there are “innumerable points of confrontation” and destabilisation that carry the potential of conflict, struggles and contestation of power relations (Foucault 1995, 27), coming from people on the move, people in solidarity, as well as, unexpectedly, from those whose role is to perform and reinforce bordering practices. Drawing

¹ See Cabot (2014) on asylum legal aid and Rozakou (2017) on police officers and coast guards

² Practices of modern nation-states to regulate their populations

on the Foucauldian notion of counter-conduct, we explore firstly, the ways in which the biopolitical power of the border regime is simultaneously contested and reinforced through practices of micro-resistance by leftist asylum caseworkers in Greece. Secondly, by looking at the occupational culture of these caseworkers, we seek to analyse the complex, circular relation between technologies of government, or “the power that conducts” (Odysseos 2016, 179) and resistive practices in day-to-day life (Foucault 2007).

In doing so, we take on the inspiring call by Alpa Parmar (2018) of changing the narratives around migration by deploying new metaphors that expose how the border exceeds itself and allow for positive reimagining, multiple forms of resistance, mobilization and transformation to emerge. We begin by exploring the function of various metaphors used in EU’s border regime to outline the relation between the biopolitics of Fortress Europe and what we define as *micropolitics* of borders. We propose the metaphor of the sappers – special military units of sieging warfare who dug underground mines below fortresses during medieval times - to describe the resistive practices of leftist asylum caseworkers in Greece to create cracks in “Fortress Europe”. After discussing the particularities of Greece’s Asylum System and the role of caseworkers in the asylum process, we identify four key features of leftist caseworkers’ occupational culture: a) critique of institutional, national and EU border regimes b) mission, empathy and solidarity c) truth-extraction, pastoral power and counter-conduct, d) burning out, pessimism and futility.

We aim to show how the border is manifested through actions/decisions taken by key state agents – street level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980) – and how their culture and ideology operates to open and close pores in the border. Leftist caseworkers, we argue, attempt to resist those exclusionary forms of power that they themselves address as “Fortress Europe” through a variety of practices and discourses. However, in resisting the “Fortress” leftist caseworkers also constitute themselves as vectors of pastoral power and reproduce the power they seek to

subvert (see also Cabot 2014). Importantly, while seeking to create cracks in the border regime, these attempts are constantly subverted by a multiplicity of technologies of government - informed by neoliberal managerialism - that reduce their potential for resistance. By bringing alive the caseworkers' occupational culture and everyday workings of the asylum process in Greece, this paper provides a novel exploration of the micropolitics of borders and of the complex entangled relation between technologies of power and micro-resistances within current border regimes.

Methodological note

The paper draws on six semi-structured interviews with leftist asylum caseworkers undertaken by the first-named author for a research project in Greece in 2018. All interviews were conducted in Greek and transcribed by the first-named author to be later imported for analysis into QDA software. The content remained in Greek and only the passages used as direct quotations were translated in English. Regarding ethics, the difficulty to access and the importance to safeguard asylum caseworkers as research participants, were given serious consideration. In what is arguably an overlapping issue for both above-mentioned concerns, is that caseworkers must sign a non-disclosure employment agreement with their employer, a state-run institution (Greek Asylum Service), a breach to which could lead to loss of their job and their prosecution. Consequently, all ethical considerations and steps were taken to safeguard the participants and any other people involved indirectly in this research (i.e. asylum applicants, interpreters) and minimize the risks related to their participation. Therefore, selection criteria, background, names, gender, age and workplace have been completely anonymized and purposely excluded from this article. The study was approved by the ethics committee of the Social Anthropology department of Panteion University in Athens, Greece.

The only selection criterion that can be disclosed for the purposes of this article, is that only caseworkers who self-defined themselves as left-wing (i.e. liberal, communist, radical leftist, anarchist or anti-authoritarian) to the researcher were selected. While we are aware of the complexities of the term leftist within the Greek context (see Panourgiá 2009; Kornetis 2013), we use it as an umbrella term to talk about: firstly, how they seek to make sense of themselves, their role, the law, the state, European supranational policies and bureaucracy; and secondly, how they attempt to use bureaucratic tools - documentation, databases, interviews, decision-making, file making - in creative and innovative ways to open alternative visions of governance, ethics and humanity (Cabot 2014; Hull 2012). We should stress that even in perceived as “rigid” bureaucratic institutions, occupational cultures and as such their micropolitics are not monolithic and static. Rather, they constitute porous sites for constructing meaning, practices and norms; they vary over time and space and, within and between departments at national and international levels, depending on specialisms, ranks as well as, social, political, structural and policy contexts (Newburn and Reiner 2012; Sorgoni 2015; Gill and Good 2019).

Asylum caseworkers in Greece are a largely heterogeneous group in terms of background, expertise, worldviews and specialism depending also in which ranks and departments they are placed. As such the arguments made here are not intended to apply to the whole population of caseworkers around Europe, nor within and between the various Asylum Service departments in Greece. Our focus is explicitly on the occupational culture and bureaucratic practices of leftist asylum caseworkers and seeks to highlight the micropolitics emerging in a crucial part of the asylum process. Due to the election of the right-wing conservative party of New Democracy in July 2019, this article depicts the asylum process up to July 2019. Various changes towards a more exclusionary and repressive approach to migration have been taking place since then.

