# Beyond depoliticization and resistance: refugees, humanitarianism, and political agency in neoliberal Cairo.

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I hereby declare that this thesis has not been, and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature: _____

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## Acronyms

AUO African Union Organization

CBO Community Based Organization

CM Care and Maintenance (UNCHR budget)

CRS Catholic Relief Services

FMRS Forced Migration and Refugee Studies Centre (American University in Cairo)

HRW Human Rights Watch

ICRC International Committee of the Red Cross

ILO International Labour Organization

IO International Organization

IOM International Organization for Migration

NGO Non-Governmental Organization

RSD Refugee Status Determination

SRS Self-reliance strategy

SSI State Security Investigation Services

UNDSS United Nations Department of Safety and Security

UNMORSS United Nations Minimum Operating Residential Security Standards

UNMOSS United Nations Minimum Operating Security Standards

UNHCR United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund

UNOIOS United Nations Office for Internal Oversight Services

UNRWA United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

WFP World Food Program

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## Note on the transliteration of Arabic words

All of the Arabic terms used in this thesis are Egyptian words. As Egyptian Arabic – with few exceptions in contemporary literature and new media – is usually not written, I have transliterated these words as they sound, rather than as they might be written in Arabic. No Arabic text has been used in conducting research for this thesis.

## Summary

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**Thesis title: Beyond de-politicization and resistance: humanitarianism, refugees and political agency in neoliberal Cairo.**

Responding to the call of contemporary political philosophy to locate 'the political' beyond the boundaries of formal citizenship (Balibar, 2004; Chatterjee, 2004; Rànciere, 2004), over the last few years researchers across various disciplines have devoted increasing attention to migrant and refugee protests and political mobilization (Tyler and Marciniak, 2013). Research in this area has thoroughly questioned paradigms of biopolitical exception, but also challenged widespread assumptions on the political agency of subaltern subjects as always associated with mundane, silent, and invisible practices. In this context, academic attention has been devoted significantly to Euro-American borderzones and spaces of enforcement, and, in the Global South, to refugee camps. Today however, evidence is growing that the vast majority of refugee and migrant populations are urbanized, and do not live in the West.

Based on an 18-month ethnographic fieldwork, this thesis contributes to this growing body of work exploring the contested relations between refugees and humanitarian agencies in Cairo, Egypt. Theoretically, the analysis combines insights from assemblage geographies (De Landa, 2006; McFarlane, 2011) and critical development, refugee, and urban studies (Hyndman, 2001; Simone 2004a, 2004b; Elyachar, 2005; Duffield, 2007, 2011; Bayat, 2010; 2012; Hyndman and Giles, 2011). The empirical sections of the thesis are articulated around two main axes of inquiry. Part B – *The Boundaries of Aid* – looks at how refugees in Cairo engage with the spatial practices of humanitarian organizations, contesting their growing securitization and the boundaries and hierarchies that separate them from practitioners. Part C – *Sociomaterial infrastructures: agency beyond resistance* – focuses on the networks – encompassing human and non-human elements – which

allow refugees to build relations of support, experience sociality, and organize politically autonomously from aid agencies.

The thesis puts forward a two-part argument. Not only do the struggles of refugees in Cairo challenge prevalent understanding of humanitarian aid as a domain of 'depoliticization', but they also question the distinction between everyday life and overt manifestations of 'resistance', contestation, and protest. Confronted with a complex and often violent system of humanitarian and urban governance, refugees in Cairo, I demonstrate, are able to mobilize a range of practices and position takings which problematize prevalent conceptualizations of resistance, and point to the need for rethinking questions of agency in conditions of structural violence.

## Chapter I: Introduction

In the evening of Friday the 28<sup>th</sup> of January, 2011 – the "Friday of Anger" marking the beginning of the Egyptian uprising which would lead to the toppling of Hosni Mubarak – as the tanks of the Egyptian army were occupying the streets of Cairo, I was sitting on the colourful sofa of my neighbours' small flat, in Agouza, Giza. The apartment I was sharing at that time with a young Egyptian teacher did not have a TV, and the day before mobile and internet connections had been cut off in the whole country, in a vain attempt by the government to disrupt the protesters' capacity to organize and gather for what looked like the largest mobilization in the history of independent Egypt. In the morning my flatmate had joined the march which had started near Mustapha Mahmoud Square, in the bordering neighbourhood of Mohandeseen. Unable to reach her or any other of my friends in Cairo, I was desperate to get some news on what was going on. In the unreal silence which had descended on the streets around our block after the noon prayer, the voice of the *Al Jazeera* anchor-man coming from the flat of that family whose members I had only seen a couple of times seemed like the only thing to hold on to. Umm Mustapha, the mother of the young man who opened the door for me, let me in barely asking for my name and nationality, gave me tea, and accommodated me in her tiny living room. "I know you, you are the *agnabeyya* (the foreign girl) who lives upstairs", was all she said. A few hours later, as we watched the Tahrir protesters performing the Maghrib prayer, she praised the courage of the people who were out on the streets calling them *reggala* – real men. She then turned to me and said: "Did you know we are Palestinian refugees?"

Mustapha, her older son, had been sitting quietly with us for most of the afternoon. As his mother began to narrate the story of her family's migration from Gaza to Cairo, however, a sparkle of interest seemed to shake his apparent apathy. In his nearly fluent English with a remarkable American accent – which, he explained, he had perfected watching CNN – he began to narrate his experience of unemployed graduate, who had only recently managed to secure a temporary, part-time job in a call-centre which sold services to an international communication company. He was afraid that, when his probation period would be over, he would have been dismissed because, as a Palestinian, he was unable to show his boss a proper national ID. Like most Palestinian

youth in Egypt, Mustapha was 'illegal' despite having been born in the country (El Abed, 2009), and never having visited Gaza. Although he had tried to address this issue approaching several NGOs, he had never received effective practical help, nor useful advice. [1] He had eventually given up, unable to understand "what many of these organizations were for."

As his mother continued to watch the news with a mix of excitement and apprehension, that evening Mustapha provided me with me with a first, powerful description of what it meant to be a refugee in Egypt. According to him, there was nothing surprising in what was happening that day around us in Cairo – the massive popular participation in the demonstrations, attacks to police stations, and a revolt which, all over the country, seemed uncontainable. The battles that were taking place at a few kilometres from our building had begun many years before, in the everyday lives of Egyptians and refugees in Egypt alike. Everyday life was a struggle, he explained, for everyone – you had to fight to live, work, and even move around an unbearably congested city[2]. If you were a young man from a lower-class background, you had to add to that picture the likelihood of police harassment, which – as political scientist Salwa Ismail (2011) has poignantly argued – had no other purpose but the disciplining of your behaviour in public spaces, asserting the pervasiveness of state repression. If you were a young refugee man, you were left to bear the consequences of authoritarianism and destitution in the absence of any formal venue to access basic

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[1] Although Mustapha's comments on NGOs strongly resonate with the experience of other refugees in Egypt, the reasons for him not receiving help from aid agencies were likely to be related to his nationality. Palestinians in Egypt – a rather 'invisible' community of no more than 50,000 – 70,000 people – are in fact excluded both from the UNHCR mandate, and from that of UNRWA, as the latter has never operated in Egypt. According to the study conducted by El Abed (2009), in 2009 only a very limited number of Palestinian families settled in the Egyptian countryside (Al Sharqiyyah) were receiving assistance by foreign NGOs. Since 2002 nevertheless, UNHCR Cairo has begun to include Palestinians in its statistical reports, and the office protection has been extended to Palestinians refugees settled in Iraq (and, as I write, Syria) who escaped the armed conflict in the two countries finding refuge in Egypt (Kagan, 2009). For a detailed discussion of the status of Palestinians in Egypt see El Abed, 2009, and Kagan, 2009.

[2] While my own research has focused on Cairo's urban area – as there is where the vast majority of refugees in Egypt live – the Egyptian uprising should not be reduced to a merely urban phenomenon. See the work of Ray Bush (2002; see also Ayeb and Bush, 2012) and Lila Abu Lughod (1993, 2004, 2012) for an analysis of the politics of labour, gender, nationalism, state repression, and resistance in the Egyptian countryside.

rights, finding assistance only in an NGO and humanitarian sector perceived at times as benevolently irrelevant, at times as ambiguous, distant, or even complicit with an oppressive regime. "Have you seen how the Sudanese live, in Imbaba?" Mustapha added. "It is not far from here. I mean, we are lucky compared to them." That, Mustapha concluded, was the kind of life too many people in Egypt were used to – over-crowded, polluted, and often violent.[3]

When, thirteen days after that conversation, Hosni Mubarak's government fell, political analyses, comments, and celebrations began to 'invade' Egypt from all over the world. Connections had been restored and, as I started browsing the web, what struck me amidst the avalanche of news and analyses was the overwhelming sense of novelty, and even surprise, which seemed to characterise most comments about "networked revolts" and civil society in the Middle East. Seen from Umm Mustapha's small living room, things appeared differently. No one in their family had ever been involved in formal social movements – as refugees, they could not. They had never joined a demonstration, and yet they were cheering the revolt. As he was describing to me his daily life in Cairo, it seemed natural to Mustapha to consider the uprising as rooted in his and many others' daily fight to, to put it simply, 'live'. Could the emergence of the revolt be traced back into the practices that marked the everyday life of 'marginalities' in Egypt? And weren't refugees, as the encounter with Mustapha's family had reminded me, an important element in defining Egypt's urban landscape of growing inequalities, daily struggles to 'get by', ordinary confrontations with state apparatuses and ambiguous, and often contested relations with the NGOs and humanitarian sector? What forms could political agency possibly take in a context where people were constantly 'pushed to their limits', excluded as they were from formal citizenship and relying, to secure their basic needs, on precarious informal networks of solidarity and on the uneven, tokenistic forms of humanitarian assistance available?

The hectic, soul-searching days I lived through in Cairo in January 2011 brought up many such questions: this thesis is an attempt to start addressing some of them. As

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[3] Fieldnotes, Cairo, 2 February 2011.

such, I focus on the forms of political agency through which refugees in Cairo engage with, and often overtly contest, humanitarian agencies, the state, and the broader entanglements of urban governance that bind the two in Cairo. It draws on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork with refugees and aid agencies in Cairo, and it aims to answer the following main questions: How can we conceptualise refugee political agency? How can we study it empirically? What is its relation with humanitarianism? What forms of politics can we see at work in the networks of solidarity and material support refugees develop autonomously from aid agency? Is there a relation between these forms of 'everyday politics' and refugees' acts of overt contestation and protest?

Combing spatial theory – in particular assemblage geographies (De Landa, 2006; McFarlane, 2011) – with insights from critical development, refugee, and urban studies (Hyndman, 2001; Simone 2004a, 2004b; Elyachar, 2005; Duffield, 2007, 2011; Bayat, 2010; 2012; Hyndman and Giles, 2011) the thesis foregrounds a contextual and spatialized approach to the study of refugee politics. Political agency is thus understood as 'emerging' from the spatial and material relations – with aid organizations, but also with the broader urban environment – refugees in Cairo are immersed in. Through such a perspective, it is argued that not only do the struggles of refugees in Cairo challenge prevalent understandings of humanitarian aid as a domain of 'depoliticization', but they also problematize the distinction between everyday life and overt manifestations of 'resistance', contestation, and protest. Confronted with a complex and often violent system of humanitarian and urban governance, refugees in Cairo, I demonstrate, are able to mobilize a range of practices and position takings in which everyday forms of resistance are strictly intertwined with, or evolve into, acts of protest and contestation.

*Figure 1. Graffiti in central Cairo, May 2013. The Arabic text reads "Unemployment, hunger, soaring prices: we want to live." (image by Swedish photographer Mia Grondähl, http://www.miagrondahl.com/, accessed 30 June 2014)*

Over the last few years, the practices through which migrants and refugees engage with and contest migration and asylum regimes have received increasing academic attention. In Europe and North-America in particular, the rise of no-border movements has led to a new interest in migrant and refugee struggles against detention, forced (im)mobility, and deportation (Nyers, 2006; Tyler and Marciniak, 2013). Theoretically, this emerging body of work has coincided with a problematisation of, and in some cases a movement against, the exclusive focus on the technologies of biopolitical exception upon which the control of human mobility is predicated at a global level. Discovering migrants' and refugees' political agency in 'abject' and exceptional spaces, such as camps and detention centres, researchers across a variety of disciplines have responded to the imperative of some contemporary political philosophers to locate the political precisely in the spaces where those who are 'left outside' confront and contest established political orders (Nyers, 2004; see also Rancière, 1999; Chatterjee, 2003).

In the context of these efforts to problematize, re-ground, and even move beyond biopolitical paradigms in critical approaches to migration and asylum, the emerging interest in politics as enacted *by* – and not *upon* – migrants and refugees has been accompanied by several attempts to rethink the role of humanitarianism, and refugee

aid in particular, in global governance (Hyndman, 2001; Fassin, 2010). Ethnographers across various disciplines have explored the refugee regime and its fundamental spatial imprint, namely the refugee camp, as sites of dwelling and place-making (Hammond, 2004; Kaiser, 2008; Dudley, 2010), but also of resistance and mobilization, where geopolitics are renegotiated and contested in the everyday (Sanyal, 2009; Ramadan, 2010; 2013a).

While attention continues to be devoted significantly to borders and camps however, refugee migration and its governance appear today as increasingly dispersed, fragmented, and ever-shifting phenomena. Their technologies and practices extend well beyond border-sites and defined geographies of enforcement or humanitarian relief, problematizing the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion, as well as those of mobility and immobility. Particularly in the Global South, cities are increasingly becoming the spaces where refugee movements and other forms of human mobility – labour migration, but also old and new forms of development induced displacement – intersect (Simone 2004a, 2004b; Bayart, 2007). At the same time, it has been argued, refugee camps are becoming increasingly urbanized (Sanyal, 2012; 2013), and the bordering practices and technologies associated with the global government of mobility are ever more extended to urban spaces (Graham, 2011; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013).

Cairo, the focus of this study, is one of the cities where the global shift towards the 'urbanization' of refugee migration and its governance is most visible. An urban conglomerate of approximately 20 million people, over 60% of whom are estimated to live in informal areas (Tarbush, 2012), the Egyptian capital is deemed to be today the "home to one the largest populations of 'urban refugees' in the world" (Goździack and Walter, 2010, p. 4). Sudanese – by far the biggest migrant group in Egypt – Iraqis, Syrians, Palestinians, Somalis, Ethiopians, and Eritreans are but the largest communities in a refugee population which is estimated to be composed of migrants from over 34 different countries, mostly Africans (Grabska, 2006).

A signatory of the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees, its 1967 protocol, and the 1969-AOU Refugee convention, throughout its modern history

Egypt has only hosted a limited number of refugee camps. Those of Azarita and Qantara Sharq, in Northwest Sinai, (El Abed, 2009), as well as the Abasseya one, in Cairo, were set up in the aftermaths of the Palestinian *Nakba*, only to be quickly dismantled[4]. Similarly, the Salloum camp, established by UNHCR in order to assist migrants fleeing from the 2012 NATO-led invasion of Libya, was closed in 2013, around a year after operations had started in the small village on the Libyan border. Most forced migrants in Egypt thus settle autonomously in the country's major cities, mixing into the vibrant cosmopolitan ambience of Cairo and Alexandria, and often actively contributing to their cultural, political, and economic life (Grabska, 2006).

To date, and in spite of its international legal obligations, Egypt remains without a national asylum system (Kagan, 2011). As in many other countries in the Middle East, the processing of asylum requests and the provision of humanitarian assistance are entirely delegated to the UNHCR "surrogate state" (Kagan, 2012). As I write, the population of concern of UNHCR Cairo – including unregistered Palestinian refugees – amounts to 250,000 individuals (UNHCR, 2013).

Since the late 1990s, UNHCR has been working on defining and applying an approach to the question of refugees living in urban areas that rests upon two basic principles: "expanding protection space" beyond camps, thus recognizing refugees who autonomously settle in cities as also legitimately entitled to protection, and enhancing refugee populations' capacity for being self-reliant, mobilizing, that is, their own social and economic resources to achieve integration into the local urban environment (UNHCR 1997, 2005, 2009, 2011). In other words, the rationale behind these policies involves on the one hand an extension of the formal humanitarian protection, and on the other a progressive downsizing of concrete, material assistance, with the aim of reducing dependency and fostering people's ability to provide for themselves autonomously. In UNHCR urban refugee policies, refugee 'aid' has thus merged into neoliberal development, embracing its ethos of self-sufficiency and its ideological dismissal of assistance as generating dependence. Conveniently for its donors – primarily Western states – this policy shift has also justified a significant reduction of

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[4] The Abasseya camp was closed in the 1980s, and most of its inhabitants relocated to the neighbourhoods of Ain Shams and Dar El Salam (El Abed, 2009).

the UNHCR care and maintenance (CM) budgets, and particularly of direct financial assistance (Sperl, 2001; Duffield, 2007).

Cairo has been one of the pilot cities in which UNHCR urban policies have been tested, and where, particularly after 2004, restructuring and cuts to the office budget have been most significant (Sperl, 2001, FMRS, 2006). As in other cities where UNHCR operates however, the achievement of the main objectives of its urban refugee policies has proved difficult. Not only in fact does the Egyptian state remain unwilling to promote 'local integration', removing legal restrictions to refugees' access to work (Kagan, 2011). The emergencies that have characterized the years between 2006 and 2013 – with the influx of refugees after the first outbreak of sectarian violence in Iraq, and the arrival of Syrians escaping the conflict started in 2011 − also forced UNHCR to revise its budgets, re-incorporating direct assistance into its activities[5].

Most important of all, it is the character of the urban environment in which refugees are supposed to integrate to make the implementation of UNHCR urban protection policies in Egypt a problematic, and highly contested, endeavour. In order to understand the elusiveness – and at times outright failure – of these policies, and the often tense and politicized contestation through which they have been met by the refugees themselves, one has to look at how humanitarian aid and refugee governance have entangled with the broader social and economic transformations Egypt has undergone in the last three decades. This is a fundamental starting point for the analysis presented in this thesis.

In both their ideologies and actual outcomes, State-led modernization projects and neoliberal 'post-development' might have, as some have argued, much more in common than usually thought (Benería, 2003; Oza, 2006; Fechter and Hindman, 2011; Fluri, 2012). Yet, in the case of Egypt, the dismissal of state-led developmentalism and adoption of *infitah* (opening up, liberalization) policies in the 1970s and, even

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[5] Only in 2013, the UNHCR Cairo office has formally registered 131,000 Syrian refugees. (UNHCR, 2013). The massive influx of refugees from the Middle Eastern countries has had a significant impact on UNHCR activities,

more importantly, the advent of neoliberal structural adjustment – enforced since the early 1990s to secure IMF loans at a time when the country, like many others developing nations, was undergoing an acute financial crisis (Mohieldin, 1995; Bush, 2004; Assaad, 2005) – have changed the social landscape deeply (Elyachar, 2002; Mitchell, 2002; Denis, 2006; Amar, 2013). Financial deregulation, downsizing of the public sectors and a rapid shift towards foreign direct investment and an export-oriented activities have had dramatic effects on living conditions, with unemployment and poverty skyrocketing (Bush, 2004).

The effects of these macro social and economic transformations on Egypt's major cities have been dramatic, to the point that, in the decade between 1996 and 2006, Cairo nearly doubled its size (Denis and Vignal, 2006). As noticed by Bush (2004), while since the early 1990s textile, agriculture and other labour-intensive productions, together with the public sector, have constantly shrunk, the construction sector has exploded (Mitchell, 2002). As a consequence, new suburbs built in the desert have changed the landscape of the capital. While the poor informal neighbourhoods – known in Egypt as *ashaweyat* (haphazardous areas) – have grown disproportionately throughout the city (Bush, 2004), in the years immediately preceding the revolution the luxurious new quarters of New Cairo and Sixth of October were among the fastest-growing urban areas in the Middle East (see Denis and Vignal, 2006). Cairo's new neighbourhoods have thus become the spatial imprint of a polarized model of growth which offers economic opportunities only to the limited circuits of wealthy and politically connected business elites, and to foreign investors. Meanwhile, in the poorest areas of the city, a hypertrophic police force counting on a capillary network of clients, informants, and plain-clothes assistants, was ensuring the maintaining of public order through wide-spread use of torture, everyday intimidation, and routine extortion (Kandil, 2011; Ismail, 2011; Ryzova, 2011; Amar, 2013).