2. Fortress Europe and the Micropolitics of Borders

The metaphor of Fortress Europe (see Carr 2016) has an impressive capacity to depict forms of sovereign power through which bordering regimes produce migrant deaths, suspension of human rights and securitarian forms of exclusion. Notably, the metaphor of Fortress produces solid analogies with images of the European past. Fortresses are the most telling witnesses of the social and political life during the Middle Ages in Europe, and later in the colonial empires, as their height and volume was meant to protect cities by keeping away alleged dangers. Currently, metaphors of a “Fortress Europe”, besieged by tides and floods of migrants whose objective is to invade and pillage European wealth, corrupt the purity of its culture and contaminate its national body, are key in the production of fear by both media and politicians (Andersson 2014). The very nature of borders is to function as “a tool of exclusion [which demarcates] a coherent inside from a chaotic outside” (Aas 2011, 332). Therefore, the use of “Fortress” as a metaphor for describing Europe, is relating to the efforts of the border apparatus to recuperate sovereignty and to reproduce Europe as an exclusive space for those admitted to its *polity* (Aas 2011; Carr 2016). Discourses and imagery of the “European Fortress” under siege, have been the driving force for exclusionary technologies of control to proliferate such as crimmigration regimes (the increasing criminalisation of migration) and a growing securitarian industry (e.g. expansion of EU systems of surveillance and border control) among others (Aas 2011; Andersson 2014; Carr 2016)

Yet, Foucault (1990) proposed a shift in understanding power, which views power as a method of production rather than repression. Whilst useful for addressing coercive politics, the metaphor of the Fortress conceals how borders are not only tools of exclusion but are also performative, productive and diffused (Vaughan-Williams 2015). They produce devices of control, governance and classification of populations, through differential modes of filtering and inclusion (Mezzandra and Neilson 2013); they produce affective forms of governance by

keeping migrants in an uncertain, impoverished limbo state (Cabot 2014, 2019, 2018; Rozakou 2017, 2012); they situate people under exploitative conditions, to ensure cheap labour for capital (Triandafyllidou 2014; Mezzandra and Neilson 2013); they produce racist discourses, which define and racialise citizenship, by creating differentiations between “us” and “them” (Aas 2011; Balibar 2010). These discourses and devices of governance legitimise biopolitical practices regulating “who must live and who must die” (Foucault 2003, 254), and demarcating which life is to be valued or not (Gill and Good 2019).

The dominance of the Fortress metaphor obscures the complexity, diffusion and ubiquity of borders (Balibar 2010; Volpp 2020). Borders are found in everyday representations and racist encounters; they are performed in the lack of access to health, housing, education, safety and work; they are constituted not only through fortification and militarisation, but also through humanitarian reasons and interventions (Ticktin 2011; Rozakou 2012; Cabot 2019). They discipline everyday social interactions and the possibilities for acting, thinking and feeling outside of their regimes (Mezzandra and Neilson 2013; Dadusc 2019); they are manifested and negotiated in the realm of law and its enforcement (Volpp 2020). It is in all these multi-layered manifestations that borders are constantly resisted by counterforces, which either directly oppose or silently counteract these forms of power. Rather than fortified walls then, borders are constituted through everyday social interactions and contestations. This, productive, ubiquitous and contested nature of borders, constitutes affective technologies of governmentality - power that conducts - that we define as *micropolitics of borders*.

An understanding of the micropolitics of borders allows to critically comprehend how technologies of power operate as well as for multiple possibilities for resistance to be imagined and performed. It allows to break away from an overshadowing focus on mechanisms of power - which tends to depict subjects as over-determined by power relations - and moves towards an openness to grasp multiple, alternative, resistive practices (Foucault 2007; Odyseos 2016).

Indeed, rather than monolithic and static, borders are constantly being displaced, reconfigured and challenged through a multiplicity of struggles, including forms of political and affective solidarity (Dadusc, Grazioli, and Martínez 2019), the creation of mobile commons (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013), direct forms of “no border” protest and contestation (Rigby and Schlembach 2013) and even dubious, unpredictable bureaucratic practices, such as nonrecording border-crossers by street-level bureaucrats (Rozakou 2017) .

By exploring the micropolitics of borders in the occupational culture of leftist asylum caseworkers in Greece, we aim to provide original insights on the complex interrelationship of technologies of power and resistive practices of those whose work is integral to the border regime. The focus will be placed on the intersections between politics and ethics, on the practices of self-formation by leftist asylum caseworkers who, on the one hand perform acts of critique that counter the power they are embodying while on the other reproduce the border regime.

We propose the metaphor of the *sappers* to address their resistive practices and discourses. During medieval times, an efficient method of siege warfare against fortresses was the use of *sappers*, a specialized unit that dug mines under the fortresses’ strong stone-walls. The mines created large voids, supported by wooden pillars, which would later be ignited only to leave the ground on top of them unsupported, bringing down the walls in its collapse. Ideally the mine would be shielded from the defenders’ sight, and the sappers would remain hidden during the digging (Gravett, 2002). In our contemporary analogy of the resistances to “Fortress Europe”, as sappers, leftist asylum caseworkers dig from within and around the borderland, rather than performing direct opposition and resistance to it. Their modes of resistance seek to create cracks in the fortress’s wall that although unable to collapse the wall and being swiftly filled in, they do enable access to some people. To fully understand their practices and

discourse it is important to first portray some key elements of the Greek asylum system and the caseworkers' role.

3. Asylum System and Service in Greece³

Until 2010 Greece had almost non-existent screening facilities to identify effectively those border-crossers legally entitled to international protection and those who entered Greece without meeting the legal requirements for such protection (see Afouxenidis et al. 2017; Cabot 2014). At that time four so-called *Special Alien Accommodation Sites* (SAAS), run by the police, were used as reception facilities for both screening and detention (Afouxenidis et al. 2017). The reception system was police-centred, with policemen acting as caseworkers and where chronic shortages of human resources and lack of appropriately trained personnel reflected an in-existent system of protection for asylum seekers (see Rozakou 2012; Cabot 2018, 2014). The situation was exacerbated by a well-established correlation between the Greek Police and far right-wing politics (Papanicolaou and Papageorgiou 2016), which favoured a strong *crimmigrant* regime (Triandafyllidou 2014), and produced a highly biased system, with refugee recognition rates being next to zero (0.06% in 2003), in comparison to a 15% EU average (see Skordas and Sitaropoulos 2004; Cabot 2014). Asylum applications started to significantly increase since the mid-2000s with a large number of them remaining unprocessed in the system for years (Cabot 2018). In 2010, these delays led to a backlog 52,000 unprocessed cases - the fourth largest number globally, after South Africa, Ecuador and U.S. (Cabot 2018). As Cabot (2014) demonstrates, a “crisis” in the Greek asylum system existed well before the 2015 “refugee crisis”.

These issues raised serious concerns in the EU: firstly, on whether the Greek state was able to filter and monitor the population passing through and residing in its territory; secondly, on the

³ An extended part of this section stemmed out of the participants' interviews.

treatment of refugees both by state authorities and within the SAAS detention centres (Afouxenidis et al. 2017; Cabot 2014). Consequently, the EU compelled Greece to fully comply with the requirements of the Common European Asylum System and Schengen Agreements (Afouxenidis et al. 2017). Thereupon, the First Reception Service, the new Asylum Service (hereinafter the Service), and the new Appeals Authority were established by law in 2011. The Service only started to operate in 2013 with the most significant change in the post-2013 period being that the police stopped reviewing asylum applications in 2015 (Cabot 2018).

Importantly, the 2015 so-called “refugee crisis” in Greece was intertwined with an acute economic crisis and austerity measures strongly imposed by the EU (for details see Doxiadis and Placas 2020; Dalakoglou and Agelopoulos 2017). Because the previous governments faced tight budgetary and public sector hiring constraints, while being under the urgency of covering for the Service’s operational needs to meet European directives, they staffed the Service by:

- a) transferring permanent civil servants with no prior knowledge or experience from other public services,
- b) placing successful candidates of previous hiring procedures, which were irrelevant to migration or asylum issues and
- c) targeted recruitment processes of expert personnel for the Service as such.

Up to July 2019 there were 12 Peripheral Asylum Offices and 10 Independent Asylum Units, both coordinated and managed by the Central Asylum Service. Shortages in resources and precarity - a common feature of street-level bureaucracies (Lipsky 1980) - continued. As with many Greek public sector services, the Service was understaffed and almost half of the Service’s caseworker staff was on precarious fixed-term contracts (251, comparing to the 264 permanent employees), employed for a one-year period and extendable according to the

Service's needs. Further, on a highly controversial move to battle long-term unemployment, the previous government promoted unemployed people over more qualified candidates for the caseworker positions. Caseworkers have been going on strike at various points the past years to protest against austerity measures, flexible contracts and precarious working conditions (e.g. lack of adequate infrastructure), the collective firings of caseworkers (e.g. a 100 in November 2017), and the delays or withholding of salary payments, together with acute pressures to meet up clearance targets of a perpetually accumulating workload.

Regarding their role, as a Service staff member, one could operate as a caseworker, but also work on the “admissibility – non-admissibility”⁴ screening on the islands or conduct administrative and managerial work. The caseworkers' posting depends on their initial choice at the time of the job application. Training is provided by the Service to every newly recruited caseworker, in collaboration with UNHCR and EASO, on refugee status determination basics, interview techniques, evidence assessment and decision write-up. Asylum caseworkers decide on asylum applications by applying the relevant legal framework⁵, known as “refugee status determination” (RSD), which determines eligibility for refugee status (Sorgoni 2015; Gill and Good 2019). Initially, this process takes the form of a hearing or an interview with the claimants, who have to provide a well-founded account of fear of persecution in their countries of origin on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social or political group (UNHCR 1992; Gill and Good 2019). Caseworkers then decide, by analysing the information, checking against the facts and using databases (called “Country of Origin

⁴ See <http://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/asylum-procedure/procedures/admissibility-procedures>

⁵ The legal framework relating to the asylum procedure in Greece is somehow complicated, comprised of 5 different laws, 9 Presidential decrees, 40 ministerial decisions, 2 ministerial circulars, 2 European directives, and 5 international legal texts

Information”, or COIs⁶), on the “credibility” and “truthfulness” of the account, on whether the legal definition of a refugee could be applied to the specific person and on whether they are able to return to the protection of the country of nationality (Sorgoni 2015; Gill and Good 2019).