When in 2011 Egyptians got to the streets in the first mass uprising of the country's contemporary history, their mobilization – *pace* the early, surprised commentaries it provoked – had been preceded by over two decades of struggles aimed at countering the violent, exclusionary effects of this system of neoliberal governance (Ayeb and Bush, 2013; see also Kandil, 2011; Elyachar and Winegar, 2012; Achcar, 2013;

Massad, 2013). Refugees in Egypt had often been at the forefront of those struggles – not only through mass protests that challenged the effects of UNHCR policies on their communities, but also sharing in the daily life of deprived neighbourhoods, and being – or, in some cases, refusing to be – a significant part of the work force in the heterogeneous, world of Cairo NGOs. Their condition however, has attracted significantly less academic attention than that of other 'urban marginalities' (Ayeb and Bush, 2012) in Egypt. If we exclude the limited number of contributions which have focused on Sudanese diasporic struggles (Al Sharmani and Grabska, 2006; Fabos, 2007; 2010) and on refugee protests as acts of 'global citizenship' (Moulin and Nyers, 2007), refugee politics in Cairo remain scarcely explored.

This thesis provides four intertwined ethnographic approaches to refugee politics in which the continuities between protests, contestation, and everyday struggles are explored, and political agency is conceptualised as a contextual and material phenomenon which emerges from migrants' relations with the urban environment. Preceding these, the first part of the thesis – *Part A: Theory and Ethnography* – introduces the theoretical and methodological tools that have sustained the ethnographic inquiry presented in the four empirical chapters. Chapter II moves from a review of how the concepts of 'everyday politics' and 'everyday resistance' have been applied in political geography, and particularly in refugee and migration studies. It then moves on to analyse how, at the opposite end of the spectrum from 'everyday politics' paradigms, recent work on migrant protests has contributed to bring agency and resistance into 'spaces of exception', and highlighted the role of space, place, and materialities in the genesis of migrants' political mobilization. The case of refugees in Cairo, I contend, suggest the need to integrate these two bodies of literature, documenting and theorizing forms of political agency which blur the boundaries between contestation and everyday strategies of resistance and adaptation, and which need to be understood contextually, grounding the analysis in ethnographic observation. The second part of the chapter then draws on assemblage geographies and recent literature on political agency and 'new materialism' to outline a framework in which agency is conceptualized as *emerging from* and *distributed through* networks of social and material relations. Importantly, it also highlights how this 'materialised' approach includes attention to political economy. Finally, the third part of the chapter

discusses how such an approach can be translated into an ethnographic practice that links attention to materialities with the political and ethical commitment to give priority to human subjectivities, particularly in a context of sustained political violence and social unrest as that of contemporary Egypt (see Squire, 2014).

Ethnography lies at the methodological and theoretical core of this work, and it is the focus of Chapter III. My fieldwork in Cairo, conducted between 2011 and 2012 for an overall period of 18 months[6], has involved participant observation and interviews with a total of 13 aid agencies – two international organizations (UNHCR and IOM), and 11 foreign and local NGOs, and community-based organizations (CBOs) – as well as refugees of ten different nationalities.[7] Research has been conducted following two main axes of inquiry. The first has focused on refugees' relation with humanitarian agencies, involving primarily in-depth interviews with aid workers and, to a lesser extent, participant observation at the UNHCR and other NGOs' offices. The second, intertwined stream of research has explored refugees' independent networks of sociality, national and community solidarity, and material support in Cairo. This second part has involved home-based interviews, as well as participant observation in

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[6] The ESRC Quota Award that funded research for this thesis covered a 6-month extension for Difficult Language Training (DLT) in Egyptian Arabic, which I took in Cairo through private tutorials between January and April 2011, and, for training at a more advanced level, between November 2011 and February 2012. Holding a degree in Middle Eastern Studies and Modern Standard Arabic (2005), I already had a good level of knowledge of the language, both written and spoken, which allowed me to carry out basic ethnographic work with a reasonable degree of confidence. In some cases, I used assistance from two qualified Cairo-based professionals with extensive experience of translation and interpretation in the NGO sector – Ayman Helmy and Dara Mahmoud. Ali Alkhadi also collaborated with translation and other research assistant work – setting up of interview appointments and organization of two informal group discussion – among the Iraqi community in Sixth of October City. Quotes from interviews conducted in Arabic are signalled in the four empirical chapters, where I also specify when assistance with translation has been employed.

[7] These have included migrants from Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Congo, Ghana, Togo and Nigeria. Throughout the thesis, I employ the term 'refugee' in a deliberately broad sense. By it, I refer to all the migrants included in my study who had regular contacts with refugee aid agencies, and considered themselves as entitled to some form of assistance or protection, independently of their nationality or legal status. In other words, I chose to refer as *refugees* to all the people who, based on their reasons for leaving their countries and seeking assistance in Egypt, self-identified as such. The distinction between claimants, rejected asylum seekers and recognized refugees is taken into account when relevant to the analysis (for example, in Chapters IV and VII), and so are the reasons for which some of the migrants included in the study – albeit belonging to groups who would have been recognized as *prima facie* refugees by UNHCR – decided to avoid registration with the office (Chapter VI).

the context of community-based organizations, and other informal social context. While initial contacts with migrants have been made through the mediation of NGOs, CBOs, particularly in the periods I spent working as a volunteer in two small organizations in March-May 2011, and May-June 2012, the majority of the people interviewed were individuals and households I reached out to 'snowballing' through these initial contacts.

The challenges posed by doing research in Cairo have been significant, not only because of the generalised condition of political and social unrest that has characterized the country since 2011. In his famous book *Rule of Experts*, political scientist Timothy Mitchell (2002) has highlighted the limitations of social scientific empiricism in the study of political and social relations in a context like that of modern Egypt. Drawing on his work on Egyptian rural politics, Mitchell (2002) makes a strong case for a research practice which, taking into account the 'cultures of fear' that allow Egypt's economic inequality and political repression to perpetuate themselves, aims to document and theorize relations of power that are often discursively unavailable, and elude empirical documentation. Moving from recent literature on ethnographic research in 'dangerous' field context and 'closed polities' (Koch, 2013; Belcher and Martin, 2013), Chapter III of this thesis makes a similar argument, and suggests that reflexive ethnographic practice is essential to explore the entanglement of subjectivity and agency in the relation between migrants, the State and humanitarian agencies in Cairo. In doing so, I also detail questions of access, as well as the practical, ethical, and political challenges of doing research at a time of uprising.

Part B of the thesis – *The boundaries of aid: humanitarianism beyond depoliticization* – presents two ethnographic cases in which refugee political agency is studied in the context of migrants' relations with humanitarian actors. As in the rest of the thesis, the terms 'humanitarianism' and 'aid' are used interchangeably here as broad umbrella terms to refer to the complex system of people and materialised practices that constitute the field of refugee aid in Egypt – what I refer to as the 'assemblage' of humanitarianism. Chapter IV examines the spatial practices of UNHCR Cairo, considering in particular how its enclavic built environment and cultures of security are experienced (and contested) by both aid workers and refugees. Chapter V focuses

instead on labour within the refugee aid industry, and the forms of political subjectification and agency associated with them. It analyses in particular the case of refugees who find employment in the NGO sector as community facilitators, receptionists, or simple volunteers, exploring their ambivalent positions in between the embracing of the values of individual autonomy and self-entrepreneurship promoted by neoliberal development, and the 'disaffection' caused by the daily experience of the hierarchies that characterize the sector.

The argument that underlies the two chapters is that, while formally seeking to 'reach out' and be accessible to their 'populations of concern', the 'material' presence of refugee aid agencies in the city – their buildings, offices, and the economic relations they mobilize – act to de facto reproduce the boundaries that separate refugees from aid workers, and expatriates from locals, intersecting with and feeding into the inequalities that mark everyday life in urban Egypt. It is around these 'material paradoxes' of the lived reality of aid, I contend, that refugees political agency finds expression. Exposing and challenging the 'boundaries of aid' through practices that span strategic adaptation, disenchanted withdrawal, and overt contestation, refugees in Cairo 'bring politics back' the supposedly technical and neutral space of humanitarianism. Understanding humanitarian aid as an 'assemblage' of bodies, materialities, labour, security practices and affective experiences, helps to highlight the contextual, shifting characters of the forms of political agency refugees deploy in their relation with aid agencies. In doing so, it avoids essentialising readings that erase the complexities of a system of governance whose language, values and practices are often mimicked and reproduced in refugees' individual and collective actions.

In part C – entitled *Socio-material infrastructures: agency beyond resistance* – analytical categories derived from assemblage thinking are used to explore the networks of social and material relations through which refugees in Cairo sustain their communities independently from aid agencies, and how these networks are mobilized to create and sustain spaces of communal living in the context of protest camps. Chapter VI starts from an exploration of the experiences of 'waiting' that characterize the everyday lives of many refugees in Cairo. While time-suspension and uncertainty are often described as the product of migration experiences and relations with

humanitarian bureaucracies, I show, it is through infrastructures – such as housing and transportation arrangements, and networks of financial and social support (Simone, 2004a, 2004b, 2008) – that the experience of living 'provisional lives' materializes. In a departure from most existing literature on refugee and subaltern waiting (Bourdieu, 2002; Bayart, 2007; Jeffrey 2008, 2010; Conlon, 2011; Hyndman and Giles, 2011; Mountz, 2011), the chapter suggests that the 'suspended time' of the refugee experience, rather than being a space of de-subjectification and depoliticization, can become one in which agency is recovered precisely through the experiences of intense sociality associated with these provisional infrastructures. In this context, I argue, refugees' political agency does not coincide with the position of a 'resisting' subject. Rather, it manifests itself through openness to the experiences of proximity, encounter, and solidarity that take place in the present.

In the last empirical chapter – Chapter VII – the concept of infrastructure is applied to the analysis of one of the biggest protest camps in the history of contemporary Egypt, and of one of the most important episodes of refugee political mobilization ever documented in the Global South: the Mustapha Mahmoud protest camp, which took place in the homonymous square in Cairo in 2005. My choice to conclude the thesis analysing the protest camp is motivated by the fact that, as the chapter shows, the protests encompassed many elements of the forms of political agency explored in the previous chapters. The Mustapha Mahmoud protesters in fact articulated an explicit rejection of UNHCR self-reliance and local integration policies, set-up their camp in a strategic location aimed at exposing the office's securitized spatialities, and were able to mobilize the networks of socio-material relations that connect Sudanese refugee communities in Cairo – including community associations and NGOs – to create a self-sustained city which, for over three months, provided many migrants with safe shelter and food. As such, it is argued, the protest camp is the space in which the boundaries between everyday life and protest are more radically challenged, and in which political agency originates from practices and affective states which, replacing oppositional stances with feelings of belonging, safety, and empathic solidarity, most clearly exceed and problematize the category of resistance.

# Part A

# Theory and Ethnography

# Chapter II: Space, political agency and the materialities of the refugee regime: Understanding refugee politics

## II.1 Introduction

In this chapter I set out to outline the theoretical framework which underlies the analysis presented in the four empirical chapters of this thesis. Combining the sensitivity to the role of materiality, relationality, and affect that characterizes assemblage geographies with attention to political economy, I thus advance a theorization of refugee agency as emerging from the socio-material and spatial relations in which migrants are inserted, as well as in the processes of subjectification associated with these relations. This contextual and relational approach to political agency, I contend, allows to overcome the tendency of most existing literature on migrant politics to dichotomise everyday politics and contestation, showing how the latter can be grounded in, and emerge from, the former.

The chapter moves from a review of existing theorizations of political agency within political geography, as well as of the conceptualizations of resistance and contestation most commonly applied in critical refugee and subaltern studies. However, although the review identifies discrepancies and *desiderata*, the framework for analysis I propose is grounded first of all in my ethnographic fieldwork in Cairo.

In Chapter I, I outlined the main characteristics of refugee migration to Egypt, as well as the recent changes that have marked refugee governance in the country. I have thus examined how the global shift from "camp-based" refugee assistance to an urban approach to protection policies – which has characterized the last two decades of UNHCR work, and for which Cairo was one of the pilot implementation sites – coincided with a new emphasis on local integration, and with the dramatic shrinkage of assistance programs. Coupled with growing levels of securitization, socio-spatial polarization, economic insecurity, and social unrest, in Cairo the implementation of this new approach has been not only largely ineffective, but also thoroughly contested by its own beneficiaries.

What characterizes the Cairo case, I argue, is a landscape of refugee politics where contestation, although often taking radical, and even violent, forms, is strictly

entangled with the materialities and spatialities of humanitarianism, neoliberal urbanism, and security-oriented state policies. Political conflict coexists and merges with everyday practices of strategic and resilient adaptation, at the same being limited by, and constantly contributing to unsettle and redefine a pervasive and multifaceted system of urban governance.

These 'hybrid' phenomena, I contend, exceed most existing classifications, and challenge straightforward assumptions around the distinction between 'everyday' and 'contentious' forms of politics, but also between resistance and inactivity. As such, they require the adoption of analytical tools, grounded in ethnographic observation, which are based on a *contextual* and *relational* approach to the study of political agency (see, among others, Featherstone, 2008; Häkli and Kallio, 2014), one which highlights in particular its embeddedness in the myriad political subjectivities which are produced through the material and spatial dimensions of apparatuses of governance (or government).

This chapter sets out to outline this framework of analysis. In doing so, I not only examine some of the most significant recent trends in literature on migrant and refugee politics, but also engage with a variety of theoretical contributions on the wider topic of political agency from human geography, spatial and political theory, and urban studies. More specifically, I focus on recent literature which has conceptualized the role of space (see, for instance, Featherstone and Korf, 2012) and that of matter/materiality, broadly conceived (see Coole and Frost, 2010), in determining the constitution of political subjects. Through it, I set out to define and contextualize the theoretical tools which will assist me in answering the questions of how and why contestation and conflict arise, in which subjectivities and everyday practices they are rooted, through which embodied and spatialised relations are individual identities, communities and collective organizations forged. As will be shown, the analysis retains a fundamental distinction between *subjectivity* – a term that I employ loosely to refer to the intersubjective constitution of the subject (see, for instance, Thrift, 2008) – and *agency*, that is to say the subject's ability to act in order to influence social processes, redesigned established relations of power. Rather than understanding it as the property of a coherent and self-contained subject of politics, it conceptualises

agency as relational, material and distributed, that is to say, emerging not only from interactions between different individuals and groups, but also from those between human actors and their material and spatial environment.

Before outlining the structure of the chapter, and given the potential amplitude and complexity of some of the issues addressed, it is perhaps worth spending a few words on its scope and purposes. First, my aim is obviously not to engage in an in-depth theoretical inquiry on questions of political agency and subjectivity[8], as this would far exceed both my competences and the scope of this thesis. My purpose in this chapter, and indeed in this thesis, is not to come out with an established set of criteria to determine what counts as 'political' or amounts to 'resistance' in the actions refugees and migrants engage in. Rather, my goal is to outline a framework for a theoretically-attuned ethnographic analysis of these practices and struggles. To borrow Clive Barnett's (2012) effective synthesis, my aim is not to engage with questions of political *ontology*, but to contextualize theoretically an ethnographic *phenomenology* of refugee politics.

The chapter proceeds through a three-part theoretical and methodological analysis. In the first part (section II.2), I start from a review of the most relevant recent debates on political agency within human geography and related disciplines, to then move on to critically assess their influence on migration and refugee studies. In doing so, I focus in particular on three issues: recent shifts in the notion of politics within critical and poststructuralist social research, applications of the concept of 'everyday resistance', and the emerging interest in migrant protests within citizenship and critical migration studies. Existing approaches to the question of migrant politics, I demonstrate, tend to

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[8] Stemming from broadly Foucauldian and Deleuzian approaches, debates on political subjectivity have occupied critical and poststructuralist social researchers for decades now. Within human geography, these debates have been reinvigorated in recent years through the application of the work of theorists like Judith Butler (1993, 1997, 2010) and Jacques Rancière (2004, see also Dikeç, 2005, 2013), as well as through various engagements with non-representational theory (Barnett, 2008) and political economy (Varró, 2014). Although potentially relevant to the themes addressed here, I am aware of the fact that, even if it was among my aims, the magnitude of this body of work would make it impossible to provide an exhaustive treatise in the context of this chapter. I therefore decided, for the sake of clarity and, more importantly, of synthesis, to limit the discussion to the review of some contributions on the political philosophy of space which are directly related to the framework outlined in the second part of this chapter.

leave the distinction between contentious and everyday forms of politics unquestioned – a distinction which, as already mentioned, the case of migrants and refugees in Egypt thoroughly questions. Moving from these observations, and drawing on literature from assemblage theory and new materialism (De Landa, 2006; Coole and Frost, 2010; Anderson et al., 2012) the second part (section II.3) of the chapter attempts to offer a synthesis in which political agency is understood as emerging from and distributed throughout networks of relations which encompass objects, built environment, affect and embodiment, but also the materiality of the social and economic relations. Finally, the last section (II.4) explores the ethnographic implications of the approach proposed here, making a strong case for an ethnographic analysis where the local, the particular, the embodied and the personal are understood and conceptualized "in the midst of major theory" (Katz, 1996, p. 498).

## II.2 Migrants and refugees as political subjects
### II.2.1 Politics and agency

The last three decades of social scientific scholarship have witnessed what has been defined as "a radical expansion of the notion of politics" (Häkli and Kallio, 2014, p. 181). Taking poststructuralism's de-centred understanding of power and the subject as a starting point (see Thrift, 2008), human geographers, among many others, have actively contributed to debates where politics have been displaced far beyond the traditional domains of formal organizations and institutional representation. Common understandings of political subjectivity and political agency have thus come to encompass a variety of acts and conditions, both individual and collective, which inform everyday life in its most mundane manifestations, involving affects, emotions, and, particularly in feminist scholarship, the body (see, among many others, Agnew, 2003; Anderson et al., 2012; Barnett, 2008, Gibson-Graham, 1993; Katz, 1996; Skelton and Valentine, 2003, Rose, 1997; Staeheli, 2010; Thrift, 2004; Venn, 2009). In current debates, political subjectivity and political agency appear thus as "multifaceted and highly contested concepts" (Häkli and Kallio, 2014, p. 1), and singling out main trends and positions appears difficult.

However, it is probably fair to affirm that this extension of the notion of politics – stemming from post-structuralism and feminism, but also from the Marxian and

historical materialist approaches – has had two main consequences. First of all, a wealth of literature has been produced to explore the political subjectivities of groups who had been traditionally relegated at the margins of citizenship and political belonging, such as children and youth (Philo and Smith, 2003; Kallio and Häkli, 2011, 2012; Elwood and Mitchell, 2012; Staeheli et al., 2013), but also, and crucially for the purposes of this chapter, undocumented migrants and other categories of non-citizens (for instance, Moulin and Nyers, 2007; Tyler, 2013). Secondly, and also importantly to the purpose of this discussion, overcoming monolithic conceptualizations of the subject "as self-sufficient, enduring and sovereign individual, from which all consciousness and action springs" (Häkli and Kallio, 2014, p. 4, see also Thrift, 2008) this new comprehensive notion of politics has led to a remarkable tendency to overlook questions of agency in politics. In other words, the dynamics, spaces, states and events in which subjects come to act – in a more or less wilful, more or less constrained, more or less conflictual way – in order to change the conditions they are immersed in, have been understudied in many contemporary analyses of the political. If nowadays it would be hard to disagree with Slater (2004) that politics is "a type of conflictual relation that can develop in any area of the social" (ibid., p. 22, cit. in Featherstone, 2008), well beyond the spaces of institutional representation, the contexts, causalities and dynamics through which these conflictual relations emerge have been generally under-theorized. Attention has been diverted from the political acts in which people engage through deliberation or organization, having well-defined objectives and clearly articulated, if temporary and shifting, political identities, to explorations of the political salience of everyday experiences, where conflictual relations, if at all present, are more fluid, and their impact generally much smaller and more ambivalent.

This turn away from agency has been the object of sustained criticism within some strands of political geography (Agnew, 2003; Kofman and Youngs, 2003, Kox and Law, 2003; Marston et al., 2005; Sharp, 2011; Häkli and Kallio, 2014). For John Agnew (2003), "agency disappeared into analyses that presume superorganic categories which determine political outcomes" so that "politics is already determined before anyone engages in it" (Agnew, 2003, p. 604, see also Häkli and Kallio, 2014). Albeit without endorsing "a liberal and individualist conception of political action",

Agnew has strongly argued that "politics must be (1) the fruit of agency and (2) organized rather than predetermined." (ibid, 605). Similarly, for Cox and Low (2003) agency – as an essential precondition for overcoming contradictions within and between subjects, and thus for change to occur – remains a fundamental conceptual tool in political geography.