This seems a “by-the-rule” process, despite the contested nature of the concept of “protection” and of the distinction between refugees and so-called economic migrants. Yet, literature on street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky 1980; Rozakou 2017) shows the high influence exercised by street-level bureaucrats and how they can act as final policymakers: their daily bureaucratic practices and encounters with claimants often look widely different from official policies and clean-cut processes. Dahlvik (2017, 382) demonstrates how caseworkers’ social practices are vital in constructing “the facts, the artefacts, and the (in)credibility” of each case, and how they use “available resources to change policies or norms that the structure imposes upon them”. She explains how the use of COI databases, which could be regarded as “objective sources of evidence”, could be utilized in subjectively (2017, p. 374), or how the adjudicator has the capacity to “select” the authoritative documents she wishes to be included in the file, or decide on the overall claimants’ credibility (see Hull 2012; Gill and Good 2019; Cabot 2014). This subjectivity, whilst inevitable, could be used at the advantage or disadvantage of the claimant, depending on the caseworkers’ positionality and intentions. Concerning our participants, they understood their capacity to construct cases’ credibility as a crucial element to ensure quality in their work. This capacity lied principally in “revealing the truth” in the claimants’ story, a practice that we will refer to as the confessional work of pastoral powers (Foucault 2007).

⁶ Country of Origin Information (COI) refers to information on countries from which asylum seekers originate relevant for decision-makers in the field of asylum (see <https://www.easo.europa.eu/country-origin-information>)

We regard caseworkers as agents of the biopolitical power of the state, in exercising forms of pastoral power that differ from understandings of sovereignty expressed through the metaphor of “Fortress Europe” (see also Cabot 2018, 2014). Caseworkers, therefore, are significant intermediaries between the state and asylum seekers, with significant power to manage, filter and give access to the EU; and, as all street-level bureaucrats, they have a significant discretionary power in their decision-making (Lipsky 1980). However thwarted, their practices and conduct incite an opening into possible transformations – if not in asylum policies, then at least in asylum bureaucratic practices.

4. Occupational Culture of Leftist Asylum Caseworkers

The ways bureaucracy and its differing practices operate is intertwined with the occupational culture of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980; Rozakou 2017). Occupational cultures are complex ensembles of beliefs, attitudes, values, discourses, symbols and practices, which emerge from the interactions and reactions of people to situations that they encounter (Reiner 2010). Caseworkers’ occupational culture is shaped by structural pressures, everyday encounters and the meaningful ways they respond to them (Reiner 2010). The leftist caseworkers’ occupational culture constitutes a framework to analyse how culture and politics enacted by individuals complicate the way power structures manifest in everyday experience, their pervasiveness in everyday life as well as, affective technologies of power through which political subjectivities are formed (Foucault 2007; Rozakou 2017; Cabot 2014). We will show the complex relationship between mechanisms of governance and counter-conduct, arguing that caseworkers’ vocation is enmeshed in a variety of power relations, structural violence and pressures, which become exposed when looking at the asylum bureaucratic system (Cabot, 2018). Leftist caseworkers seem motivated by a politics of egalitarianism, social justice, solidarity and a commitment to human rights. Their discourse and practices seek to create cracks in the Fortress’s walls. However, they inevitably reinforce biopolitical technologies of

government through pastoral forms of power; while, simultaneously their resistive potential is constantly eroded and governed through technologies of neoliberal managerialism, burn-outs and exhaustion.

In what follows, we identify four main features of Greek leftist caseworkers' occupational culture: a) critique of institutional, national and EU border regimes b) mission, solidarity and empathy c) truth-extraction, pastoral power and counter-conduct, d) burning out, pessimism and futility.

a) Critique of institutional, national and EU border regimes

Dominant discourses around migration such as metaphors of Fortress Europe are a central element of how governmentality operates. They produce knowledge *believed* to be “true” representations of the world and which, in turn, shape individuals' understandings of migration, of themselves and of relationships with others (Foucault 1990). Governmentality, or “the power that conducts” refers to the multiplicity of techniques, discourses and practices employed by state or non-state actors to conduct populations and form subjectivities (Foucault 2007). Therefore, giving voice to alternative and silenced discourses, particularly within the bureaucratic part of the border regime, is an important aspect of resisting governmentality. Through their discourses, caseworkers intentionally resist governmentality techniques and the biopolitical power of both the state and the EU. Echoing the earlier discussion on the power exercised when mobilising the metaphor of “Fortress Europe”, participants expressed a clear aversion toward the exclusionary power of borders, EU migration policies and instead claimed a no-border politics approach:

“In relation to human migration, states and borders are inventions of the last two centuries. This thing aside, people will always go and always come. The rest is just politics. [...] There

should be no borders, there should be free movement, people should not be subjected to this degrading treatment and everyone should have papers.”⁷

Their criticism targeted the core role of racism in constituting borders by cultivating fear and xenophobia to produce crimmigration regimes and securitarian forms of exclusion. They highlighted their frustration with EU repressive policies to prevent and curb migration (i.e. externalizing borders through bilateral agreements between EU and non-EU countries, including Turkey and Libya) (see Iliadou 2020). These are addressed as an unfair and coercive attempt to displace responsibility and “*sweep under the carpet*” a situation which Europe created through colonialism, post-colonial military interventions or neo-colonial capitalist ventures (see Dinucci 2018). They stressed how the asylum system is run inefficiently to deter prospective migrants (see Iliadou 2020). They described how the system “*wants to be perceived as unwelcoming and unattractive*” and that “*the goal is to construct something that you will not even approach*”. The caseworkers addressed the hypocrisy of Europe’s migration policies and how Europe purposefully failed to uphold its declared human rights principles (Cabot 2019, 2018).

The EU-Turkey agreement received the most fervent criticism:

“It is outrageous! ...Since the agreement onwards we are basing our decisions on a political document! ... Before the Greek administration decides if someone is indeed a refugee or not, they need to decide through an admissibility/non-admissibility screening whether they can be sent back to Turkey. This is based on a political agreement and not a legal text, so it is not just unfair, but it is also illegal!”

For the caseworkers, the agreement was a political document overriding international law at the expense of human rights conventions, as Turkey is not to be considered a “safe third

⁷ Interview extracts have been completely anonymised to protect and safeguard the participants

country” due to its incapacity to guarantee fundamental human rights to migrants (see Kalir and Rozakou 2016). The participants had refused to participate in the “admissibility/non-admissibility screening”, believing that this was deplorable and illegal. Also, the Greek authorities, especially the Ministry of Migration Policy and the Service, were to blame for the situation created in the hotspot islands following the EU-Turkey agreement:

“The shame is on us (Greek state) because the geographic restriction⁸ was a patent of Greece. It was not part of the deal. It came from the Service, the police and the Ministry of Migration Policy”.

All participants particularly targeted the Ministry as responsible for spearheading the “inhumanity” of the Greek state’s responses and for continuously failing to organize effective asylum-related infrastructures (e.g. lack of integration planning or preparation to deal with a future, “refugee crisis”), which results in keeping people stuck in limbo on hotspot islands among others. Such practices seemed to be intentional outcomes of failed policies. Several researchers refer to the continuous “strategic use of limbo as key governance tactics in Greek (and European) asylum regimes” (Cabot 2018, 293). Essentially, the caseworkers’ discourse offers a criticism which challenges national and supranational mechanisms of governance over border-crossers. They formulate counter-conduct through their discourses and practices, which aims to provide an alternative that resists Fortress Europe’s exclusionary powers as well as the governmentality of bordering regimes.

As Odysseos (2016: 188) argues, one manifestation of counter-conduct is, rather than refusing or directly confronting the disciplinary power of conduct, to hold it accountable to the “letter of the law” by providing “alternative attempts of governing”. From this perspective counter-conduct is an “ethical and political self-formation in destabilising predominant modes of

⁸ People arriving in Greek islands are obliged to remain on the island where they first registered until it is determined whether their asylum claim is admissible or not.

subjection and subjectivation, and the resulting attempts of subjects to co-govern” (Odysseos, 2016: 181-182): in our case, to produce cracks into the border regime.

b) Mission, empathy and solidarity

“I would say that the way I perform my duties is 90% politically charged. The reason I went into this is my political background, and I have been in the left since I was born! I try to see my job more objectively, but I can’t”.

Leftists caseworkers’ discourses informed by their political motivation, attempt to counteract the violent, exclusionary power of Fortress Europe and translate into a sense of mission to uphold human rights:

“My job is a personal affair. Since I finished University, I knew I wanted to work around this area of migrants’ and refugees’ rights. You also need to consider the time that the Service was created. You had a rising of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party, a growing anti-migrant sentiment and populist right-wing discourses had become the norm. Simultaneously you had a very vulnerable population arriving at increasing rates people being drowned in the sea or coming here and being exploited...So this was my way of doing something”.

Indeed, these caseworkers do not perceive their work as “just a job” but as a mission, a way of channelling their leftist political subjectivity to produce a work ethic based on social justice, human rights, egalitarianism, solidarity and no-borders that runs counter to the structural violence and exclusionary politics of borders:

“Caseworkers are exposed to all these stories of human suffering... my predisposition is in favour of migrants and refugee rights and that the world should be open, that we are all equals and hell yeah, that there should be no borders... so yes this predisposition does affect the way you treat a claimant and how much time you are going to spend on their case”.