The question of agency will be returned upon in further detail in the second part of this chapter, where I will show how recent material and relational ontologies of the political can be applied in an analysis in which agency is understood in *relational* and *distributed* terms. First however, I examine how the notion of the political discussed above has been applied in migration and refugee studies, as well as how some of the most problematic aspects of this application have been re-addressed through the recent interest in migrant protests.

## II.2.2 Migrant politics beyond resistance

Until recently, migrants' political agency had received relatively scarce academic attention. "The question of migrants and politics", Peró and Solomos (2010) write, has "traditionally been interpreted in terms of migrants as objects rather than subjects of politics." (Peró and Solomos, 2010, p. 7). The problematisation and expansion of the notion of politics outlined above has contributed significantly to change the terms of the debate. Over the last decade, migration research has witnessed a growing interest in the subject, and themes such as the political representation and electoral geographies of diasporic groups (Collyer, 2014) and the role of faith-based and non-profit organizations in migrant politics (Back et al., 2004) have been largely explored. Moreover, social movements studies and transnational paradigms have provided new interpretative frameworks, such as, for example, Østergaard-Nielsen's (2003) theorization of transnational political practices. However, these and other similar strands of research have focused almost exclusively on institutional and representational forms of political mobilization, and their scope has been mostly limited to the issue of immigration in Western liberal societies.

It is rather in the study of migrants' 'everyday politics' that a more comprehensive notion of the political has found application (see, among many others, Vandergeest,

1993; Horstmann, 2002; Stasiulis and Bakan 2005; Ellermann, 2010; Gardiner Barber and Lem 2008; Hobson and Seabrooke, 2007; Martin, 2005; Zontini, 2008; Moukarbel, 2009; Zinn 2009). Resonating with the arguments advanced in other emerging fields of research on political subjectification, like children and youth studies (Kallio and Häkli, 2011), this literature has aimed to show "how migrants can be politically engaged while appearing quiescent." (Peró and Solomos, 2010, p. 11). Researchers' attention has thus been directed to the small scale, and often invisible, tactics and strategies through which economic exploitation, social and cultural repression, and surveillance and mobility control are eluded or countered. The lens through which these quiescent and hidden politics have been most commonly read is that of *resistance*. A critical engagement with the most common applications of the concept, and particularly of the related notion of *everyday resistance*, is important to understand the theoretical gaps that this chapter sets out to address.

The ascendancy of the idea of resistance in contemporary social sciences can be ascribed to the influence of writers like Michel de Certeau (1984), Ranajit Guha (1999) and, much more significantly, Michel Foucault (1978) and James Scott (1985, 1999; see Blom Hansen and Stepputat, 2001). Foucault's remarks on the pervasiveness of resistance and on its being intrinsic to all manifestations of power, articulated in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, are well known (Foucault, 1978). To be sure, in Foucault's later writings the idea of resistance as both incessant and always entangled with – and never external to – power has been reformulated in a much more nuanced way, one which appears also more optimistic with regard to human creative agency.[9] Overall however, Foucault's micro-physics of power and resistance have undoubtedly contributed to make the latter "a much wider and more ambitious category than it used to be" (Blom Hansen and Stepputat 2001, p. 32). Transforming resistance in "an anthropological universal, something which is always/already out there" (ibid.), the (mis)application of Foucauldian analytical tools, often without adequate ethnographic support (Ortner, 1995), has much contributed to

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[9] As many have highlighted, Foucault's study of power has never – throughout his work, not only in the later Foucault – excluded the possibility of conflict, counter-conducts (Death, 2010) and revolt, and has even been concerned with a phenomenology of contemporary revolutions (Foucault, 1979, see also Afary and Anderson, 2005; Smith, 2001).

make of politics the pre-given phenomenon "determined before anyone actually engages in it" described by Agnew (2003, p. 604).

Within migration, refugee and development studies, particularly in postcolonial contexts, the work of James Scott (1976, 1985, and 1990) has also done much to attract attention on the micro-physics of politics. As Duncombe (2002) puts it, Scott "has been one of the most eloquent defenders of a politics that does not look like politics" (Duncombe, 2002, p. 89). Scott's inquiry into forms of popular struggles which are alternative to protests, unrest and rebellion started in his volume *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (1977). But it is mostly in his later works *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985), and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990) that "the ordinary weapons of powerless groups" were described and conceptualized.[10]

The influence of Scott's theory of resistance can be located at the opposite and complementary spectrum than Foucault's one. While Foucault's theories of power and resistance are based on a decentred and radically anti-humanist conceptualization of subjectivity, Scott's work retains strong "humanist assumptions about political agency" (Mitchell, 1990, p. 559). The agent of politics crafted by Scott is, to say it with Timothy Mitchell (1990), "constructed in terms of the distinction between a power that operates at the level of objective behavior and power in the realm of individual or collective consciousness." (Mitchell, 1990, p. 362).

To be sure, the 'strategic subjectivities' described by Scott can be seen at work, and very effectively so, in many context where people deprived of formal and substantial rights try to make the most of the material advantages the power they are subjected to can provide. As Julia Elyachar has written, "the Egyptian people, the popular classes in particular, are skilled in deploying weapons of the weak" (Elyachar, 2010, p. 453).

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[10] Drawing on his field research on land reform in rural Malaysia, and incorporating insights from Marxism, anarchism, and British New Left historians such as E.P. Thompson (1971), the argument put forward by *Weapons of the Weak* is multilayered and complex, and it can hardly be exhaustively summarised here. Nevertheless, it is possible to outline what, in the context of the analysis of refugee politics advanced in this thesis, appear as its most problematic aspects.

In some of the poorest neighbourhoods of central Cairo, where NGO presence is particularly concentrated and visible, development projects fail everyday also because people have learned to employ very effective forms of trickery (ibid.). Also in the context of this thesis then, as an analytical category Scott's "weapons of the weak" should obviously not be dismissed altogether.

Yet affording an excessive degree of rationality and coherence to the everyday acts of disempowered actors can lead to miss the co-productive relations through which specific subjectivities and expressions of agency are bound to existing relations of power. If we consider how the concept of everyday resistance has been prevalently applied in migration, refugee and subaltern studies, it is easy to see how the dualistic oppositions attributed by Mitchell to Scott – "material versus ideological, actions versus words, observable versus hidden, coerced versus free, base versus superstructure, body versus spirit" (Mitchell, 1990, pp. 362-363) – have led to the unquestioned reproduction of the structure-agency dichotomy, even in studies which formally claimed to be adopting a more nuanced and contextual approach to the question. The only possible response to the poststructuralist turn-away from agency seems to lie in an almost romanticized 'resisting migrant', whose constitution as political subject is never explored in its material, affective, and spatial genesis, and whose ambiguities are rarely acknowledged.[11]

The second aspect of Scott's 'problematic legacy' that I want to emphasize here lies in the sharp line he draws between covert and overt forms of subaltern politics, a point which is reiterated and developed in most of his work after *Weapons of the Weak* (Gutmann, 1993). As Scott explicitly states, the purpose of his ethnography is not simply to demonstrate the salience of peasants' small strategies of resistance against capitalist agricultural modernization. Its aim is also to show how it was the focus on revolt and rebellion that had prevented previous scholarship from engaging with what actually determines and shapes subalterns' relations with the powers they are

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[11] To be sure, in Weapons of the Weak Scott does describe tactics that "emerge though everyday forms of knowing" (McFarlane, 2012, p. 55), including forms of spatial encroaching which are not dissimilar with those analysed in Chapter IV of this thesis. Nevertheless, also in this case his analysis privileges practices of resistance which remain invisible, conceiving them in sharp opposition to direct contestation.

subjected to, namely everyday practices. As he writes in the first chapter of *Weapons of the Weak* "the emphasis on peasant rebellion was misplaced. […] as most subaltern struggles "stop well short of collective outright defiance" (Scott, 1985, p. 29).

This argument is largely based on the assumption that both subaltern and dominant groups "perceive the advantage of avoiding open confrontation" (Sivaramakrishnan 2005, p. 350). Yet, if anything, this points for the need to understand even better "why then both sides get involved in escalated conflicts" (ibid.) rather than concluding, as Scott does, than all attention to people revolting and protesting is misplaced. As Gutmann (1993) writes, "far from needing to narrow our understanding of which forms of resistance are worthwhile to study, we must study both overt and covert forms and the relations between them." (Guttmann, 1993, p. 76).

In migration studies, phenomena as heterogeneous as transnational citizenship (Baubock, 1994; Fitzgerald, 2000; Zontini, 2008) and extreme forms of migrant protests involving self-mutilation and suicide attempts (Ellermann, 2010) have been labeled as 'everyday politics' and 'weapons of the powerless'. This last example, in particular, is revealing of the effects the proliferation and dilution of the concept of resistance has had on this field of studies. The sharp contraposition between everyday politics and contestation has left researchers without tools for studying the many grey areas between different forms of political agency – overt and covert, strategic and confrontational, collective and individual, radical and adaptive and compromising.

How we can make sense of the cases where political mobilization appears as a hybrid practice in which the language, discourses, identities and spatialities of agencies of governance are thoroughly appropriated by migrants before being contested and reversed? This thesis presents many such cases – from the setting up of community-based migrant NGOs which compete with bigger international actors for visibility and funding, to the adoption of the protection and vulnerability discourses of international humanitarianism in refugee mobilization. Setting everyday resistance against mobilization and revolt, I argue, prevents the analysis of how ordinary relations of power within migration regimes can evolve into protests, revolt and conflict. The framework proposed in part II of this chapter attempts to move beyond this strict

dichotomy. Before introducing it however, in the next section I examine how recent engagements with migrant and refugee protests have brought mobilization and contestation back to the fore, albeit leaving many questions about migrant political agency still unanswered.

## II.2.3 Migrant protests: Re-materializing spaces of exception

In recent years, debates on migrant resistance and migration politics have been reinvigorated by the growing visibility of protests and mobilization by migrants, refugees and, more in general, non-citizens (Tyler and Marciniak, 2013). Migrants, it has been argued, have gradually emerged "as key protagonists in global struggles concerning freedom of movement, social recognition, worker protections, and the right of asylum" (Nyers, 2010, p. 127). Inspired by the activism of no-border movements in Western Europe (Nyers, 2002, 2006, 2008), as well as by attention to the forms of political subjectivity associated with migrant detention and deportability (De Genova, 2002; Nyers, 2006; McGregor, 2011; Conlon and Gill, 2013), or emerging from – as in the case of this thesis (see Chapter III) – the growing interest in revolt and protest movements in the context of neoliberal structural adjustment and austerity (McNevin, 2006; Tyler and Marciniak, 2013; Tyler, 2013) literature on migrant protests constitute a rapidly growing and highly heterogeneous body of work. However, some prevalent trends can be identified, particularly if we consider this literature in relation to debates on liberal citizenship and 'states of exception'.

Arguably, the main impact of this literature can be located within the field of citizenship studies (Balibar, 2000; Nyers, 2003, 2006, 2008; McNevin, 2006, Tyler and Marciniak, 2013). In 2000, commenting on the *Sans Papier* movement in France, Etienne Balibar famously argued that Europeans owe to the struggles of undocumented migrants a re-invigorated understanding of citizenship "in as much as it is not an institution or a statute but a collective practice" (Balibar, 2000, p. 42; see also, p. 147). For Balibar, migrant protests thus constitute what other authors have defined as "acts" of citizenship (Isin, 2008). Moving from such a perspective, several writers have highlighted the centrality of migrant mobilizations in challenging and redefining the ever tighter contours of inclusion and the increasingly uneven access to mobility in neoliberal polities (McNevin, 2006; Isin and Nielsen; 2008; Nyers, 2008).

Another significant aspect of this body of work lies in its constituting an attempt to move beyond analyses of what have been named "exceptionalist politics" (Moulin and Nyers, 2007), that is, the body of work that draws on Giorgio Agamben's theorization of spaces of exception (Agamben, 1998, 2000, 2005). Since the late 1990s, the conceptual apparatus derived from the work of Italian philosopher has in fact constituted a fundamental point of reference for critical poststructuralist engagements with the politics of the international migration and refugee regimes. Agamben's seminal book *Homo Sacer* (1998), which combines insights from the work of Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, and most importantly Carl Schmitt, "elevated the camp to the status of the biopolitical paradigm of modernity" (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013, p. 147; see also Minca, 2006, 2007), tracing its juridical genealogy in the state of exception and martial regimes (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Minca, 2006, 2007). Agamben argues that in modern camps – a term used to qualify a variety of technologies of 'holding' and exclusion, from  refugee camps to waiting zones in airports, and urban peripheries – sovereign power works erasing the distinction between political life (*bios*) and biological life (*zoe*), thus reducing subjects to "bare life" (Agamben, 2000, p. 41).

Giorgio Agamben's work has been essential in foregrounding a spatialised understanding of biopolitics, in both topological and topographical terms (Diken, 2004; Gregory, 2004; Diken and Laustsen, 2005; Reid-Henry 2007; Minca, 2006, 2007; Belcher et al., 2008). Showing how subjects can be positioned within existing political orders precisely through the 'exceptional' exclusion of the camp, his book *Homo Sacer* has  highlighted the need to consider how politics work 'at the margins' and in abject spaces, and how these spaces are essential to the constitution of sovereign power. It is probably fair to say that, without Agamben's analysis, most contemporary critical research into the politics of asylum, refugee camps, migration detention, and deportation would have been impossible.

In recent years however, the "sometimes mechanical transposition of Agamben's argument into critical discussions of refugee and migration politics" (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013, p. 148) has come under increasingly critical scrutiny. In particular, it has been argued, applications of Agamben's work have resulted in gender neutral,

place-less, and ultimately static geographies of exception that provide no tools to account for the political and social agency of abject subjects (Walters, 2008). In these discussions, "migrants are always depicted as *cast* into spaces at the limit of the law, *contained* outside the system of legal protection, *trapped* in zones of indistinction" (Walters, 2008, p. 188). If in the literature examined in the previous section of this chapter migrants' agency appeared either diluted into nearly imperceptible everyday acts, or taken for granted assuming the existence of overly coherent "resisting subjects", in critical migration research which has explored Agamben's themes agency has been sometimes simply ruled out of the debate.

Accounts of migrant protests have significantly contributed to re-animate, re-materialise, and bring agency back into spaces of exception. Feminist scholars, for example, have argued for transnational counter-topographies in which the "intimacies of exclusion" are explored in their located, embodied and material constitution (Mountz, 2011). The 'autonomy of migration' approach (Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos, 2008; Mezzadra, 2011; Rygiel, 2011; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) has also "fostered a somewhat more optimistic view of the trajectory of migrant politics" (Walters, 2008) shifting the focus from sovereign power to migrant mobility and autonomous organization. Although building in part on the same biopolitical paradigm which underpins Agamben's work, writers adopting feminist and autonomist perspectives have reworked Agamben's analyses of states of exception conceptualizing migrant politics – including demonstrations, protests and mobilization around the right to mobility – as challenging, and sometimes preceeding, sovereign power.

Some empirical gaps can be identified within existing literature on migrant protests. The most evident is probably what Garelli and Tazzioli (2013) – with reference to migration research more in general – have called its implicit "methodological Europeanism". Both theoretically-informed analyses and ethnographic explorations of migrant protests in fact seem to focus exclusively on immigrants in Western liberal polities. Furthermore, within such polities, attention has been devoted almost exclusively to the struggles taking place at border-zones, de facto ignoring the many recent contributions which have described the proliferation and dislocation of

bordering practices (Graham, 2011; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) and highlighted the centrality of countries of transit in the Global South in these processes (Bayart, 2007). This thesis addresses these gaps looking into the shattering of the governance of international migration into urban areas of the Global South, as well as to the role of humanitarianism – and of its contestation – in this process.

Notwithstanding these limitations, both the 'acts of citizenship' literature and the critiques to the Agambenian paradigm advanced by feminist and autonomist approaches have been essential in pushing the debate on migrant political agency beyond simplistic accounts of resistance. First of all, this body of work calls for a problematisation of the distinction between overt and covert political engagement. So, for instance, "treating mobility as a resource" (McGregor, 2011, p. 237) which is essential to the constitution of migrants as political subjects, the 'autonomy of migration' literature has been able to account for the political salience of both migrants embodied practices of border-crossing *and* of forms of organized political mobilization against borders. Highlighting migrants' public protests, demonstrations, occupations, as well as their illegalised 'dwellings' and their underground networks of solidarity (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2008, 2013; Rygiel, 2011), recent engagements with migrant protests point to an understanding of political agency as 'emerging' from – and in spite of – the contextual sets of material and spatial relations through which the government of mobility is enacted.

## II.3 Space, materiality and the emergence of political agency

The first part of this chapter has discussed the ambivalent effects of "the radical expansion of the notion of politics" (Häkli and Kallio, 2014, p. 181) which has characterized poststructuralist approaches in contemporary social scientific literature. On the one hand, I have argued, attention to 'micro' and 'everyday' politics has allowed scholars to acknowledge and account for marginalised actors – including non-citizens, migrants, and non-status refugees – as subjects and not just objects of politics. On the other though, this conception of politics as 'diffused' has led to overlook the question of how and when, and in which forms, individuals and groups come to act politically, forging new alliances and identifications, and unsettling existing relations of power. In a word, *political agency* as an analytical category has been virtually

dismissed. These dual, ambivalent effects, I have shown, are particularly evident in migration and refugee studies, where theorizations of "everyday resistance" have marked a shift from an almost complete neglect of migrant political agency, to a somewhat romanticised figure of the 'resisting migrant', constantly (and silently) engaging in a wide variety of everyday struggles. In the meanwhile, conflict and contestation have been for a long time almost completely neglected. Yet, as explained in section I.3, recent research on migrant protests points for the growing diffusion of phenomena which exceed straightforward classifications as either everyday politics or overt mobilization. These phenomena, I suggest, presuppose political subjectivities which, although setting themselves against them, are also strictly entangled with the spaces, practices and discourses of migration governance, and require rather a relational approach to the study of migrant politics, one which is at same time materialised and spatialised. This second part of the chapter attempts to outline such a framework. I propose a conceptualization of migrant political agency as emerging from the networks of material and spatial relations through which refugee aid and migration governance are constituted.

## II.3.1 Agency as relational and distributed

In this second section, I therefore introduce another aspect of the "radical expansion of the notion of politics" (Häkli and Kallio, 2014, p. 181) outlined at the beginning of this chapter, namely that of new and emerging material and spatial ontologies of the political. The last few years have witnessed a renewal of interest in the relation between space and politics, broadly conceived. Human geographers in particular have readdressed issues such as the spatialities of global capitalism, or the relation between space and democracy (Massey, 2005; Sparke, 2005; Dikeç, 2006; 2007; Barnett, 2013, 2014 forthcoming). At the same time, ethnographers from various disciplines have shown growing attention to the contestation of spatial relations, for example through critical geopolitics and postcolonial critiques of development (see, among others, Sharp et al., 2000; Oza, 2001; Sharp, 2003, Kothari, 2012). Simultaneously with this renewed interest in spatial politics, contributions drawing on Actor Network Theory (ANT; see Harbers, 2005; Routledge, 2008; Hawkins, 2009; Shaw and Meehan, 2013; Meehan, Shaw and Marston, 2014; new materialisms (Whatmore, 2006; Braun and Whatmore, 2010; Coole and Frost, 2010), and assemblage-thinking

(De Landa, 2006; McFarlane, 2011a, 2011b; Anderson et al., 2012) have also deeply changed the way in which political agency is conceptualized and studied, in particular re-centring the debate around objects, matter and materiality.

Two main elements can be singled out within these emerging bodies of literature, both of which can contribute to a conceptualization of migrant agency that overcomes the shortcomings of the unquestioned accounts of resistance discussed above. First, new spatial and material approaches consider *agency as relationally constituted*. The capacity to act to change relations of power which constrain us, assuming more or less explicit and well defined political identities, should thus be regarded not as the pre-given attribute of self-contained, coherent subjects, but as *emerging from the contingencies of ongoing, actually existing relations*. Secondly, agency is understood as *distributed throughout networks* – often configuring asymmetric relations of power, marked by hierarchies and historically determined inequalities – which encompass not only human subjects, but also materialities – in the forms of objects, built environment, bodies and their affectivity. In the next two sections I further explore these points with the assistance, in particular, of assemblage geographies and recent literature on new materialisms.

## II.3.2 Assemblages and agency

Assemblage geographies constitute today one the most significant bodies of work in which agency is conceptualized as emerging from the contingency of material relations (Davies, 2011; see also, Marcus and Saka, 2006; Philips, 2006; Venn, 2006; Harman, 2008; Harrison, 2007; McFarlane 2009, 2011a; 2011b; 2012; Robbins and Marks, 2009; Anderson et al., 2012). While writers such as Ong and Collier (2005) and Sassen (2007) have used the concept of assemblage to describe intertwined, multiscalar phenomena associated with globalization, theorist Manuel De Landa (2006) has advanced a more systematic theorization derived from the writings of Deleuze and Guattari (1987). In his book *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, De Landa (2006) is concerned with providing a framework for the study of social ontology which avoids both methodological individualism and overarching structural accounts in which the autonomy and unpredictability of micro-scale relations is rarely accounted for (Cresswell, 2011). As

argued by McFarlane (2011a), De Landa's (2006) conceptualization of assemblage is today commonly applied by geographers both as a theoretical and methodological approach "attuned to practice, materiality and emergence" which conceives the social "as a process of composition", and as "a name for relations between objects that make up the world through their interactions" (McFarlane, 2011a, p. 23).

In the context of this thesis, the influence of assemblage is traceable primarily in the underlying epistemological orientation attuned to the emergence of political agency from networks of socio-material relations (Anderson et al., 2012). However, the analysis also mobilises the notion of assemblage as "an object in the world" (McFarlane, 2011, p.03), particularly in the case of institutional organizations and community networks, which I analyse, following De Landa (2006), as assemblages of "bodies […] food and physical labour […] buildings and neighbourhoods serving as their physical locales" (De Landa, 2006, pp. 5-6). In part C of this thesis, adopting a terminology today increasingly used in both urban studies and empirical analyses of spaces of protest, this perspective is applied mobilizing the notion of infrastructure (Simone, 2004b; Feigenbaum et al., 2013b). By it, I refer to the contigent socio-material practices and relations which are both made by people and 'make people do' (Latour, 2005), thus opening up specific and contingent possibilities for co-habitation, cooperation, and collective mobilization.

Whether the objects of analysis are hierarchical globalised agencies like UNHCR, or informal and spontaneous alliances – as in the case of the diasporic networks involved in the organization of refugee protests in Cairo – assemblage and 'infrastructure' geographies allow to account not only for their heterogeneity, but also for their contingent and often unstable nature. As Anderson et al. (2012) note, relational ontologies and assemblage thinking can be considered in fact "as an ethos oriented to the 'instability' of interactions", and as "a concept for thinking the relations between stability and transformation in the production of the social" (Anderson et al., 2012, pp. 171-172). Applications of assemblage theory to critical urban studies (McGuirk and Dowling, 2009; McFarlane, 2011), as well as to the study of race, identity and difference (Saldanha, 2007, Swanton, 2010), illustrate this latest point particularly well. Arun Saldanha (2007) sees race as "a heterogeneous process of differentiation

involving the materialities of bodies and spaces […] shifting amalgamation of human bodies and their appearance, genetic material, artefacts, landscapes, music, money, language, and states of mind" (Saldanha, 2007, p. 9). Through assemblage theory, Saldanha's (2007) work thus manages to account for two apparently opposite, but actually complementary attributes of race: its inherent provisionality, that is to say race as produced through relations between heterogeneous components taking place at particular moments in time, but also its stability as a social formation in which relations tend to crystallise in a particular order.

Applied to the study of migrant political agency, this attention to the tension between provisionality and stability proves particularly helpful to shed light on the relational continuities between everyday practices and radical, collective and organized forms of mobilization. Instead of conceptualising the former as opposed to, and excluding, the latter, as in most readings of (everyday) resistance, relational thinking allows to account for the *emergence* of political agency from the networks of powers through which subjectivities are produced. In the context of this thesis, this methodological approach translates into an examination of the continuities between the subjectivities produced through migrants' everyday relations with humanitarian agencies, and the forms of overt mobilization in which these relations are exposed and contested.

So, for instance, Chapter V describes how neoliberal aid creates, among the refugees who are expected to be its own beneficiaries, subjects who are able to appropriate the language and practices of humanitarianism in order to make the most of the material advantages it has to offer – namely jobs, salaries, and the relative privilege of inclusion in a socially prestigious transnational environment. At the same time however, Chapters IV and VII show how the same practices and discourses can be mobilized, often by the same categories of migrants, to articulate stances of overt contestation in which not only the efficacy, but also the very legitimacy of humanitarian governance is radically questioned. Overall the thesis provide several examples of how individuals and groups can shift between the seemingly unquestioned assumption of the docile and vulnerable subjectivities of 'aid recipients', and the adoption of oppositional stances through which forms of organized mobilization emerge and thrive.

Crucially for an approach which is inspired by assemblage thinking, the inter-subjective relations from which these forms of contentious political agency emerge always involve materialities, exceeding the domain of merely human interactions. As I will detail in the following sub-section, these materialities include not only bodies and the built environment, but also the economic relations which, configuring the aid industry as an employer and as a source of income, are essential part of the international political economy of aid.

### II.3.3 Agency, materiality and political economy

The analyses presented in this thesis are informed by a heterogeneous and multifaceted conception of materiality. Relational approaches and assemblage-geographies are in themselves based, as Cresswell (2011) notes, on an "ontology derived from the connections between people and things" (Cresswell, 2011, p. 239). However, this thesis combines these insights – largely influenced by ANT – with the recent reengagement with political economy that characterize literature on "new materialisms" (Whatmore, 2006; Bennet, 2010; Braun and Whatmore, 2010; Coole and Frost, 2010). In Chapter I, I have outlined the empirical reasons for contextualizing the study of humanitarianism and refugee politics in Cairo within the broader analysis of the political economic changes Egypt underwent since the late 1980s, stressing in particular the impact neoliberal structural adjustment had on the country. Here I want to briefly discuss the theoretical underpinning of my choice of conjugating attention to political economy with sensitivity to the multiple, embodied materialities through which social relations are forged. In the introduction to their book *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (2010) argue that studying politics *materially* is today rendered necessary by the realization that "the radicalism of dominant discourses which have flourished under the cultural turn is now more or less exhausted" (Coole and Frost, 2010, p. 6). While it is undeniable that radical constructivism has provided "considerable insight into the workings of power", they argue, its more linguistic and discursive forms have tended to dismiss all "overtures to material reality as an insidious foundationalism" (ibid.) Yet, if we consider the challenges posed by today's biopolitics and global political economy, a "complex, pluralistic, and relatively open" conception of matter and materialism, that is to say an epistemology which is "thoroughly immersed into

materiality's productive contingencies" (ibid., p. 7) is essential to do justice to contemporary manifestations of the political, and to the variety of scales and actors they involve.

In the context of this thesis, Coole and Frost's (2010) call for a complex and pluralistic engagement with matter/materiality/materialism is fully followed. A "critical and nondogmatic reenagagement with political economy" is thus combined with attention to "the productivity and resilience of matter" (ibid.) in the forms of built environments, corporeality and, crucially, of affect. Thus, for instance, the analysis of refugees' contestation of the securitized spatialities of UNHCR Cairo, as well as the exploration of migrants' experiences of 'waiting' and 'time suspension' – presented in Chapter IV and Chapter VI respectively – are all discussed as expressions of agency in the context of "the politics of the neoliberal city inside-out", to borrow Asef Bayat's (2012) definition. Collectively organized protests, individual experiences of subversion and rebellion, as well as everyday experiences of powerlessness and frustration, that is, are read against the politics of spatial exclusion in the context of Cairo's polarized urban development. Similarly, the analysis of the Mustapha Mahmoud protest camp in Chapter VII considers at the same time the micro-politics of corporeality which marked everyday life in the camp, and the effects of neoliberal development policies on refugee aid.

The conception of relationality and materiality that structures the analysis presented in this thesis is thus multi-dimensional, and yet always applied contextually to very specific and localized analytical case studies. In the next section I further discuss the methodological implications of the analytical framework outlined above, focusing in particular on how ethnography can be employed to mitigate some of the most critical and problematic aspects of material and relational approaches to the study of the political.

**II.4 Space, ethnography and the more-than-human politics of refugee regimes**
If we move from a conceptualization of agency as spatially and materially constituted, as well as distributed throughout heterogeneous networks of actors, how can we then make sense of the conditions, events, alliances, through which people come together in spite of differences within groups, or overcoming their inner contradictions and

conflictual interests as individuals, and act openly to contrast and change the relations of power to which they are subjected? Are we not, moving from such a perspective, at risk of stepping back into a diluted, over-expanded conception of political subjectivities, thus losing all analytical capacity to account for manifestations of agency? If, as in the case of this thesis, we conceive refugee political agency as fundamentally entangled with the spatialities and materialities of the refugee regime and neoliberal development, are we not the risk of assuming a deterministic stance, one that is inevitably imbalanced towards the "structural" side of an implicit structure/agency dichotomy? Finally, can such an approach be combined with an ethnographic engagement with politics as enacted by subaltern and marginalised subjects? Or does it rather inevitably 'flatten' the uneven distribution of power within the networks in which these subjects are positioned?

In this section I want to look more closely at the challenges posed by these questions. In doing so, I argue that a spatial and material approach to the study of political agency needs to be grounded in ethnographic inquiry. On the one hand in fact, attention to the spatialities of politics can help to overcome the limitations of ethnography as an intrinsically place-bounded methodology, whose scope is necessarily limited to the present and the local. On the other, I contend, critically and reflexive ethnographic practice, and commitment to fieldwork, is essential to overcome the potentially depoliticizing effects of analyses that emphasize the agency of non-human entities. To counter these effects, at the end of this section I make the case for an ethnographic reflexive practice which, considering subjects as sites of radical interdependency (Butler, 2010; Hansen, 2010), foregrounds a politics of care and vulnerability which unsettles positionalities within the research relation, as well as the categories of vulnerability and protection which mark humanitarian discourses. This argument is also developed in the second part of Chapter III, where I analyse more in details my ethnographic fieldwork.

## II.4.1 Ethnography, space and place

A research project which has the ambition to analyse refugee agency in relation to institutions, relations and phenomena which are globally entangled – such as humanitarianism, transnational migration and, if we consider its international role and

connections, also the Egyptian regime – cannot be exempt from a careful consideration of the limitations of ethnography. Based as it is on epistemologies of presence, contextuality, and locality, ethnographic methods, as Featherstone (2008) reminds us, tend to implicitly reinforce dichotomic distinctions between space and place. Such a distinction has a longstanding tradition in geographical thought (Featherstone, 2008; see also Tuan, 1979; Harvey, 1996; Cox, 1998; Massey, 2005), and it is what sustains traditional views of subaltern agency as bounded and localised (Featherstone, 2008). The struggles of subaltern actors have traditionally been conceived as inherently place-based, and thus necessarily limited in reach, and fundamentally ill-positioned to challenge phenomena, like the neoliberal urban change or international migration governance, which are instead globalised. In migration and refugee studies, this has been clearly the case with everyday resistance paradigms, for which political action by disempowered actors is by definition aimed at small-scale change. Also in the literature concerned with migrant transnational political engagement however, this is often conceived as having effects only within the bounded space of national or ethnic communities – to the point that 'transnational space' often ends up being rather a sort of virtualised 'national' or 'community' place. On the contrary, recent research on migrant protests has highlighted the trans-local circulation of practices of opposition, resistance and organized protests, as well as the potential for these forms of contestation to effectively expose and challenge processes that are global in scale (see, for instance, Tyler, 2013). How to use ethnography to analyse these phenomena, however, remains a far less explored question.

In their engagement with the work of Doreen Massey (2005), Featherstone and Korf (2012) propose that we consider 'place' as a site of multiplicity and coexistence, and most importantly as produced by ongoing relations that transcend boundaries. Although imbued with meanings and identities that can be strictly localised, places are thus conceived as coming into being at the intersection of globalised relations of power. Applied to the study of political agency, this conception, they argue, "allows a focus on the way that the political, rather than being primarily either antagonistic or associative, can be a site of co-production of different modalities of forms of identification" (Featherstone and Korf, 2012, p. 664). This approach retains attention to the tension between *provisionality* and *stability*, discussed above introducing

assemblage-geographies. From such a perspective, understanding politics spatially means in fact considering the ways in which antagonism and solidarities, everyday strategies and overt contestation, coercive forms of political and spatial control and creative acts of subversion coexist and produce each other through relations which involve a variety of actors.

The work of Michael Burawoy (1991, 2000) and Gillian Hart (2001, 2002, 2004) offer particularly useful insights on how a spatial approach to ethnography 'beyond place' can be operationalized. Burawoy (2000) in particular urges us to think ethnography beyond "conventional stereotypes of participant observation as atheoretical, ahistorical, and micro" (Burawoy, 2000, p. 25). This is all the more important in the context of a research project which aims to combine attention to the micro-politics of materialities with a commitment to analyse the material politics of broader socio-economic phenomena, such as, for instance, neoliberal urban development. Approaches influenced by ANT and science and technology studies (STS) – including assemblage-geographies – tend in fact to emphasize the limited, micro-scalar nature of the social phenomena observable through ethnographic practice, and warn against the risk of overarching generalizations which lose track of actually existing relations. Critical ethnographers like Burawoy propose instead an analysis which "extend[s] out from micro processes to macro forces" (ibid., p. 27). In such methodology "the macro-micro link refers not to [such] an expressive "totality", but to a structured one in which the part is shaped by its relation to the whole" (ibid. p. 28). For Burawoy (2000) it is its being constructed inter-textually with social theory which allows ethnography to trace the connections between specific and localised objects of inquiry and broader social phenomena. Ethnography, he writes, should aim at *extending social theory* exposing the irreducible complexity of social relations. "Rather than being "induced" from the data, or discovered "de novo" from the ground" (ibid.) available theory can thus be interrogated and complemented to accommodate the challenges emerging from the field (see also, Moore 1987; Ghani 1992; Wolf 2001; Elyachar, 2003; Cerwonka and Malkki, 2007).

Chapter IV provides an example of an 'ethnography of space' which responds to this call for ethnography as "a theoretical undertaking" (Elyachar, 2003, p. 598). The

chapter explores the securitized spatialities which characterise the work of UNHCR in Cairo. Conceiving space at the same time as subjectively experienced and produced through what Henri Lefebvre's (1991) would call "orders of representations" (such as planning, mappings, security procedures, rules of usage etc.), it combines the analysis of UNHCR training materials (produced by the UN through its central headquarters in New York and Geneva), with participant observation near the office premises, and interviews collected locally among practitioners and refugees. I thus hope to show how ethnography can be mobilized to study spatial relations which at the same time constitute and exceed the boundaries of 'place' – to study, that is, the production of space as taking place in particular localities. In a similar vein, in that chapter as well as in the others, my ethnography turns to literature on neoliberalization in post-1990 urban Egypt (Mitchell, 2002; Amar and Singerman, 2006; Bayat and Biekart, 2009; Elyachar, 2010) to show the fuzzy and hybrid nature of these processes. Bringing the materiality of socio-economic processes to bear on the study of refugee governance and aid in Egypt, I hope to show how neoliberalization and neoliberalism work creating subjectivities that are essential to the reproduction of existing unequal articulations of power. But at the same time, through their own fissures, interstices and contradictions, lead to emergence of forms of political agency which, albeit marked by inherent provisionality, expose and challenge existing orders.

**II.4.2 More-than-human vulnerabilities: fieldwork and ethics of care**

A critical reflection on the spatial, material, and relational approach to the study of political agency outlined above triggers another fundamental question: can this approach be applied to the case of subaltern, migrant and refugee politics – fields in which, arguably, retaining the centrality of the human element amounts to a political and ethical imperative? As Vicki Squire (2014) rightly highlights the focus "on the vitality of things or the efficacy of matter is difficult to justify or sustain without an emphasis on people, in a context which is marked by significant numbers of migrant deaths each year" (Squire, 2014, p. 14). Squire (2014) refers here to her ethnography of the "political life" of the objects left behind by irregular migrants on the land route which crosses the Sonoran desert, on the US Mexico border. But also in Egypt, it is worth remembering it, to study the political agency of migrant, refugee and other subaltern subjects amounts to documenting and making sense of extremely violent

forms of state repression. While the massacre which ended the Mustapha Mahmoud protest camp in 2005, examined in Chapter VII, constitutes an extreme and very visible example of state violence targeting refugees in Cairo, arbitrary detention, deportations, and "shoot to kill" policies in the Sinai region, on Egypt's borders with Israel, remain academically less explored, albeit being real and well documented, aspects of refugee governance in the country (HRW, 2008). How can we then reconcile the political imperative to maintain emphasis on the human element, without running the risk of either victimizing migrants and deprive them of all capacity to act, or considering resistance as a pre-given, inherent attribute of subaltern subjects? Concluding this chapter, I want to briefly outline the two main ways in which this thesis will attempt to find this equilibrium. While the first is a theoretical and methodological observation of the relational agency of subaltern subjects, the second concerns reflexive ethnographic practice, and will be further developed in the second part of Chapter III.

Making the case for a political geography of postcoloniality in which the voices and actions of marginalised subjects are allowed to emerge, Sharp (2011) has suggested that we "find space for subaltern agency" precisely taking into account "the dispersion of agency through the political system, to see those outside of the formal circuits of power/knowledge of international relations and statecraft." (Sharp, 2011, p. 274). Sharp's point is particularly important in that it reminds us of how understanding agency as distributed does not necessarily imply it being diluted within flattened networks of dehumanised relations. A distributed conception of agency can also help to illuminate how this is spread outside formally organized systems and institutions, and can therefore be mobilized also by subjects who are positioned 'at the margins' of established polities and societies. In doing so, this approach is helpful to investigate 'politics' as enacted within spaces which are often considered as 'depoliticized', like that of humanitarianism, while at the same time maintaining a nuanced, grounded approach that avoid reducing to the category of 'resistance' all manifestations of subaltern agency.

Political scientist's Salwa Ismail's (2013) recent work on the urban aetiology of the revolts which have so powerfully affected Cairo and Damascus since 2011 offers

another interesting example of how a relational and distributed conception of political agency can be applied in subaltern studies. Ismail shows how, in literature on urban subaltern classes, informality, dispossession and subordination are often "ontologised". That is to say, she explains, much like resistance, they end up being implicitly treated as pre-given, inherent attributes of the subject (see also, Spivak, 2005). Instead, she writes, the subordination and politicization of Cairo's popular classes should be understood relationally and contextually, as "it is in interactions with government and the police, within the context of a conjunction of neoliberal and security politics […] that their assumption of oppositional subjectivities takes place" (Ismail, 2013, p. 869). In the context of her study of the Arab uprisings, "rather than proceeding from *a priori* assumptions about subalterns' political agency" such an approach, Ismail contends, allows her to "tease out the complex factors that shape subalterns' positioning within the web of power and control" (ibid., p. 870). Ismail's (2013) take on the relational character of agency is all the more interesting in that it allows her to show how mass protests which are often understood as sudden and temporary, if momentous, eruptions of alliances, events, and discontinuities, are actually phenomena whose emergence is traceable back to embedded, long-term relations with the state, its security apparatuses, and neoliberal policies, as experienced by people in their everyday life – an approach which is similar to the one I develop in this thesis to analyse refugee protests in Cairo.

As Ismail's astute analysis of Egyptian popular politics confirms, sensitivity to relational processes is thus essential to do justice to the political agency of the subaltern without ontologising their condition of subordination, or their political subjectivities. Yet her works exemplifies how understanding subaltern agency as relationally constituted through material and spatial webs of power does not necessarily lead to lose sight of the centrality of the human element in those networks. In my research, this attempt to conjugate a relational, material and spatial approach with the primacy of the human element as has found correspondence in actual ethnographic practices, by incorporating into the research process, as well as in the final analysis, the careful, continuous observation of my own relations with all the people who, with different degrees of involvement, have taken part in this project, but also with my own affective and embodied experiences throughout my fieldwork. As

the next chapter will show, the conditions under which research for this thesis was carried out – that is, simultaneously with the 2011-2012 Egyptian uprising – made reflexivity all the more necessary, and the result of reflexive analysis all the more revealing.

## II.5 Conclusions

This chapter has started from a review of what I deem to be the most significant streams of research within recent literature on migrant political agency, and, more in general, migrant politics. In particular, I have focused on two: theories of everyday politics and "everyday resistance" and their applications within migration and refugee studies, and an emerging body of work – including feminist literature, citizenship studies, and Marxian-Deleuzian autonomist approaches – which is concerned with how migrant protests challenge Agambenian paradigms of exception and redefine the contours of citizenship and inclusion.