The case workers reveal a different ethical, political and affective self-formation, as their work is motivated by a “sense of mission”: a humanitarian and political duty to care for distressed people, and to change the socio-political situation by affecting the destiny of each individual. They engender a subtle pastoral power in their desire to bring individuals to salvation. Their ethical, political and affective self-formation shapes their counter-conduct and manifests in practices of solidarity and empathy during the interview process:

“What I always have in my mind when I enter into an interview is that if I was in their position, I would be shitty when it comes to credibility. What I mean is that it is extremely hard what we are asking them to do. Because, what you are asking them is to tell you, within 3-4 hours, in a consistent manner, with no contradictions or mistakes what happened in their lives. This is very difficult for everyone, but imagine for many of these people that might be detained on an island for a year or more, exhausted and close to a nervous breakdown, not having where to stay, separated from their families and with various psychological issues”.

Similarly,

“I always try to feel the other person and what they have been through, how they ended up here and pay attention to parts of the story that perhaps another caseworker would not...It is really about empathy. I try to see as much as I can through their eyes and how they see me”.

The participants’ political, ethical and affective subjectivity, their reflection on the asymmetrical power relations in the process and how all these translate in their occupational practice forms their counter-conduct. Counter-conduct manifests in individual or group practices that aim to resist technologies of conduct by influencing “the social environment, individual and group behaviour, livelihood activities and spaces where various ‘forces’ may have the ability to alter relationships and their outcomes” (Massey 2014, 291). Indeed, the leftist caseworkers’ “conduct” countered the racist and indifferent “conduct” of other

caseworkers. The participants expressed how their occupational culture was in striking difference with other caseworkers of both the Service and their particular department. They presented lucid descriptions of the divisions between fixed-term employees and regular employees of the Service. They saw the lack of humanitarian motivation as the greatest flaw in other employees, as most of them *“just landed there”*, and did not necessarily desire to work with migrant populations. They also reported incidents of racist behaviour towards the claimants as well as hostility towards the fixed-term contract employees by permanent ones.

The caseworkers’ counter-conduct expands also in their off-duty activities: socializing, meeting after work to discuss cases, sharing concerns, tactics and ideas on how to reach solid legal ground for granting asylum. Efforts were also made to influence other caseworkers beyond their friends’ circle. For example, the participants had knowledge on specific areas or cases that merited positive decisions and would informally share their knowledge with their colleagues; and some would follow their reasoning and grant positive decisions:

“Inexperienced people are currently working at the Service – and all they want is to finish their work as soon as possible ‘cause they don’t care... You can just go and tell them ‘I have ready what you are looking for’ and give them the decision. They will take it, because it makes their lives easier”.

Therefore, the participants’ counter-conduct lies in their efforts to influence positively their colleagues’ behaviour and the social environment around border-crossers. In striking difference to what Cabot’s study (2014) revealed around police caseworkers’ arbitrary decision-making and indifferent attitude, the participants of our study got into verbal fights with policemen who harassed the claimants (e.g. taunting, name-calling, various forms of violence). They also spoke of colleagues who acted as whistle-blowers, providing information about the inhumane conditions of detention to other NGOs and human rights organizations.

They used their position to bring solidarity to asylum seekers. With a desire to go “*beyond the call of duty*”, they would help claimants with several issues, including booking health visits, liaise with other NGOs for housing, refer them to psychosocial support, speak to them about their rights, help them issue a national insurance number and guiding them through the complexities of the Greek asylum system. Simultaneously though, they engendered a subtle pastoral power.

c) Truth-extraction, pastoral power and counter-conduct

For Foucault (2007) pastoral power is deeply related to governmentality, which is shaped by the institutionalisation of pastoral power. Pastoral power had three main features: it was exercised over moving populations rather than a fixed territory; it was “fundamentally a beneficent power”, a duty to care for, serve and lead “the flock” to salvation (Foucault 2007, 126); and, it was an “individualising power” (Foucault 2007, 128) in that the pastor cared for, and disciplined, both the multiplicity and each individual. Indeed, pastoral power is a disciplining power of care that produces subjectivities; as to direct the flock to salvation the pastor observes and intrudes into the private life and thoughts of individuals. It operates via the production and extraction of “truth” through confessional practices that continuously subject the individual to forms of obedience and servitude (Foucault 2007). The caseworkers’ counter-conduct therefore exercises pastoral forms of power by engaging into benevolent practices and extracting or revealing an alleged truth in the claimants’ individual stories. This way, leftist asylum caseworkers seem to be maintaining a complicity, rather than an opposition to key practices of bordering regimes (see also Cabot 2014).

As Dahlvik (2017) and Cabot (2014) demonstrate, in contrast to other legal procedures, the asylum process is characterized by lack of corroborating evidence, making the argumentation of credibility difficult for both claimant and caseworkers. For the caseworker, the credibility assessment lies largely on subjective judgments, aesthetics, comportment, attitudes and

assumptions on how a “truthful account” should be presented (Gill and Good 2019). Here the entanglement of both pastoral power and counter-conduct reveals itself.

All participants were aware of the hard process the claimants have to go through and that the applicants cannot protect themselves during the process. They understood it as their responsibility to *safeguard* and *protect* the claimants’ rights during the process by making sure to reveal the “truth” in each claimant’s story. In one example, a claimant was from a conflict zone that would have made an easy case for asylum but due to how she was expressing her story, she could have been classified as an economic migrant. The caseworker then questioned her about her ethnic origin and the hardships her people had to endure. This way the caseworker was able to reveal a plausible fear of persecution. The affinity to the “beneficent” pastoral power that cares for the salvation of both the multiplicity and each individual is arguably evident in the “confessional” practices that caseworkers engage in to produce and extract the “truth” (see also Cabot 2014). The entanglement between pastoral power and counter-conduct is highlighted in how they subject border-crossers to “truth-telling” practices. By revealing the “truth”, they simultaneously exercise their governance to the letter of the law while pushing its boundaries towards widening the net, and upholding egalitarianism and human rights principles.

The affinity to pastoral power is particularly reflected in all participants’ clear sense of legality in their work. While in some cases of street-level bureaucracy within the asylum system bureaucratic practices oscillate between the licit and the illicit (see Rozakou 2017; Cabot 2014), leftist caseworkers use a perfectly legal way of exercising their solidarity to asylum seekers. The laws governing caseworkers’ practice are sufficiently permissive to give them a wide range of discretion (Dahlvik 2017; Gill and Good 2019; Lipsky 1980) and hence, a space to explore possibilities and exercise agency (Cabot 2014), which can be used in favour or against the applicants’ needs:

“I do not consider myself as an activist. I am using a perfectly legal way to help people. I am not doing anything out of the ordinary, neither am I helping anyone get in through the back door. I am helping people who would have either drowned or sent back to Turkey. Since I always stay within what’s legally acceptable, I don’t consider my work to be anything more than that.”

Their personal reading of the law aims at widening the sphere of protection for people, at projecting their own sense of justice and humanitarianism. As Odysseos (2016:187) argues this form of counter-conduct “as a critical demand of co-governing” is not about rejecting but about adopting, utilising, affecting and benefiting from the bureaucratic tools that are already available in governing technologies of pastoral power, which aim at alternative policies and different governing objectives. Their attempts to co-govern and counter-govern by employing norms, principles and ideals that strongly abide to human rights, social justice and solidarity principles, is seen as a tool for opening cracks in the fortress’s ubiquitous walls.

d) Burning out, pessimism and futility

Despite attempts of co-governing and counter-governing, the Service’s mechanisms can strip the caseworkers’ power altogether in specific cases. These exceptions were enforced under the discourse of “political and/or national security” (i.e. the 8 Turkish soldiers seeking asylum in Greece after the failed coup d’état attempt of July 2016). In these cases, the Service, rather than trying to modify the decision of the caseworker, would strip their power all-together by changing the caseworker assigned to the case. Therefore, in certain circumstances, the Service reserves itself the authority to intervene on the decision of caseworkers, thereby drastically reducing their autonomy. As it becomes evident the caseworkers are entangled in a complex set of power relations and their resistive practices both counter and reproduce the power they seek to subvert. Most frequently however, the resistive potential emerging from the pastoral

power that they engender, rather than being stripped as depicted above, is disciplined and governed through managerialism and burning out.

Rather than direct repression, neoliberal managerialism has been used as a governing tool to hinder and restrict the participants' attempts to act differently and to counter the bordering regime. Neoliberal managerial practices have been identified as shaping particular sets of conducting technologies which affect structures and subjectivities alike. Highly problematic changes in operational practices of the public sector have been attributed to neoliberal managerialism; namely the application of corporate values, strategies and practices to all areas of work and society in order to "run public institutions and society as corporations" (Klikauer 2013, 1105). Management principles and practices such as performance indicators, quality audits, efficiency, cost-effectiveness, production of outputs, results and risk assessments among others, have been its core characteristics (Klikauer 2013; Feeley and Simon 1992). The Service is no exception, as the focus is placed on the number of cases cleared, rather than the quality or fairness of the outcomes:

"There is a policy line that comes from above, but I would say it relates less to the content and more to the number of decisions. The Service cares more about quantity than quality. They don't care if I give 100 or 0 positive decisions. They care that I give them 100 decisions, not 98, or 90."

The prioritization of numbers and the consequent pressure to deliver decisions at a certain speed restricts the time the caseworkers can invest into doing in-depth research about a case. This pressure also puts a huge psychological strain on them, as they are pushed to deliver on much higher rates than they realistically can to ensure good quality and fair work. When these indicators are not met the caseworkers could be sanctioned in several ways, including by being

deprived of telework⁹, which all caseworkers expressed was vital for their mental health. Managerialism, despite being a subtle technique, is arguably the strongest and most effective neoliberal disciplinary tool that weakens the caseworkers' counter-conduct and renders more powerfully the omnipresence of bordering technologies in their practices.

Under managerialism asylum seekers are treated as members of particular sub-populations defined by categorical indicators rather than as human subjects (Feeley and Simon 1992). As Cabot (2014) shows, classification categories play a fundamental role in the asylum process and are powerfully reproduced by it. The Service maintains a database of acceptable "template decisions" that one can refer to and use as a base for their decision-making. Cases from Pakistan or Albania for example, are managed through fast-track of negative decisions, while similarly cases for Syria through a fast-track of positive decisions. Such cases are considered "easier" by the Service's administration, which in result demands higher clearance rates for them per week by the caseworkers. These targets are set on top of the standard workload, which for caseworkers leads to a clear incapacity to go in-depth on those cases:

"This groupings are a way to speed up the processes...So they say to you, ok this country is a difficult one but Pakistan is an easy one so you can do 3 of that per day... sometimes when we protest because they allocate us with too many hard cases, they characteristically say to us 'ok take one Albania and we will exchange it with a hard one', as if countries and people are cards to be exchanged"!