What emerges from this review, I have shown, is a theoretical and methodological landscape which, for all too long, has been marked by two apparently opposed, but actually similarly perilous, attitudes. In most existing critical literature, migrant political agency has been in fact for too long either completely neglected, or romanticised and, in the form of resistance, assumed to exist as an almost pre-given entity "before anyone engages in it" (Agnew, 2003, p. 604). When migrant agency has been ignored, this has happened often because all capacity to act politically had been diluted into a fragmented landscape of everyday practices in which, although the potential for discovering political voices had apparently multiplied, most voices had de facto ended up being silenced. Or because, even more often, all agency has been annihilated by the unproblematized adoption of the Agambenian paradigm of bare life. Rather paradoxically, from a sharp, radical critique of the biopolitics of exception which mark migration and refugee regimes at a global level, Agamben's work has in fact turned into a theoretical stance which has the same effects of humanitarian victimization (Walters, 2008; McGregor, 2013): the radical erasure of migrant political agency. When agency has been unduly celebrated, and attributed *a priori* to coherent, rational and nearly pure subject of politics, on the other hand, this has been done mostly through the unquestioned application of the concept of resistance.

In between romanticised glorifications – what Lila Abu Lughod (1990), already in the 1990s, called the "romance of resistance" – and radically pessimistic anthropologies of 'bare life', where refugee governance and humanitarianism are seen as spaces of biopolitical 'depoliticization', what emerges from this review is the urgent need for analyses of migrant politics which are based on extensive, committed, and careful ethnographic analysis. Making a strong case for an ethnography which is also, and perhaps primarily, "a theoretical undertaking" (Elyachar, 2003, p. 598) I have thus deliberately aimed at outlining a framework for analysis which, if not weak, is surely 'minor' – that is, pragmatic and contextual. Although their use is grounded in a careful consideration of the relevant theoretical developments within human geography and related disciplines, the concepts of *relationality*, *materiality*, and *distributed agency*, which synthetise the complex and heterogeneous analytical tools employed in this thesis, defined a contextualised, historicised and fundamentally ethnographic approach to the study of refugee agency.

In an article published in 1996, Cindi Katz has reworked one of the least explored concepts in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Feliz Guattari, namely that of 'minor theory'. Katz has thus argued for a theory that is "interstitial with empirical research and social location", a "scholarship that self-reflexively interpolates the theories and practices of everyday historical subjects", and that "reworks marginality by decomposing the major" (Katz, 1996, p. 487) "Embodied, situated, and messy, these non-linear productions of knowledge", Katz writes, "alter the terrain of theory and practice, they pry apart conventional geographies not by dismantling 'major theory', but by situating minor theory in its midst" (ibid., p. 498). Drawing on Katz's (1996) and other more recent feminist engagements with the politics of ethnographic fieldwork, particularly in migration and refugee research, the next chapter presents a reflexive analysis of my fieldwork in Cairo.

## Chapter III: Reflexive epistemologies in dangerous field contexts: Researching refugee politics in Egypt, 2011-2012

### III.1 Introduction

In the actual experience of most researchers, the reality of fieldwork conflicts with the normative assumptions about methodology and ethics which fill qualitative research handbooks (Roberts, 2012; Drzewicka, 2007). Building a rapport based on trust with one's informants, following systematic patterns of data collection, maintaining one's personal life reasonably separate from research work, and abiding to strict ethical standards are much more challenging endeavours than commonly acknowledged in classrooms and textbooks (Gentile, 2013). Writers adopting a reflexive methodological standpoint have seldom recognized that ethnographic fieldwork inevitably contains an element of unpredictability, and as such is always, at least partially, unsuccessful (Parr, 2001, Van Maanen, 2011). However, the more specific "tacit dilemmas" (Gentile, 2013) that accompany the practice of research in closed polities and authoritarian states are still largely under-examined (Koch, 2013). Yet the convention of prolonged overseas fieldwork, often in countries under authoritarian rule, continues to characterize postgraduate curricula in geography, anthropology and international relations, as well as in the interdisciplinary fields of development and refugee studies.

Although the Middle East is perhaps the most paradigmatic example of such fieldwork contexts (Clark, 2006), recent contributions are starting to acknowledge that the practical and epistemological challenges of carrying out research in 'dangerous' contexts and closed polities extend well beyond the territorial borders of the developing world (Koch, 2013). This is particularly true in the area of migration and asylum governance, where the policies and practices of Western liberal states are also increasingly marked by closeness and arbitrariness (Koch, 2013). For researchers in the field, the militarization, securitization and 'closure' that characterise migration governance have countless consequences. Difficulties in gaining access to undocumented migrants, in tracing dangerous migration routes, and in documenting conditions of detention are but the most commonly encountered challenges. The task

of carrying out ethnographic research – broadly conceived – on migration and humanitarian regimes appears an increasingly difficult one, for everyone, everywhere.

As an ethnographic exploration of the relation between migration governance, international aid and refugee political agency in an authoritarian state of the Middle East, the fieldwork upon which this thesis is based can be located at the exact intersection of the two domains introduced above. Moreover, a third element must be added to further complicate the picture: the high level of political unrest that characterized Egypt throughout my entire fieldwork. Having arrived in Cairo the 9th of January 2011, less than a month before the "Friday of anger" which marked the beginning of the Egyptian uprising, and having left at the end of June 2012, I lived through months of recurring waves of street battles, strikes, and massive political rallies taking place in nearly all major cities. Working and living in Egypt between 2011 and 2012 has required that I learn how to deal with – to mention but the most noticeable examples – curfews, checkpoints, and tear gas, constantly adapting to the disruptions and risks they caused. But it also forced me to question reflexively the limits of my methodological, epistemological and ethical assumptions, and it is here that I wish to focus the discussion in this chapter.

Engaging with recent contributions examining the politics of fieldwork in closed and dangerous contexts, this chapter offers a reflexive account of my ethnography in Cairo. I use field journal entries and notes taken alongside interviews to illustrate my practical predicament and the risks it involved, and to address the ethical and methodological questions it raised. How can we account for the 'cultures of fear' (Mitchell, 2002) and uncertainty that permeate daily interactions in authoritarian polities? How can we do research on refugees and refugee politics in such a context, without putting our informants and ourselves at risk? What does doing research in a 'revolutionary' context or in condition of social unrest entail?

In addressing these questions, this chapter has a dual purpose. On the one hand, it aims to present to the reader an exhaustive picture of the conditions in which data for this work were collected, thus reflecting on the more problematic, ambiguous and missing aspects of the ethnographic research which constitute the bulk of this thesis – a

contextualization which is intended to complement the methodological details provided in Chapter I and in section III.2 of this chapter. On the other hand, I hope to offer an analysis which moves beyond the scope of a purely 'confessional' tale from the field (Nilan, 2002; Van Maanen, 2011). In a place like contemporary Egypt, I show, political repression, state surveillance, and social and political unrest are not just 'the research context', not merely practical challenges, 'side effects', or shortcomings in one's research design and practice. As deeply rooted, essential aspects of Egypt's – and many other countries', for that matter – polity and society, they demand a thorough engagement with reflexive epistemologies in order to be understood and accounted for. When based on positivistic empiricism and taking the stance of objectivity, research on Egypt's urban poor, refugee communities and other marginalities is left without tools to account for political violence and political repression (Mitchell, 2002). As already remarked in the introduction to this thesis, much existing research on refugees in Egypt is undermined precisely by this lack of thorough engagement with the entrenched politics of 'the context'.

The chapter is divided in two main parts. The first one begins with a description of the methods (interviews and participant observation) used conducting research for this project, with particular attention to questions of access, and continues reviewing the relatively new body of literature on qualitative research in authoritarian states, as well as some recent contribution on the politics and epistemology of doing research on migration governance. It then moves on to analyse my own experience in Cairo. After a description of the Egyptian security apparatus through the Sadat and Mubarak years till the 2011 uprising, I explore the effects of Egypt's 'invisible' securitocracy on my informants – both refugees and aid workers – as well as on me as a researcher. The second part of the chapter analyses the role of reflexivity in messy and dangerous field contexts, namely in conditions of political and social unrest. It thus examines my experience of the Egyptian uprising, describing the practical challenges and risks it posed, but also reflecting how it influenced my research trajectory, becoming a form of serendipitous – albeit very troubled – heuristics to which this thesis owes many of its insights.

**III.2 Fieldwork under authoritarian rule.**

As briefly introduced in Chapter I, this thesis is based upon research conducted in Cairo over a period of around 18 months, between January 2011 and June 2012. After an initial phase of preparation of approximately 5 months, devoted to language training in Egyptian colloquial Arabic, the actual field research has involved primarily interviews, with both aid workers and migrants, and, to a lesser extent, ethnographic observation. I conducted a total of 57 unstructured interviews[12]: 12 with IO workers; 13 with international and local (Egyptian) NGO workers, 15 with migrants and refugees employed in the sector, mostly in community-based organizations (CBOs), and 17 with refugees and asylum claimants. I also ran 3 formally arranged group discussions (focus groups) aimed primarily at exploring refugees' perceptions of aid agencies. In one of them I worked with 12 Iraqi migrants, all secondary-school and university students and young refugees living in Sixth of October City, while the other 2 were organized through a Sudanese CBO based in the neighbourhood of Ain Shams (one group discussion with 4 community leaders, and one with a group of 14 Sudanese refugees and asylum claimants). Migrants and refugees interviewed for this research have been accessed in three main ways: through the organizations for which they worked in the case of refugees employed in the NGO sector; volunteering in two small local charities offering language courses to refugees[13], and 'snowballing' through the contacts built through the first two access methods. In addition to formally arranged interviews, the analysis draws extensively on notes from ethnographic observation[14]. In the case of aid agencies, this has involved primarily the following: observation of

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[12] Interviews taking place at a previously agreed time and place, and revolving around a specific theme, but without an established list of questions. When interviews on the same theme have been conducted with different informants however, some of the questions have obviously been recurrent. These mostly concerned security perceptions and organizational security procedures in the case of international aid workers, and perceptions of aid agencies' work (waiting times, inconsistencies, lack of information, accessibility etc.) in the case of interviews and group discussions with refugees.

[13] These have been Student Action for Refugees (STAR) Cairo, where I have worked for an overall period of 2 months between April and September 2011; and the association Sons of Fur, based in Ain Shams, where I have volunteered for a month between May and June 2012.

[14] Participant observation has involved contacts with 126 migrants and refugees in total. In this regard, it should also be noted that some of the shorter quotes used in the four empirical chapters are referred to in the relevant notes as being based on 'fieldnotes', rather than on interviews. By this, I refer to conversations I had outside of formally arranged interviews, but where I was nonetheless able to record – in a written form – what I regarded as particularly significant and representative exchanges and opinions.

some aspects of the work of 3 NGOs and 1 CBO (for about a week each), where I focused on first reception of clients, and volunteering in the 2 organizations mentioned above (for a period of overall 3 months). With migrants, ethnographic research has been carried out through repeated home visits (mostly with 2 refugee families, and with the 4 young Somali students and refugees to whom I refer in Chapter VI), observation in the context of the small encampments and protest sit-ins taking place near the UNHCR building, and 'hanging out' in cafés and other social spaces, such as central Cairo's Pentecostal Church, where a large number of Eritrean and Ethiopian migrants gather every Sunday.

In all the contacts I had outside of formally arranged interviews, I always disclosed my identity as a researcher, and tried to make my plans for using notes taken through more informal interactions as clear and explicit as possible. Nonetheless, as explained in the introduction, issues of access, trust, and research ethics have proved particularly challenging in this context. As I argue in the next section, this was mostly – although not exclusively – due to the 'invisible' mechanisms of surveillance and repression at work in Egypt (Mitchell, 2002; Amar, 2013; Ismail, 2013). What follows is therefore an attempt to use ethnographic reflexivity to make sense of the challenges encountered.

"Confessional" fieldwork tales are surely not a new genre (Nilan, 2002; Van Maanen, 2011). The reflexivity turn has prompted many writers to "lift the veil of public secrecy surrounding fieldwork", to the point that not only researchers' emotions and personal experiences, but also "missing data, incompleteness, blind spots and various other obscurities are admitted into the account" (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 91). Nonetheless, as already remarked, more systematic and in-depth analyses of risk and danger in ethnographic fieldwork are still few, and so are the papers engaging with the methodological and ethical challenges of research under authoritarian rule (Koch, 2013).

Together with the former Soviet Union (Gentile, 2013), the Middle East provides some of the most poignant examples of 'closed' and 'surveilled' field contexts. The large survey conducted by Clark (2006) among North-American researchers having

worked in the region after the 9/11 terrorist attacks shows how, for them, the challenges and ethical questions commonly associated with ethnographic fieldwork were largely overshadowed by the concerns raised by potential risk scenarios. The dangers deriving from working under authoritarian rule permeated all practical and ethical aspects of research routine, surpassing the challenges posed by linguistic and cultural differences. Clark's results strongly resonate with my own experience in Egypt. Over 45% of the respondents reported having felt "the looming smell of *mukhabarat*"[15] (ibid., p. 418), that is, of surveillance by secret police in the form of shadowing, wire-tapping or disguised collaborators. Although similar perceptions, as Gentile (2013) notes, are seldom overstated, they can be just as effective in inducing self-censorship by the researcher as overt intimidation. This explains why regimes across the region actively engage in practices – like the use of plain clothes assistants and anonymous informants, or withholding of information on detention and judiciary procedures – which deliberately aim to reproduce "cultures of suspicion" (Clark, 2006). Amidst ubiquitous fear and mistrust, access to informants can be particularly difficult, either because people utterly refuse to share information with researchers, or because reticence and concealment are common in interviews and informal conversations. But problems can also emerge when the researcher tries to gain – and maintain – access 'to the field', for example when applying for visas or research clearances.

My experience in Egypt exemplifies this well: applying for a visa to Egypt and trying to secure a local academic affiliation, I adjusted all written summaries of my research plans so that they did not contain any explicit reference to politically sensitive issues. Although I never received any overt pressure from the academic institution to which I was affiliated in Egypt, in all of our communications there was a tacit understanding of the necessity to avoid situations which could have exposed me and my work to unwanted attention. I thus deliberately glossed over the fact that my research could involve migrants belonging to religious minorities – such as Iraqi or Southern Sudanese Christians, or Shiite Muslims, who are traditionally under the spot light of

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[15] Arabic for intelligence.

political police in Egypt – and carefully withheld all possible references to my interest in both Egyptian and refugee politics.

Alongside those caused by the grip of authoritarian governments however, fieldworkers trying to get access to migration governance agencies are also confronted with another kind of difficulties. Political ethnographers researching migration enforcement often encounter the "closed door" (Belcher and Martin, 2013) of state agencies and private contractors, but also those of humanitarian agencies which are increasingly embedded in networks of migration management in the "global borderland" (Duffield, 2010, on the merging of humanitarianism and migration enforcement see Albahari, 2006; Walters, 2010; Andrijasevic and Walters, 2010.) Interestingly, this is an ever more common problem also for research concerned with spaces of 'political exception' within nominally liberal Western states, to the point that recent analyses of 'closed' fieldwork contexts call for a problematisation of the taken-for-granted liberal/illiberal dichotomy. (Koch, 2013). My experience in accessing UNHCR Egypt, detailed in section 4 of this chapter, is an interesting example of this, one in which a reflexive analysis of 'troubled access' sheds light not only on the practical and methodological challenges of fieldwork, but also on the way in which humanitarian bureaucracies function on the ground.

From a practical point of view, literature on fieldwork in closed contexts – either spaces of exception within liberal states or authoritarian polities in the Middle-Eastern region – highlight the need for careful, adaptable, and 'discrete' research design to protect both the researcher and her informants from harassment by state authorities. Gentile (2013) suggests "the adoption of a defensive fieldwork strategy whenever their [of state security apparatuses] presence is suspected" (Gentile, 2013, p. 7). As the example of my visa application shows, as a researcher doing lone ethnographic work in Egypt I interiorized the need to watch out and not attract attention, protecting my informants and myself form state security apparatuses, even before actually moving to Cairo. In the following sections I will further examine my experience in Egypt providing other examples of such adaptable and defensive fieldwork strategies. Before it though, a brief discussion of the recent history and modes of functioning of the Egyptian security apparatus is in order.

### III.2.1 An invisible securitocracy? Surveillance and violence in Egypt

Since the early eighties, both the Sadat and the Mubarak regimes were able to pursue economic liberalisation – and, in the last years of Mubarak rule, even some kind of 'cosmetic' political liberalization – without undermining Egypt's militarised, authoritarian, and statist status quo (Tadros, 2012). Even after the demise of Hosni Mubarak in March 2011, security apparatuses including the army, the police and the infamous *Amn al Dawla* (State Security Investigation apparatus, SSI hereafter); and the Central Security Forces (*Amn al Markazi*) working under SSI supervision, continued to constitute a ubiquitous, and extremely powerful, system of social and political surveillance and repression. Several writers have highlighted how the most peculiar character of these apparatuses is their functioning through *invisibility* and *concealment*. According to Tadros (2012), the Egyptian SSI constitutes a form of parallel or "backstage" governance. Similarly, Timothy Mitchell (2002) famously described the Egyptian security regime as relying on forms of deterrence which are based on 'cultures of fear' (Mitchell, 2002). These cultures result from the ordinary use of extreme forms of violent repression – like torture in police stations (Ismail, 2006; Scott, 2012) – which are carried out systematically, and yet systematically denied by official sources. Fear thus pushes common citizens, activists, and researchers alike to adopt behaviours aimed at avoiding a threat which can hardly be documented or accounted for – in spite of the efforts of human rights and civil society organizations – but which they nonetheless encounter, in different forms, in their daily life. Invisibility, it should be made clear, does not mean that the regime work exclusively to engineer perceptions that do not correspond to the factual reality. To the contrary, police violence is widespread. But it tends to take place away from public scrutiny, thus remaining "a secret everyone knows about", as my Egyptian Arabic instructor once described it,[16] astutely echoing Michel Taussig's notion of "the public secret" as constitutive of the social and political order (Taussig, 1999).

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[16] Journal entry, December 2011.

A poignant example of this mix of physical violence and state 'invisibility' is given by the use of plain-clothes thugs for deterrence, intimidation of single individuals, and violent attacks against organized protests and political rallies. Pro-regime, government-paid thugs are known both in Egypt and in other countries of the Middle East as *baltageya* (*baltajiya* in Middle-Eastern Arabic), a term of Turkish derivation originally meaning "wielders of the balta", a cudgel used as a weapon in late Ottoman Egypt. According to Paul Amar (2013), in Egypt the word refers to "gangs of "thugs" and networks of violent extortion rackets seen as emanating from the informal settlements surrounding downtown Cairo" (Amar 2013, p. 211.) Interestingly, in Egyptian Arabic the word is commonly used to refer both to common criminals and plain-clothes assistants working for security forces – a usage which is in itself very telling about the disguised nature of the Egyptian apparatus of repression. For Kandil (2011) the use of plain-clothes assistants "on the pay-roll but not in the ranks of the police" was started by Sadat in the seventies. "In order not to implicate the police," he writes "raids (by paid thugs) were passed off as manifestations of popular support for the regime." (Kandil, 201, p. 19; see also Ismail, 2006.)

But it was in the nineties, under Mubarak, that the use of thugs became the norm. Amar (2013) associates the rise of what he names "the *baltagi* effect" with the rising levels of political and social unrest that characterised Egypt between 2003 and 2006, a mix of anti-imperialism (reinvigorated by the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan), Islamist movements and mass discontent caused by structural adjustment policies.

> The infiltration of protests by government-paid thugs shouting extremist slogans and engaging in violent looting not only terrorized protesters, but also generated new images for domestic and international media and criminological narratives for international security agencies and local law enforcement. Protesters were resignified as crazed mobs of brutal men, vaguely "Islamist" and fiercely irrational […] and targeted as assemblages of hypersexualised terrorist masculinities. (Amar, 2013, p. 212)

The use of paid thugs to foreground criminological narratives on political rallies become all the more evident in the aftermaths of the 2011 uprising, when protests targeting the military's "transitional rule" were gradually delegitimized though infiltration by gangs engaging in sexual harassment and sexual violence (a form of

policing, the one based on sexual intimidation, particularly of women activists, which had nonetheless a long history in Egypt, see El-Mahdi, 2009).