These managerial modalities of governmentality gradually erode their counter-conduct and produce instead more pervasive and subtle enforcement of the bordering logic:

"I have become harder. I make distinctions. I started with a different philosophy, a different ideology and then I understood I can't do this in this work. You open the door and you perform

⁹ Caseworkers are allowed to work on cases (decision write-up) from home 2 days a week.

triage: You place humans into categories, Pakistani economic migrants go here; the other go there. Beforehand it was all about categories of needs; now it's all about categories of people. It's crazy!"

Therefore, governing technologies of managerialism show how the border exceeds itself in day-to-day life by negatively affecting the caseworkers counter-conduct, who then find themselves reproducing and enforcing a bordering logic in their working practices (see also Cabot, 2014). The caseworkers identified further factors that affect their capacity to exercise counter-conduct: the unsuitability of the infrastructures and working spaces (e.g. working in containers and offices infested with rodents) and lack of devices such as computers and voice recorders. If the lack of organisation and of infrastructures are key issues in preventing an adequate working environment, the shortage of resources lead to enormous delays in case handling (sometimes extending for periods exceeding two years), as well as the absence of adequate quality in terms of technical know-how (i.e. specialized techniques for interviewing children, rape survivors, etc.), lead to fast, inadequate and detrimental decision-making processes.

In this context, being pressurised to meet workload “targets” was recognised as the principal factor of depleting their capacity to “co-govern” or to counter-govern and was also linked to long-term mental health impacts. All participants spoke of suffering from occupational burnout, which is widespread within the Service. The burnout is further deteriorated by insecurities around their contract renewal and the overall precarious working conditions:

“The fact that I am not being payed has really fucked me up! Although we are used to it, this time we are unpaid for more than 3 months ... I am already burned-out because the job in itself is very difficult.”

There was also an expressed “sense of futility” regarding the caseworkers’ power to make a difference to people’s lives by granting them asylum protection:

“I felt that through this job I could make a significant difference in someone’s life. I would recognize them as refugees or give them subsidiary protection, as they deserve, and this would have an impact. Now I know. This is just an illusion.”

The futility of their efforts was evident as caseworkers were aware that asylum seekers are enmeshed in a remarkably complex set of power relations and multiple forms of limbo, whereby the positive asylum decisions did not succeed in affecting much their quality of life, or addressing their protection concerns (see Cabot 2014, 2018). Also, the caseworkers were depleted of their energy and willingness to continue their pro-migrant activist struggle outside the office and the job pressures apparently discouraged their participation in other forms of solidarity activities (see Cabot 2014). Here, the invisible and everyday conducting strategies in producing the ubiquitous border regime clearly emerge. While most of caseworkers attempted to challenge Fortress Europe, they were faced with and repressed by, more complex, pervasive and contested forms of biopolitical control embedded in the managerialist technologies of the border apparatus.

5. Sappers of Fortress Europe: Conclusive Remarks

By exploring the micropolitics of borders and struggles as manifested in the occupational culture of leftist asylum caseworkers, in our metaphor of the contemporary *sappers*, we aimed to show the circular, dynamic relationship between governing technologies and counter-conduct. The counter-conduct the sappers exhibit is a product of the overarching biopolitical power of the border regimes, to which they show that they managed to self-transfigure their political, ethical and affective selves in a way that refuses being governed, and to govern, the way they are supposed to. The sappers claim their right to co-govern by abiding to human

rights, egalitarianism, solidarity and social justice. Rather than a fundamental rupture between the system and the subjects, sappers operate both as vectors of power and resistance, and cracks are created through the use of already existing governmental techniques such as, the repetition of the expected process, but with a nevertheless critical skew that aims to a changing work ethic, the improvement of policy and governmental objectives. While their tactical and creative exercise of discretionary power, their care for asylum seekers and their refusal to reproduce border violence seek to create cracks on the fortress's ubiquitous walls, they often reinforce biopolitical technologies of government through pastoral practices and forms of discipline.

Their counter-conduct was met by the employment of neoliberal technologies that subverted their attempts to co-govern and to counter-govern. Their counter-conduct is thus managed and contained by a variety of direct and indirect technologies of government of asylum caseworkers time, space and affective relations: managerialism, precarisation, productivity requirements and occupational burnouts, which eventually reduce their capacity for action and contribute in the sappers reproducing bordering practices. By looking at the micropolitics of borders in everyday, mundane occupational practices of leftist caseworkers, we aimed to highlight the complex, diffused and interconnected manifestations of power and resistance, where the creative agency of the governed brings about transformative practices, that no matter how temporary or durable, impactful or feeble, they speak back to governmental power and, as such, need to be considered.

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