However, the effects of these violent techniques of 'plain-clothes policing' extend well beyond protests and political gatherings. Kandil (2011) notes how starting from the late 1990s, and particularly in the most deprived areas of Cairo, repression became far more generalised and pervasive. Gangs of thugs on the police payroll "would often harass or manhandle ordinary people for no political reason, simply for purposes of extortion." (Kandil, 2011, p. 19.) Ismail (2006, 2012) describes the everyday encounters of ordinary Egyptian citizens – particularly young men from informal neighbourhoods – with the police and their plain-clothes 'assistants' as part of "monitoring and surveillance campaigns" (*hamalat*) which shape poor Egyptians' experience of public space and have "entered into the structuring of feelings towards government" (Ismail, 2012, pp. 439-440; see also Ismail, 2006, pp. 132-133.) These techniques of spatialised policing and violent repression are often counted among the main causes of the 2011 uprising (Kandil, 2011; Ismail, 2012). Ryzova (2011) in particular has shown how the young men who engaged in the ravaging street battles that took place in November 2011 in the areas surrounding the Ministry of the Interior in Downtown Cairo – commonly referred to as 'the battle of Muhammad Mahmud Street' – were often moved by the exasperation resulting from their daily experiences of humiliation, extortion and violence by the hands of security forces.

Plain-clothes police and thugs are of the most effective examples of how the Egyptian securitocracy works and of the form of resistance it generates, but also of the practical predicaments any applied research project in Egypt entails. The next sub-section analyses how these forms of 'invisible' policing influenced my fieldwork, focusing in particular on refugees' daily encounters with the security state.
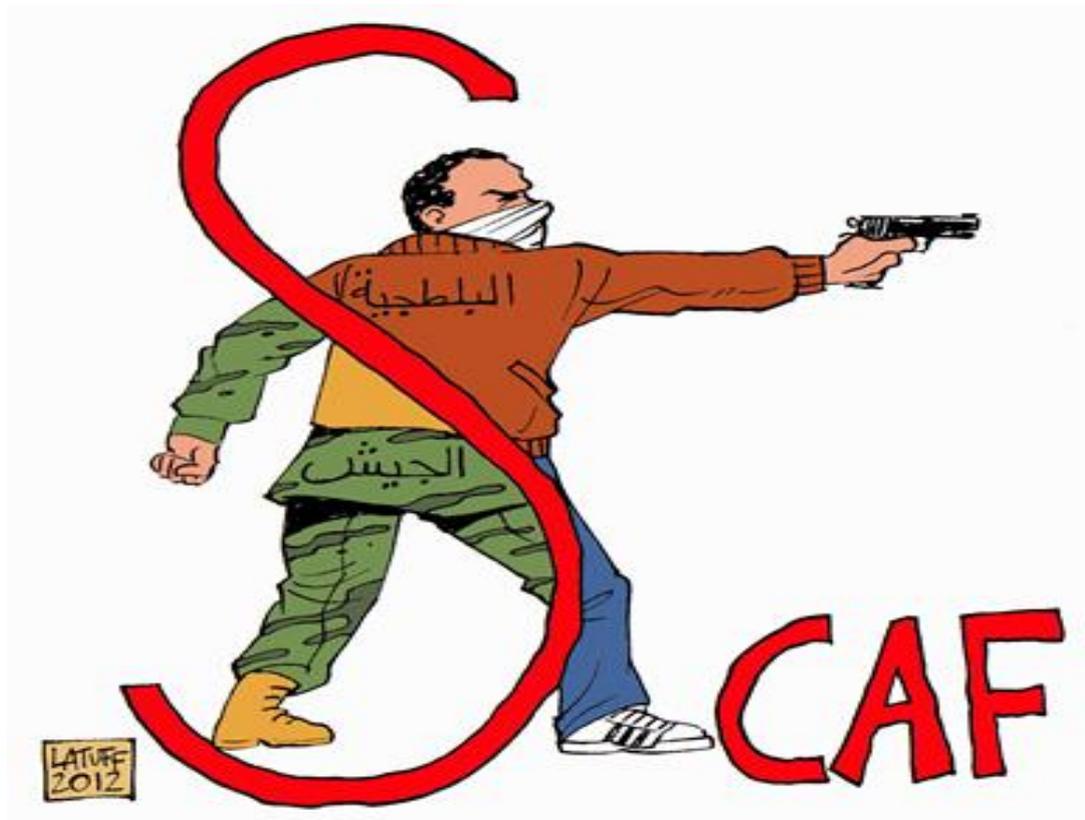
*Figure 2. Brazilian cartoonist Carlos Latuff has provided some of the most thought-provoking artistic representations of the Arab Spring, and particularly of the Egyptian uprising and its repression. In this drawing Latuff, whose work is extremely popular in Egypt, represents an armed man whose face is covered, and whose half figure wears a military uniform, while the other half is in civilian clothes. The Arabic words geish (army) and baltageya (thugs) complete this effective representation of the connivance of the Egyptian Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), in charge of the country's so-called post-revolutionary transition, with the violence exerted on common citizens by gangs of plain-clothes thugs, especially in the context of political rallies.*

## III.2.2 Refugee subjectivities and narratives of police violence

As a fieldworker, my 'close encounters' with pro-regime thugs were limited to a few episodes. In what I recall as the most sinister of them, travelling by taxi in the area of Sixth of October bridge, in Downtown Cairo, in the last days of the uprising in February 2011, my car was stopped by a group of men in civilian clothes, who immediately asked for my passport. Realising I was a foreigner, they entered the car and "hijacked it", diverting our route towards an army checkpoint, were I was interrogated for twenty minutes on the purpose of my sojourn, my work, and my academic affiliation in Egypt. On that occasion as in other circumstances, my status as a Western researcher was the reason why I found myself 'in troubles', but it also

provided me with a form of 'immunity' from the most serious consequences such encounters can have – namely imprisonment and physical violence.

The dangers fieldwork in authoritarian polities entails for researchers should not be exaggerated –although risks undoubtedly exist, in most cases the position of Western researchers is still one of privilege. In a country like Egypt, a crucial Anglo-American ally enjoying positive diplomatic relations with all major Western geopolitical powers, Western European and Anglo-American researchers enjoy a level of protection – from police violence and state arbitrariness – which is simply incomparable to that of the local population. I will further elaborate on the uneven and shifting distribution of 'vulnerabilities' between researcher and informants below, discussing the effects the Egyptian uprising had on my fieldwork. Here I want to analyse some of the encounters with the Egyptian security state that were related to me by my refugee informants.

For certain categories of refugees in Egypt, namely those who are politically active, and those who live and work in the poorest informal neighbourhoods, pro-regime thugs, police informants, and SSI are a constant presence, and a constant threat, in their daily lives. Among refugee communities, state security agencies and their informal networks of information and repression have exactly the same dual function they have in the larger Egyptian context: the policing of protests, and the daily surveillance and containment of people's – and particularly young men – livelihoods and presence in public spaces. The latter is well exemplified by Egyptian police's use of short-term arbitrary detention as a tool for extortion, a wide-spread practice that largely involves refugees and asylum claimants.

In November 2011, UNHCR released a report containing figures on the estimate number of people with asylum seeker and refugees status who were detained in Egypt. Out of a population of 44,070 registered individuals, the office had "records of 47 refugees detained in Cairo, including 28 Sudanese nationals, 8 Eritreans, 4 Ethiopians, 5 Somalis and 2 Congolese nationals" (UNHCR 2011). While these figures refer to the cases of long-term detention intercepted and documented by international NGOs such as Amera and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) – and are,

also in relation to that phenomenon, largely underestimated[17] – they do not include the short periods of arbitrary detention for the sake of extortion many refugees undergo by the hands of the Egyptian police. Having to pay rents which are often higher than those of locals, saving money to carry on their journeys beyond Egypt, and being able to rely on transnational networks of family and community support, refugees' availability of cash can in many cases be higher than those of ordinary Egyptians. As such, it is relatively common for them to become a target for extortion.

Abdullah's story is paradigmatic in this respect. A married man in his mid-thirties, Abdullah had come to Egypt in 2008, while his wife and children were still living in Darfur. When I met him, he was living in a relatively poor street in the central neighbourhood of Agouza, sharing a flat with other 5 Sudanese people. At the end of 2010, a fight had erupted among three of his flatmates over a money issue. On that occasion one of his neighbour, whom Abdullah identified as 'a police informant', had reported rumours about the fight to the Agouza police station. As a result, in March 2011, as soon as a relative calm was restored after the January uprising, their flat was raided and Abdullah was detained for a month, with no formal charge and in spite of the fact that he was not even in the neighbourhood when the fight among his friends had happened. I met Abdullah, together with his best friend Ibrahim, several times during my fieldwork. When we met for the last time in November 2011, he had been detained three times, always without any formal charge. Talking about what was happening, his friend Ibrahim described the situation as follows:

> … they intervened cause they knew the money was a big sum. They were hoping you guys had the money, and to get some money. They, the police, thought that if you really have the money, with detention and persecution and threats, you would end up giving them the money if we wanted be released from prison. This is the only reason why they would ever care and intervene in a fight among Sudanese guys.[18]

Having met Abdallah and Ibrahim at the beginning of my fieldwork gave me the chance to build a rapport that allowed for this account to be shared with me. In many

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[17] In the opinion of most of the practitioners working in refugee legal aid I interviewed, as well as to some of the UNHCR officers I met in Cairo, personal communication, fieldnotes, Cairo, 11 and 29 April 2012.

[18] Interview, Cairo, 16 November 2011. Male, 26 year old, Sudan casual worker in an internet café in Imbaba.

other cases, even though experiences of detention and police abuse were common –
as it was the case among my Eritrean informants – reticence prevailed. Moreover, fear
of police harassment often led people to change their residence, squatting at relatives
and friends' houses, not replying to phone calls, and to a generalised feeling of
mistrust towards situations, such encounters with Western researchers taking place
outside of the 'safe' space of NGOs, which they felt could have made them visible to
security agencies.

Another situation in which episodes of serious threats by police and *baltageya* were
related to me was the sit-in held in front of the UNHCR compound in April 2012.
During my visits, those among the Sudanese asylum claimants who used to spend the
nights at the encampment in Sixth of October City frequently reported having received
night-time threats and harassment by thugs. Interestingly, in this case victimization by
police and paid thugs was held as a sign of the 'political relevance' of refugees'
protests. As one of the Sudanese protesters at the encampment put it:

> Sixth of October is a very calm, rich and safe area. There are no *baltagi* here, it is no
> place for *baltagi*. There is a lot of police around UNCHR. Who do you think the
> *baltageya* who come to our camp in the night are? They are policemen, we have no
> doubt about that [laughs]… It is funny because that means this is a proper sit-in, a
> proper protest and they want us to stop. If they send *baltageya* it means we are doing
> something important…[19]

In this case, it was the feelings of 'community' and 'solidarity' fostered through the
'safe' space of the protest sit-in which allowed for such accounts to be shared with a
total outsider like me – a point which I will elaborate upon in Chapter VII analysing
the case of the Mustapha Mahmud protest camp.

More in general, different refugee positionalities lead to different stances towards
victimization by the police, vulnerability and need for protection. In Abdallah's case,
besides our mutual relation of trust, it was his proximity to aid agencies as an asylum
claimant which allowed him to find in relations with practitioners and researchers a
space in which his vulnerability could be mobilized. For the Sudanese protesting at

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[19] Fieldnotes, Cairo, April 2012. Conversation with Sudanese asylum claimant, male, age and
profession unknown.

the sit-in on the other hand, it was rather through an oppositional stance aimed at exposing victimization and foregrounding the legitimacy of their political act that the account of violence emerged. In these and other similar situations, analysing silences and omissions alongside narratives is crucial to understand the different subject positions produced by both refugee aid, and by the Egyptian system of urban security governance.

On a more practical note, the endeavour of gaining access to refugee communities in Egypt, particularly when outside of the networks most researchers – including myself – establish through NGOs and their community facilitators (refugees employed in psycho-social and translation services), is not only a practically difficult one, but also a sensitive ethical issue that requires constant negotiations and adaptation. Even in outwardly 'safe' contexts, I often came to realise that perceptions of dangers among my informants were high and mistrust widespread. In many cases, the reason for that was they were exposed to threats which I was not able to see because of my status as a European. In these cases, the "adaptive fieldwork strategies" described above could only be based upon utter respect for these perceptions. I often decided to give up on accessing some spaces and categories of people, or meeting some informants, and to avoid asking specific questions that I had carefully planned to ask. Far from being a 'withdrawal from fieldwork', my working through absences, silences, and reticence – what would be commonly labelled as "difficult access" – provided me with important insights on the complex interplay of subject positions which characterize the refugee experience, as well as on some of the most elusive aspects of the Egyptian securitocracy. The next subsection continues the analysis of what 'difficult access' can reveal about the functioning of closed polities and organizations, considering my experience with refugee aid agencies in Egypt.

**III.2.3 Accessing IOs and NGOs: Humanitarianism and "closed doors"**
Intimidation by thugs and other modalities of repression and control happening 'in the dark' also characterize the Egyptian state's grip on non-governmental organizations and aid agencies. Although in this case the people involved – aid workers and managers – are generally not concerned about their physical safety, but rather preoccupied with preserving the precarious operational space their organizations have

in Egypt, wide-spread fear of governmental spying made access to NGOs and IOs a sensitive issue throughout my entire fieldwork. In the last years of Mubarak rule, the SSI – the "elephant in the room" hampering all attempts at enhancing good governance in Egypt (Tadros, 2011, p. 62) – had actually become rather explicit and 'visible' in its strategies for controlling NGOs. The "backstage governance" of the Egyptian security apparatus had been almost brought to full daylight through, for example, the institutionalisation of processes such as the need to ask for permission from SSI for NGOs wanting to organize conferences in international hotels (ibid.)

At the beginning of January 2011, right after my arrival in Cairo and before the revolt started, I had my first contacts with the managers of the operational offices of some of the main UNHCR implementing partners in Egypt, most of which were US-based international charities. At that time, it became immediately clear how for some aid workers in Egypt, particularly for those who had already experienced harassment by security agencies, meeting for the first time an interviewer whom they did not know required particular caution. NGO managers would typically check repeatedly on my nationality, academic affiliations, and research work in Egypt before agreeing to meet me. Requests to avoid tape-recording of interviews were the norm – also from my refugee informants.

This already tense situation deteriorated further after the 2011 uprising. In January and February 2012, in the middle of a new wave of anti-military protests, foreign-funded NGOs in Egypt became the object of sustained nationalistic-xenophobic propaganda by state-controlled media, which were framing them as the *agent provocateur* stirring unrest in the country. SSI's raids of NGOs premises, during which offices were stormed and workers prevented from leaving their building for entire days, became increasingly common in Cairo and Alexandria. At the beginning of February 2012, amidst rumours of possible cuts to US aid to Egypt – a measure repeatedly advocated by various members of the US congress, although never seriously considered due to geo-economic and geopolitical impediments (Marshall, 2012; see also Marshall and Stacher, 2012) – in an unprecedentedly audacious move, the Egyptian provisional government referred for trial over 43 NGO workers, including 19 Americans.

After these events, the task of accessing foreign-funded NGOs became even more problematic. Given the generally high turn-over among NGO staff, especially for the people who had arrived to Egypt in 2011-2012 and were thus scarcely familiar with how to 'coexist' with security apparatuses, the level of concern grew to the point of bordering paranoia. In March 2012, I had several interviews cancelled due to "the NGO row". In some cases, arguably out of fear of tapping, informants expressed their concerns via carefully worded emails in which any explicit reference to the political context and the tightening grip on civil society was avoided – "the situation at the current time" being one of the sentences most commonly used.

Yet, even in the circumstances outlined above, other aid workers showed remarkable helpfulness, and an unusual degree of openness. In April and May 2012, when the issue of the American practitioners referred for trial was not entirely solved yet, I was given the chance to repeatedly visit two NGOs – an Egyptian human right organization and an international charity, both working on refugee detention – and was able to observe their work and engage in extensive conversations with both members of staff and refugee clients. In both cases the organizations were operating in Egypt without formal authorization from state authorities, and had been threatened with shutting down by the SSI.

The variety of attitudes towards researchers reflect the wide range of policies, operational strategies, relations with donors and host states, values, ideological orientations and professional biographies which characterize the world of "Aidland", to borrow Raymond Apthorpe's (2011) famous definition. A reflexive ethnographic approach, incorporating fieldworkers' positionalities and the contextual micro-politics of the research relation, is thus essential not only to make sense of the political contexts in which aid agencies operate, but also to understand and account for their complexity and heterogeneity.

In the cases of smooth access to NGOs detailed above, my work benefited from my social and personal proximity to aid workers. My positionality as a Western researcher – somehow, *de facto* an expatriate working in the field of refugee aid – allowed me to

be introduced to practitioners by common friends, or to hang out with them in the Downtown coffee-shops, restaurants and clubs which are popular among both expatriates and young Egyptians working in the development sector. Reflecting on these interactions does not simply amount to an analysis of practical access strategies. It also provides insights on Aidland as an "archipelago" (Duffield, 2010; Apthorpe, 2011) defined by shared – yet heterogeneous – professional trajectories, transnational mobility patterns, and expatriate lifestyles.

'Closeness' in humanitarian agencies is not always due to external pressure, nor does it always result from coherent policies as to access to information. In some cases, it is rather a manifestation of what Dunn (2012) has named the "adhocracy" of humanitarianism (Dunn, 2012). Actions which aid workers refuse to or are unable to explain can be simply the result of chaotic organizational arrangements, or individualized "petty sovereignties" (Duffield, 2007, p. 52; Butler, 2004, p. 56) exerted in applying regulations and making decisions.

UNHCR is an interesting example of the messy arbitrariness which can lie beneath aid agencies' "closed doors" (Belcher and Martin, 2013). For external researchers, access to the office is anything but easy. In Egypt as in most of its field missions, UNHCR is only accessible to researchers who are employed as interns by the organization itself, or by one of its implementing partners. As an external, in my fieldwork I had to rely on two main access strategies. On the one hand, I used personal contacts with UN consultants, both in Egypt and abroad, to get interviews with UNHCR senior officers and managers. On the other, I worked through my network of expatriate friends and acquaintances in Cairo – as well as through Egyptian friends employed in the NGO and development sectors – to get in contact, in more informal social settings, with lower rank practitioners, local staff, and with the many young aid workers employed on a temporary basis to carry out RSD and resettlement interviews.

The more or less institutional channels through which I accessed my interviewees influenced the narratives which I was able to collect from them, and the degree of openness which characterized the research relation. In general, local staff and senior officers tended to give more 'institutional' accounts of their working routine and of

the daily functioning of the office, and proved to be reluctant in answering questions on topics such as the processing of resettlement applications. While in some case silences and omissions were deliberate, in others they were simply the sign of "a non-event, a deferred decision, a question ignored in the hope of its disappearance", as Belcher and Martin (2013, p. 7) put it. Officers were often unable to answer questions on, for example, problems with RSD and resettlement procedures simply because contradictory outcomes were frequently just the result of errors, omissions, and lack of effective management. In a couple of interviews I had with the temporary staff recruited locally, bureaucratic inconsistencies were articulated openly:

> they work with both electronic databases and hard files….so in order to have a complete picture, all the information relative to a case you have to have access to the hard file too… which means that for each case you have to get downstairs and get the hard file…imagine what that means when you're dealing with 50 cases or more, per day… most of the time you end up not doing that… at resettlement I have two new families everyday… really, they deal with so many cases… so many refugees… and the number of staff is limited…the fact is ProGres hasn't substituted the hard files…it is a big, huge programme designed for UNHCR exclusively…  but I think to actually put it at work, to expand it to the point of containing all the data would be too expensive for the organization. And not everybody can use it properly…[20]

> … the resettlement process…it is fairly randomized… actually it is so random! Really, I am serious. People used to shout and complain, when I was working at the window… I don't understand, why didn't I get resettled and the other person was, when his situation is exactly like mine? They are right. The answer is: it is totally random. Sometimes it just depends on whether the management received an email from an officer, an Egyptian officer, a European researcher, an NGO has advocated for their case… the management are responsive to that.[21]

Prevalent views within critical refugee and development studies tend to conceive humanitarian agencies as coherent apparatuses – the self-contained space where international policies and transnational practices of aid are applied. However, as chapters IV and V will show, 'fortified humanitarianism' is more contradictory and porous, and far more contested, than accounted in existing literature. Ethnography is essential in order to avoid affording to the actions of aid and migration governance agencies a degree of intentionality and coherence they do not always have (Belcher and Martin, 2013).

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[20] Interview, Cairo, 2 May 2011. Female, locally-recruited UN staff.
[21] Interview, Cairo, 1 May 2011. Female, international UN staff.

As in the case of resettlement mentioned in the quote above, deliberations and policy implementation are often determined by the unpredictability of on-the-ground interactions. Moreover, as blatantly shown in the last quote, and as poststructuralist and feminist scholars have long reminded us, the researcher's presence, even when she is not openly engaging in advocacy or activism, always and inevitably contribute to define the reality being studied (Hyndman, 2001; Mitchell, 2002). It is only casting a light on 'the shadows' of qualitative research, on the seemingly irrelevant and all-too-human interactions taking place at the margin of research work, that the 'unintended' and often messy consequences of refugee aid, advocacy and research – the 'material paradoxes', as I name them in Chapter V, of humanitarianism and the refugee regime as catalysers of power and generators of employment, income, and neoliberalised refugee subjectivities – can be studied.

### III.3  Fieldwork and political unrest: the Egyptian uprising 2011-2012

The first part of this chapter has analysed the challenges posed by field research in authoritarian polities and 'closed contexts'. In doing so, I have focused in particular on what narratives – and silences – of repression and political violence can reveal about the 'invisible' Egyptian security apparatus, as well as on the often contradictory humanitarian "adhocracy" (Dunn, 2012) which lies behind aid agencies' "closeness". I have thus shown how reflexive epistemologies are essential to understand not only the functioning of closed polities and organizations, but also the kind of subjectivities these institutions produce. In this second part of the chapter I shift from an epistemology of invisibility to the affective and embodied – and extremely visible – experience of 'political awakening' brought about by the Egyptian uprising.

On Wednesday the 25th of January 2011, the date conventionally deemed to mark the beginning of the Egyptian revolution, my individual class of Egyptian Arabic was cancelled. My teacher – an Egyptian-Lebanese professor whom I used to meet twice a week in a coffee shop in Downtown Cairo – called me in the morning to explain that there were going to be demonstrations in virtually all neighbourhoods of Cairo, and police presence would have been massive. For my own safety, she said, it was wiser to stay home and avoid public spaces and any sorts of gatherings. I thus spent the day

in the small Agouza flat I shared with an Egyptian English teacher, a young woman from the El Fayoum region, reading news on the internet and listening – to the limit of my then dusty Egyptian Arabic – to the radio. In the evening, my flatmate came back from the protest march she had joined around noon. Standing near the front door, and looking at the same time excited and frightened, she told me "I think I want to go back to the square. Would you come?"[22]

That night I would have found myself before the unprecedented 'spectacle' of a completely empty, and uncannily silent, Cairo. Tahrir Square seemed to be the only animated place: it was already full of protesters chanting slogans, while the rest of the city centre was patrolled by thousands of policemen in full riot gear. The stage – so to speak – was fully set for a 'revolutionary situation' that would have the most unexpected consequences on both our daily lives – including my flatmate getting injured by a petrol bomb on Friday the 28th of January 2011 – and on my research.

Only two weeks into my fieldwork, when the revolution started I had in fact barely had the time to set up a series of Egyptian Arabic classes, having a couple of introductory meetings with NGO practitioners and establishing the first, tenuous contacts with some Iraqi families living in Maadi and Madinet Nasr. Those weeks of violent and widespread unrest were going to be the first of a series of disruptions that characterized my fieldwork for over a year – a 'context' which would deeply penetrate into my research, infusing my ethnography.

What kind of research could I do in those days? Surely not much, yet somehow I managed to write an incredible amount of notes. When I went back through them almost two years after the events of January 2011, back to my university work and life in the UK, at first it seemed to me I had amassed a lot of irrelevant material. Most of the notes were about my own experience as an expatriate in Egypt, and my position as a researcher in that context was rather neglected. As noticed by Nilan (2002) reflecting on her experience of ethnography throughout the 1999 riots in Bali, the notes collected in condition of chaotic and dangerous fieldwork often present a

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[22] Journal entry, January 2011.

"hierarchy [..] of arenas of fears and concerns" (Nilan, 2002, p. 373) in which the researcher's self is at very centre.

At such times, as Nilan (2002) notes, emotions can be overwhelming in a way that is hard to account for. Although I obviously do not subscribe to positivistic stances prescribing objectivity and affective detachment, I nonetheless have experienced how the kind of emotional upheaval associated with being – more or less directly – involved in situations of unrest can be paralysing, confusing and even make research look superfluous and unimportant. Without suggesting that emotions be an obstacle to social scientific validity, highlighting the chaotic and emotionally draining nature of research in dangerous contexts I thus intend to point for the need to use reflexivity beyond autobiographical narratives. Self-protective instincts can in fact all too easily reduce reflexive engagement to self-indulgence (Staeheli and Lawson, 1994; Kobayashi, 2003). Moreover, while engaging thoroughly with one's own embodiment, emotions and positionality is essential for all ethnographic research projects, sharing all of one's reflections is not (Kobayashi, 2003).

Yet, as Nilan (2002) herself acknowledges, in spite of the risk of producing self-indulgent 'confessional tales', an engagement with the researcher's affects and emotions is essential for understanding the political subjectivities produced and mobilized through revolts and uprisings. In my experience, the affective experiences associated with this kind of dangerous field contexts can help to shed light on aspects of the research relations that would otherwise remain hidden. In what follows I try and conceptualize two of the most evident effects the experience of the Egyptian uprising had on my fieldwork, namely the unsettling of categories of 'vulnerability' and 'care', and the theoretical and ethical implications of my decision to document and write about refugee protests.

**III.3.1 Shifting vulnerabilities and ethics of care**

Feminist approaches to reflexive ethnography within political geography and refugee studies have highlighted the centrality of researchers' commitment to fieldwork as an expression of "a feminist concern to engage with others, to work through ethical issues of trust, responsibility, empathy and compassion" (Dixon and Martson, 2011, p. 446).

Was my decision to stay in Cairo throughout the revolution an example of this ethical commitment to fieldwork? I tend to believe it was rather the result of a complex mix of desire to prove myself, and preoccupation and empathy for local friends[23], and academic ambitions – an issue, that of the Arab Spring and academic careers, to which I will return upon below.

Feelings of care, empathy, and responsibility in ethnographic fieldwork are never pure – they can never operate in a vacuum where academic concerns, careers, and relations of power between researcher and informants are neutralised. And, most importantly, care, responsibility and vulnerability ought to be understood not only as ethical and political stances, but also as shifting affective states, reflecting unstable positionalities. In my case, the experience of "caring" and "being cared for" by local friends, neighbours, and research informants during the uprising both reaffirmed and changed the power-geographies of categories such as "vulnerability" and "protection".

In studies concerned with the spatialities of aid and state-building (Duffield, 2010; Smirl, 2010) the uneven distribution of biopolitical protection, vulnerability and mobility between transnational aid and development professionals and local beneficiaries is thoroughly analysed. This "biopolitical divide" (Duffield 2007, 2008) is not only due to the legal-political protection Western passports afford to expatriates. In Cairo, financial availability in foreign currency and access to expatriate lifestyles also help to avoid the inconveniences caused by Egypt's – one of the poorest and most densely-populated countries in the Arab World – chronic lack of social and economic protection, such as poor health services and precarious housing, ineffective and often dangerous public transportation, and pollution (I examined this point also in the last section of Chapter V).

In many circumstances during the 18 months of unrest I lived through in Cairo, I found myself offering or being asked for care and help precisely as a European expatriate. In November 2011, in the violent days of the so-called Muhammad Mahmoud battle, two of my best Egyptian friends got injured and tear-gassed so seriously that, as I

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[23] Many of whom I had known for years: having an undergraduate degree in Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies, I had already lived in Cairo before for language training.

write, they are still suffering from eye damage. One of them, after having been rescued while lying on a sidewalk near the Ministry of the Interior, almost unconscious, came to my house together with his sister. In Sharabeya, they explained, the popular informal neighbourhood where they used to live with their parents, hardly any well-equipped pharmacy or clinic was available. That night, after visiting a doctor in Madinet Nasr, not far from where I lived, we sat together in my living room drinking white coffee, and watching Al Jazeera's reports on the Muhammad Mahmud battle, which was still raging. It was then that one of them, the girl, commented on the relief and comfort provided by the silence and safety of a middle-class area, and of an "expatriate house", in that situation, comparing it with the over-crowdedness and precariousness that characterized life in their neighbourhood. My friend's observations echoed some of my informants', particularly refugees, comments on the feeling of safety and physical comfort experienced hanging out in NGO premises and expatriates' houses and offices. As I explore in Chapter V, similar feelings are often mentioned as one of the reasons for pursuing jobs – mostly as community facilitators –in the aid industry.

In many other cases though, the steady deterioration of the security situation made me feel rather unable to understand and evaluate risks not only for my informants, but also for myself – let alone to help anyone. During the January revolt and its aftermaths, the wall of secrecy protecting the work of Egyptian SSI was obviously shaken. Rather than reducing them to impotence or leading to major reforms though, as some had optimistically forecasted, the 2011 uprising left security agencies in a temporary state of outwardly ungoverned chaos. The political aims of surveillance and deterrence became less clear, yet control and intimidation, as demonstrated by the "NGO row" detailed above, did not cease to exist. Since the major defeat security forces suffered by the hands of protesters in the days between 25 and 28 January 2011, abuses and systematic violence against people who were finally 'fighting back', and particularly disenfranchised urban youth (Ryzova, 2011), escalated. Among other things, the use of plain-clothes thugs by the police became more visible and more indiscriminate. In one of her commentaries on the 2011 events, novelist Ahdaf Soueif (2011) argued that the revolution had simply brought to full day light the systematic, ordinary abuses the Egyptian regime had been perpetrating for decades, by displacing them from police

stations, private houses (of dissidents), and slums, to the streets and the squares of city centres.

Considering the effects it had on the condition of refugees, this situation seemed to reverse all the assumptions commonly found in handbooks of research with vulnerable subjects and marginalized communities, where discussions of researchers' power and ability to "do good" abound. The following journal entry could not be more revealing about how powerless I felt in some circumstances.

> I used to have many 'research ethics' kind of concerns about people talking to me just to get 'help'. But after the conversations I had today, especially after the one I had with Ibrahim, I am starting to wonder: how the hell could I think that? Here in Egypt, among the refugees I met, awareness of how tough the situation is, and of how limited what can be done is, is striking. People know how it works. The way it works is that nobody can help you. The level of violence has grown after the revolution, and identifying with certainty who the perpetrators are seems now harder than ever. For refugees, getting out of the country is too hard: there are almost no resettlement chances, and routes of smuggling and illegal migration are deadly dangerous. The space of maneuver for NGOs and UN, assuming they were working honestly and not just "wasting time, playing games, making jokes", as Ibrahim said in his first interview, is so limited. The situation is just hopeless.[24]

In some cases, feeling powerless or frightened led me to accept or actively ask for help and 'protection' from my refugee informants, some of whom knew Cairo and Egypt much better than I did. Between November 2011 and January 2012, when political rallies and street battles were raging in Downtown Cairo, I was travelling for research to the suburb of Sixth of October almost on a daily basis, and I often accepted hospitality by my informants who were worried about me taking a late-evening bus back to town. Similarly, between April and May 2012, the clients and volunteers – both women and men – of a small Darfuran community organization offered to escort me home after nearly every visit I paid to their association's offices, in the neighbourhood of Ain Shams. In those days a protest camp held in front of the Ministry of Defense, not far from the flat I had moved to in Cairo, had rendered my locale – Manshiyet El Bakri – particularly unsafe due to the presence of *baltagiya*. Most nights, I really welcomed and accepted with relief their offer for help.

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[24] Field notes, Cairo, 2 April 2012.

These moments in which I was forced to 'weaken' my positionality were essential for our relation to become stronger and more equal, fostering mutual trust and, in some cases, friendship. In fact, in my experience, more than by abiding to some abstract 'ethical code', power imbalances within the research relation have been overcome through the discovery of my own vulnerability. Moreover, the situations in which informants 'took the lead', finding practical solutions for my travelling around Cairo, or reassuring me about the security situation in areas of the city I did not know, were the moments when I could more productively observe and experience what was beyond the asylum claimant, the recipient of aid, the 'protesting refugee'. Networks of community support – although sometimes contested and experienced as suffocating – family dynamics, resilience, and humour, were but some of the social ties, subjective positions, and emotions through which migrants navigated, in a complex relation with the environment, the coercive powers they were subjected to, and the institutions they could reclaim rights and protection from. As Dixon and Martson (2011) highlight, the task of feminist and critical ethnography is precisely to "unsettle the implied fixity of social categories – *the* marginalised, *the* vulnerable", allowing

> the conditions of the site in which the researcher is engaged to help specify the subjectivities that are at work, and the ways they shift and settle under different stresses and pressures so that we are able to recognize how space and power are differentially experienced and embodied (Dixon and Marston, 2011, p.448).

To engage reflexively with my contradictory experiences of care and vulnerability throughout the uprising is thus much more than simply ticking a methodological box. A reflexive analysis of differences and shifting positionalities, as well as the attention devoted to the research 'context', is how I prominently explored questions of subjectivity, space, power and politics.

### III.3.2 Writing refugee protests?

What were the effect of the uprising on my research trajectory and ethnographic writing? Did it influence, and how, the theoretical preoccupation with migrant politics and political subjectivity which informs this thesis? Answering this question requires considering not only on my work and personal experience in Egypt, but also, most

importantly, the relation between the Egyptian uprising and academic knowledge production.

From a practical point of view, before the uprising it would have been almost unthinkable to disclose to any institutional actor within Egypt, be it academic or governmental, one's plans to spend weeks hanging out in a refugee protest sit-in in a Cairo suburb. Although they had marked the Egyptian political and social landscape for at least a decade before the revolution (Amar, 2013; Elyachar and Winegar, 2012), mass protests in Egypt were a 'research taboo'. The reasons for that were not only the dangers empirical research on the topic implied for both fieldworkers and informants, but also much deeper and entrenched political issues linked to Egypt's geopolitical status. The massive popular mobilization which came to transfigure the Egyptian polity did not only redefine the contours of what counted as 'legitimate' political acts within the country, it also lifted the veil of liberal hypocrisy which used to protect a crucial Western ally abroad. Research on protests in Egypt – and indeed in much of the Arab world – became not only practically affordable, but also common, and even fashionable.

A few hours after the first big demonstrations on January the 25th, 2011, 'uprising narratives' started to proliferate in mainstream international media. Prevalent views seemed to oscillate between realpolitik scepticism about the possibility of Egypt undergoing a revolution like the Tunisian one, due to its geopolitical role, and the rhetoric of a rediscovered "domino theory" (Fregonese 2012). According to these, the Arab revolts were read as the starting point of a wave of "democratization" which was expected to follow the pre-determined paths established by the orthodoxy of Western liberalism (Mezzadra 2011, Reid 2012) and development trusteeships (Duffield, 2007).

This "urge to speak on behalf of the preset" (Reid, 2012), hastily putting labels on political subjectivities that were just starting to emerge, did not involve only leftist intellectuals, political theorists and well-established academics in the West**.** Hanging out in Downtown Cairo in the first six months of 2011, the signs of the existence of a true 'economy of knowledge production' on the uprising were already evident.

Photographers, video-makers, journalists, and bloggers from all over the world could be found in Cairo in those days. I personally met several free-lancers in the media sector who had come to Egypt, often at their own expenses, to cover the uprising, hoping that would mark a breakthrough in their careers. In general, the level of mediation, in the Egyptian one as well as in other Arab revolts, was so high that its role in shaping the language, dynamics and outcomes of these movements should be thoroughly analysed, well beyond the untenable rhetoric of "Twitter revolutions" (Reid, 2012).

Academics, including young researchers with precarious affiliations to UK and USA universities, and graduate students, undoubtedly did their part in creating this economy. In a piece polemically entitled "Academic tourists sightseeing the Arab Spring" Egyptian sociologist Mona Abaza (2011) effectively described the influx of Western academics to Egypt in the aftermath of the uprising, and their use of the "local knowledge" and linguistic skills of Egyptian researchers to work on a 'hot' topic which would have granted them international attention and easy access to publication. To be sure, among the foreign scholars and students I met in my 18 months in Cairo I have also come across examples of political engagement, commitment to fieldwork and academic rigour which are hard to equal. In most cases though, reasons to do research on, and in general to engage with, the Egyptian uprising were less noble or, at the very least, less clear.

In December 2011, I was invited by two British research students affiliated to centre for Refugee Studies at the American University in Cairo to attend an informal workshop in a well-known cultural centre in the Attaba neighbourhood, in central Cairo. After arriving at the venue for the workshop and starting chatting to the participants, I soon realised nearly all of the around 30 – mostly Anglo-American, British, and German – international PhD researchers who were there were planning to write about the Egyptian uprising. That meeting left me with a number of daunting questions – did I want to be part of that economy?

Negotiations between one's research ethics and commitment 'to the field' and scholarly trends, academic expectations, and pressures to produce timely outputs cannot but

have shifting, uncertain outcomes (Nagar, 2010). While trying not to give in to the academic rush to document and classify the Egyptian uprising while it was still unfolding, in planning the final stages of my research I deliberately allowed sensitivity to 'the context' to guide most of my decisions, letting the uprising infuse my research.

Yet even this apparently 'less ambitious' methodological choice was not one devoid of problematic implications. Ethnographers like Shaw (2011) and Nelson (2013) have warned against the problems "adventure impulses" can cause to researchers undertaking fieldwork in dangerous contexts. "Preoccupation with gathering interesting stories (of danger and excitement) while in the field", Shaw (2011) writes, "often shields our awareness of and engagement with processes […] that began long ago […]" (Shaw, 2011, p. 471.)

In my experience, one of the most significant consequences of the uprising was to re-orient the theoretical focus of my ethnography towards refugee politics, and to document refugee protests. Was I attracted to dangerous situations, and sensationalistic data? I obviously cannot exclude it. Yet what drove me towards such an approach was also the realization that, in cases like the Egyptian one, Shaw's point on "documenting the ordinary" works precisely the other way around. To study 'the everyday' and 'the ordinary' means accounting for conflicts and protests, and surely not only at a time of wide-spread, massive uprising. Shaw's (2011) argument conceptualizes uprising, revolts, violent conflicts, and socio-political crises exclusively as moments of rupture, as if always in contrast with the everyday practices and relations which allow the reproduction of dominant socio-political structures.

Yet, as this thesis aims to show, contestation, protests and revolts, among migrants and refugees as well as in other cases, are always embedded in the subjectivities forged through ordinary relations of power and 'resistance' which are fundamentally material and spatialised. Conversely, invisible strategies and 'everyday resistance' often involve a much higher degree of conflict, collective organizing, and even violence, than accounted in most existing literature. In the context of this research, commitment to documenting the ordinary and the everyday therefore necessarily meant shedding light on how the Egyptian uprising "was rooted in long-standing day-to-day struggles

for food, jobs, security, and dignity, as well as in years of organizing and activism among various groups" (Elyachar and Winegar, 2012), including migrant and refugee groups, thus problematizing the distinction between 'everyday politics' and acts of resistance based on organized protests and revolts.

Like the struggles of labour groups and of Islamist collectives mentioned by Elyachar and Winegar (2012), political organizing and protests by refugees had been taking place in Egypt for years. The humanitarian bureaucracy in charge of refugee assistance was part of a "human security governance assemblage" (Amar, 2013) which had always been highly, and often overtly, contested. In a way that is not dissimilar to the struggles of other marginalised groups in urban Egypt, refugees and asylum seekers in Cairo engage with humanitarian agencies through acts of contestations that defy all straightforward classification as either everyday resistance or 'migrant protests', and which are shaped by the power geometries marking relations of aid and refugee governance, while at the same contributing to redefine them. What the uprising has contributed to show was thus precisely how, in Egypt, violent conflict and securitization, contestation and repression, revolt and subjugation are part of everyday social relations, and are often strictly intertwined, constituting a very resilient and adaptable, although highly unstable, modality of governance.

**III.4 Conclusions**

Providing a reflexive account of my research fieldwork in Cairo, this chapter has clarified the conditions under which research for this thesis was carried out, thus hopefully elucidating some of the problematic and 'missing' aspects of my ethnography to which I refer in the empirical chapters. Most importantly though, detailing the issues of danger, difficult access, and shifting research ethics I encountered throughout my fieldwork I aimed to provide a methodological analysis of how reflexive practice can be used as a heuristic tool in dangerous field contexts. In doing so, I firstly discussed the challenges posed by research on and within closed polities and organizations, and then moved on to analyse how the Egyptian uprising influenced my work.

Concluding this discussion, it is perhaps useful to add a more personal note on my experience of doing research in Cairo in those almost two years of revolt, one which can nonetheless open paths for further discussion both on the politics and on the practicalities of dangerous fieldwork. Almost three years on, I can confidently affirm that, both academically and personally, doing research in such a context was an immensely enriching experience. Yet would I do it again? Would I stay in Cairo throughout the uprising again, doing research? Since I left Egypt, I have been asked this question dozens of times, particularly by other PhD researchers planning to do fieldwork in Egypt on in other countries of the Middle East. From a practical point of view, although overall research in contemporary Egypt is surely doable, my answers have always suggested caution. The need to constantly adapt one's design to shifting evaluations of risk and danger – not only for the researcher, but also for her informants – makes collecting and analysing qualitative data much more difficult and time-consuming in such a context than it is in other research settings. Also, the price of a thorough engagement with 'the field' in a situation of revolt and violent repression can be emotional distress, and even trauma – problems that I also had to face, although surely to a much lesser extent than my 'local' friends and informants.

Yet, as I hope this chapter has shown, in my work 'commitment to fieldwork' and reflexive engagement with my own experiences of danger, fear, and vulnerability have been essential to apprehend, ethnographically, how 'closed' governance apparatuses work, and what are the forms of resistance and contestation they engender. For however demanding, and at times even dangerous, my experience was, I doubt that topics like humanitarianism, politics and protests among marginalised groups in a country like Egypt can be investigated without a long, committed fieldwork, involving language learning and extensive personal engagement with participants. In a global academic condition in which researchers are increasingly bound to risk-assessment procedures, restrictive insurance requirements, tight time-schedules and budget cuts, the discussion offered in this chapter can hopefully contribute to critical analyses of the constraining and 'standardizing' effects such policies have on ethnographic research.

# Part B

# The boundaries of aid:

# humanitarianism beyond depoliticization

# Chapter IV: The boundaries of aid: contested spaces of humanitarianism in neoliberal Cairo.

## IV. 1 Introduction

Less than two months after I started my fieldwork, in January 2011, the UNHCR Cairo office started to be the target of protests that would have gone on, with only brief interruptions, till I left Cairo at the end of June 2012. The people protesting just outside of the office's premises were UNHCR's own clients: people who had been denied legal protection, but also ordinary asylum claimants and refugees reclaiming assistance, or waiting for resettlement. Their protests took the form of sit-ins and small encampments which, in most cases, lasted weeks, and involved a significant number of migrants of different national backgrounds.

That year, refugee protests against UNHCR Cairo's office began simultaneously with the much larger – and far more well-known – occupation of Tahrir Square. At a first glance, the refugees camping outside of the UNHCR building in Sixth of October seemed to be emulating the actions of Egyptian protesters. Refugee protests in Cairo, however, had a much a longer history, one that preceded, and somewhat anticipated, the Egyptian uprising. Sit-ins in front of the UNHCR building had been happening since 2004. In the last months of 2005, a protest encampment set up by Sudanese refugees in a square of the neighbourhood of Mohandeseen, in Giza – where UNHCR's offices were then located – had become, in less than three months, the biggest protest camp ever documented in the history of postcolonial Egypt. While the origins, spatial dynamics, and politics of 'everyday life' in that major protest camp are analysed in Chapter VII of this thesis, here I want to begin the spatial analysis of refugee political agency by focusing instead on one of the first questions that emerged from my ethnography in Cairo: why are migrants camping near the UNHCR premises? Is there a relation between the spaces in which aid is delivered (or denied) and the ways in which refugees protest?

Early on during my fieldwork, I was struck by the fact that, among my informants, there seemed to be a common implicit recognition that UNHCR's built environment

had some degree of agency (see Smirl, 2009). In reports by NGOs and local researchers, as well as in the rare accounts of refugee protests found in the Egyptian press, the spatial organization of UNHCR seemed to be regarded as an important element explaining the causes and dynamics of the protests. The UN office's reactions to the refugee sit-ins were criticized for consisting exclusively in rampant securitization, and enhanced separation of aid workers from the refugees (see FMRS, 2006). Many NGO workers and refugees in Cairo described UNHCR as a 'fortress'.

Similar depictions of UN spaces are not rare, nor are they limited to the Cairo case. The spatial practices of humanitarianism, and in particular its growing tendency towards securitization and 'enclavism' appear often in the background of scholarly analyses of aid, development, and migration. In her ethnography of human trafficking in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), for instance, anthropologist Pardis Mahdavi (2011) describes her and her research assistant's first visit to Dubai's Humanitarian City (DHC) – the neighbourhood hosting the headquarters of all the main international organizations and charities in the region – as follows:

> DHC appeared to be comprised of several large, blue warehouses with only a few small office buildings, surrounded by a series of menacing fences topped with barbed wire. Security guards were stationed at each entryway, so we drove up to the first guard we encountered and told him our names. "The person you are meeting with has not arrived yet, so I can't let you in," said the guard apologetically.
> We parked on the side of the road, directly under the sun, and waited. Over the guard's shoulders I read the sign "United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees." "Huh. This place is like Fort Knox. What would you do if you really needed help or were a refugee?" I asked Chris.
> She nodded, wiping sweat from her brow for the fourth time in four minutes. "Dubai *Humanitarian* City isn't so friendly," she said.

Mahdavi (2011) explains how that visit was sufficient to realise how, if they had to access trafficked women in the UAE, Dubai Humanitarian City was definitely not the place from where to start. Not only were there not likely to be many migrants and refugees in the area, but the people who spent their days working in such heavily securitized and isolated buildings were unlikely to have a 'feel' for the reality of women's migration to Dubai was.

Over the last few years, the work of Jennifer Hyndman (2001, 2011) Lisa Smirl (2008, 2009) and Mark Duffield (2010) in particular has pioneered an approach to the study of international humanitarianism in which the political salience of its spatialities are brought to the fore. This chapter takes this literature as a point of departure to explore the relation between the space in which refugee aid is delivered and the emergence and dynamics of refugee protests in Cairo. I suggest that refugee protests are better understood as revolving around the contestation, re-definition and re-affirmation of a boundary: the one between refugees as aid beneficiaries and the practitioners that are supposed to assist them. As the analysis will show, inscribed as they are in the built environment in which aid is delivered, in Cairo these boundaries intersect and reinforce the socio-spatial segregation that has characterized the city's urban development since the late 1990s, separating urban elites from lower strata of the population.

The analysis draws on the part of my fieldwork which has involved interviews and participants observation with UN workers, as well as with asylum seekers, refugees and other categories of migrants who had regular contacts with the Cairo UNHCR office. In particular, in-depth interviews with UN officers (both international and locally recruited staff) are analysed[25]. In addition to that, I employ ethnographic data collected at two protest encampments at the UNHCR buildings, between March and April 2011, and April and May 2012. In these two periods of my fieldwork, I visited the sit-ins several times a week, talking to migrants and, occasionally, also to security officers guarding the UNHCR building. Analysing these data, which combine in-depth subjective accounts with thick observation of the micro-dynamics of refugee protests, I therefore adopt a model of analysis which is articulated around two axes. On the one hand, I examine the space and materialities of humanitarianism as central elements in *long durée* processes of subjectification, which are contextualized taking into account broader patterns of urban development and social stratification. On the

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[25] Due to explicit and repeated requests by all my informants working with IOs in Cairo, the nationalities of the UN workers quoted in this chapter have been withheld. I only specify whether the professionals quoted were international or local staff, as the distinction may be regarded as relevant to the analysis.

other, I trace the micro-dynamics through which contestation emerges in particular and highly localised spatial settings.

The chapter proceeds as follows. Firstly, I review recent critical and spatial approaches to international humanitarianism, focusing in particular on analyses that have highlighted the importance of understanding the boundaries separating aid workers from beneficiaries, but also the need to assess how the aid industry's spatial practices intersect broader patterns of urban development. In doing so, I introduce the concept of neoliberal urbanism (Peck et al., 2009; Fawaz, 2009; Bayat and Biekart, 2009) as a framework of analysis for the social production of Cairo's securitized urban development. I then move on to explore the spatialities and cultures of security that characterize the work of UNHCR Cairo, discussing how they relate to broader patterns of urban segregation and securitization. I also look at the impact of working 'behind fences and walls' has on aid workers and on their beneficiaries. I show how the emphasis on security associated with gated architectures produces "risk-averse subjectivities" among aid workers, and contributes to the perception of refugees who engage in acts of contestations as intrinsically dangerous. Finally, in the last section I analyse ethnographic material on refugee protests taking place around Cairo's UNHCR building, highlighting in particular their spontaneous patterns of development, and their revolving around the occupation and subversion of spaces where refugees are supposed to 'wait' for assistance. I also discuss the emergence of this "counter-presence" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 382) that encroaches and exposes the gated architectures of refugee governance as a spatialised form of political agency in a neoliberal urban context, and explore its similarities to phenomena which, in Cairo, involve other marginalised groups (Bayat, 2011, 2012; Ismail, 2013).

## IV.2 The boundaries of aid

As Chapter II has shown, the spatial turn has significantly influenced debates on the political agency of migrants and other marginalised subjects (see Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). In refugee studies in particular, spatial approaches have found application in critiques of topological readings of the Agambenian notion of 'exception' (Mountz, 2011; Ramadan, 2013a; see also Belcher et al., 2008), and in analyses of place-making practices and cultures of resistances in refugee camps

(Dudley, 2010; Sanyal, 2009; Kaiser, 2008,). However, it is much rarer for refugee cultural and social practices to be analysed in their co-constitutive relation with the spatialities of humanitarianism, and with the subjective experiences of aid workers.

In this regard, Jennifer Hyndman's *Managing Displacement* (2000) constitutes a remarkable exception. Analysing the politics of doing research in a 'field' like the Dabaab refugee camp, in Kenya, Hyndman confronts aid workers representations of the camp with refugees' practices and perceptions. Her findings highlight the salience of the 'boundaries' produced by "mapping practices of the Kenyan camps [that] are predicated on this distance and the gulf between Somali refugees, Kenyan locals, and international relief staff" (Hyndman, 2000, p. 116). "The liberal humanist construction of united nations, human rights, and equality for all becomes rhetorical in the refugee camps where humanitarianism is practiced", she concludes (ibid). Hyndman's work provides a rare systematic analysis of how the identities, discourses, and practices that constitute the international refugee regime are produced through the spatialities and materialities of refugee camps. In these contained spaces of relief and control, the boundaries separating aid workers' and beneficiaries are meant to reinforce identities and historically determined separation between 'us' and 'others' which sustain the projects of international development and liberal humanitarianism (Hyndman, 2001; Smirl, 2008; Barnett, 2011).

More recent analyses of the spatialities of aid and development have further highlighted the centrality of boundaries (see for instance, Kothari, 2006, Smirl, 2008, 2010; and Duffield, 2010). Kothari (2006, p. 235), for instance, has argued that international development workers' "enclavic locatedness" shape the relationships they establish with the implicit other of international development, namely their beneficiaries. In a similar vein, Lisa Smirl (2008) has analysed the field of humanitarian reconstruction as a site of material and symbolic differentiation between the 'us' of aid policies and 'the other' of underdeveloped, disaster-affected areas. Smirl's (2008) work is particularly significant in that it highlights another fundamental aspect of the boundary around which the spatiality of aid work is predicated, namely its invisible, unquestioned and naturalised character. Adopting a Lefebvrian perspective, Smirl (2008) explains how, in aid workers' representations,

reconstruction sites appear as "flat space, empty space, smooth space" (Smirl, 2008, p. 247). In Henri Lefebvre's words, the space of humanitarianism would be marked by an inescapable "opacity", a "realistic illusion" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 27-28) that leaves its utter unevenness not only unquestioned, but often also unperceived, 'naturalizing' it into the landscape. In order to understand how this "realistic illusion" works in the case of humanitarianism and international aid – how do we come to take, that is, its fortified architecture and its remote locations for granted, in spite of the blatant contradictions they entail – it is essential to understand how these spatial practices fit into broader trends of urban development.

## IV.3 Aid, security, and neoliberal urbanism in Cairo

In a number of recent contributions, security and risk-management policies are held responsible for the merging of aid work "with international trends towards urban splintering and, reflecting the appearance of elite gated communities, the privatization of space" in Third-World cities (Duffield, 2010, p. 471; see also: Smirl, 2009, Grant and Thompson, 2013). The aid industry would contribute to these emerging forms of segregated urbanism in two main ways: establishing offices, residences, and limiting the mobility of international workers within the boundaries of economically privileged and securitized suburban areas, and adopting the gated compound as its architectural paradigm. Existing literature on this topic examines predominantly post-conflict and reconstruction situations – the most recurrent case-studies being Aceh (Smirl, 2008), Khartoum (Duffield, 2010; Assal, 2012) and Juba, in South Sudan (Grant and Thompson, 2013).

Nevertheless, the categories these analyses apply elsewhere are of utmost relevance also to the Cairo context. Debates on "splintering" (Graham and Marvin, 2001; Duffield, 2010), "wounded" or "pathological" urbanism (Lees, 2004; Duffield, 2010; Assal, 2012), and "fortress architecture" (Murray, 2011), with their emphasis on spatial practices that disrupt social integration, on rural-urban migration, and on the proliferation of informal settlements, resonate strongly with the now substantial body of work on Cairo as "neoliberal city" (Kuppinger, 2004; Amar and Singerman, 2006; Denis, 2006; Ismail, 2006; Bayat and Biekerart, 2009; Peterson, 2011; Bayat, 2012.) Broadly defined as cities whose spatial and social organization, as well as structures

of governance, are driven by market forces, neoliberal cities are more specifically identified through two opposite and complementary socio-spatial formations: enclosed, gated architectures for wealthy elites; and the concomitant production of a 'surplus humanity' (Bauman, 2002a, 2002b 2004) whose spatial discrimination is made visible by the sprawling of shanty towns (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Hackworth, 2006; see also Davis, 2006).

The labeling of phenomena of gated urbanism, informal settlements, segregation and growing spatial inequalities as neoliberal urbanity presents several problematic aspects. At a general level, as there is no pure application of neoliberalism as a social and economic doctrine, there is arguably no such thing as a 'pure' neoliberal city (Peterson, 2011). "Actually existing neoliberalism", Brenner and Theodore (2002) argue, ought to be understood contextually in its historical manifestations. Studying the emergence of what is considered to be the main spatial manifestation of neoliberal urban development, namely the 'gated community', Atkinson and Blandy (2002) have warned against generalizations that do not adequately take into account the existence of gated architectures beyond the geographies of neoliberalism. Fortifications and in-ward tendencies in residential planning have marked the urban and architectural histories of many European, Muslim and Arab societies through the middle-age and the modern era (ibid, see also: Al-Sayyad, 1994, Kiang 1994; Cartier 2001 and Kuppinger, 2004.) In the case of Cairo, Eric Denis's (2006) work on Heliopolis (Masr El Gadida) provides an interesting account of an early twentieth-century version of suburban planning targeting local and foreign elites through the promise of an exclusive, utopian community of European fashion. In general, as Asef Bayat (2012, p. 116) puts it "in reality cities have almost always been marked (and defined by Lefebvre among others) by differentiations, diverse life-styles, and spatial units juxtaposed in close proximity" (see also, Parakash and Kruse, 2008).

Nevertheless, evidence of the association between neoliberal policies (Washington-consensus-led structural adjustment, privatization of state assets, and liberalization) and the spreading and sharpening of segregation and gated urbanism is robust, in Cairo as well as in other postcolonial cities (Caldeira,1996, 2000; Mitchell, 2002; Fawaz, 2009; Murray, 2011; Bayat and Biekart, 2009; Bayat, 2012). The exponential growth

Cairo underwent in the two decades between 1992 and 2012 is largely ascribable to the real-estate speculation favoured by the hasty process of privatization of state-owned land, as well as of financial deregulation, implemented as part of IMF-led structural adjustment programs (Mitchell, 2002; Denis and Vignal, 2006). The pattern of bifurcated urban development – characterized by the juxtaposition of informal neighbourhoods and precarious housing with elite residential architecture and gated compounds has also been widely explored (Denis and Vignal, 2006, Bayat, 2011).

Sixth of October, the suburb where UNHCR Cairo was relocated in 2007, exemplifies these processes well. Created in the early eighties as part of Anwar Sadat government's industrial policies, the satellite city itself is originally the result of large-scale, state-led developmentalist projects (Stewart, 1996; Wahdan, 2010, 2012.) However, in its first years the city only attracted a limited number of industries, and had almost no residential or commercial areas. It is since the introduction of neoliberal economic reforms, and in particular after 1991, that "the city has experienced investment surges, with private real-estate developers, encouraged by legal stipulations and the money remitted from Egyptians in Gulf countries, engaged in land speculation and development of expensive residential complexes" (Wahdan, 2012, p. 115). Egyptian neoliberalism, and what is commonly classified as the neoliberalisation of urban space in Cairo, are thus the result of a governance assemblage in which the role of the state, as demonstrated by the case of NGOs and aid agencies, is central in particular in the administration of security (on the role of the securitized state in roll-back neoliberalism, see Peck and Tickell, 2002.) This assemblage can be seen at work in the relocation of the UNHCR office to Sixth of October, which took place between 2007 and 2012, when refugee protests grew both in frequency and intensity.

**IV.4 The case of UNHCR relocation.**

Till the end of 2007, UNHCR Cairo's premises were located in a building in the highly populated, semi-central area of Mohandeseen, in the Giza governorate, at around twenty minutes' drive from Downtown Cairo. In 2007 – less  than 2 years after the tragic end of the Mustapha Mahmoud protest-camp, held by Sudanese refugees in

front of its premises – the office was relocated to a compound around thirty kilometers south-west of Cairo's city centre, in the 7th District of Sixth of October City.

The relocation should be read in the context of the process of progressive securitization that UNHCR and other major aid agencies in Cairo have undergone in the last decade. Although precipitated by the violent outcome of a 2005 three-month protest camp – analysed in this thesis in Chapter VII – in the case of UNHCR this process was the result of a number of intertwined factors. Some of these factors are specifically related to the Egyptian context, while others are linked to patterns of securitization in aid and development work that are global in scale.

In the officers' accounts, the decision to relocate was taken under pressure by the Egyptian State Security Investigations (SSI) apparatus and other agencies within the Egyptian government. These are reported to have explicitly asked the management to relocate the building to the outskirts of Cairo, far away from the overpopulated and highly visible city centre. UN officers synthetize the reasons behind this request as the need "to better contain protests and limit their visibility."[26]

**IV.4.1 The role of the State**

The role of SSI in the relocation should not come as a surprise. The 2005 sit-in was a major public security issue, and one of the biggest and longest public protests ever staged in the Egyptian capital. Moreover, as explored in Chapter II, the grip of governmental control and security surveillance on development, aid and civil society work in Egypt is well documented, and extends well beyond refugee governance (El Ibrashy, 2011; Tadros, 2011, 2012.) Tadros (2012) describes the relation between NGOs and the Egyptian SSI under Mubarak as marked by the latter's "increasing visibility and expansion of power in governance." (Tadros, 2012, p. 67). Between 2005 and 2011, SSI progressively substituted the Ministry of Social Solidarity in issuing permits and clearances to aid agencies and civil society organizations, and institutionalized its presence 'assigning' a particular SSI officer to each institution,

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[26] Personal communication, interview, Cairo, 16 April 2012. Female, age unknown, international UN staff.

thus normalizing previously hidden processes like the need to ask for permission to organize roundtables, conferences and other events (ibid.)

The role played by SSI in the relocation of UNHCR is far from being an Egyptian anomaly dating back to the Mubarak era. As to relationships with NGOs, rights groups and international organizations, the case of Egypt is not dissimilar from those of other authoritarian regimes (Tadros, 2012; see also: Das Gupta, 1978; Rathmell, 1996; Bruneau and Drombroski, 2006; Matei, 2007.) Similarly, UNHCR's problematic status in negotiating its protection mandate with hosting governments is widely discussed in the literature (Verdirame and Harrell-Bond, 1995). In Cairo, this controversial relation is made explicit by the presence of police around their buildings, and also by the numerous accounts of the troubled negotiations around refugee detention and deportation, reported by UN workers themselves.[27]

### IV.4.2 UN Security

Although they played a major role in the office relocation however, as confirmed by UNHCR officers in Cairo, Egyptian authorities did not expressly choose the area where the new office should be relocated.[28] Another major factor determined the choice of Sixth of October City, namely the need to comply with UN field-security requirements. In this regard, a brief outline of the role of the UN MOSS (Minimum Operating Security Standards) guidelines is in order. Introduced in the early 2000s, the MOSS has marked what could be defined as a 'security and risk-management turn' in UN field operations at a global level, institutionalized in 2004 through the establishment of UNDSS (Department of Security and Safety; see Duffield, 2010). Integrated a few years later with the introduction of the MORSS (Minimum Operating

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[27] The contiguity between UNHCR and Egyptian State apparatuses is also sharply perceived by the office's clients. When I conducted participant observation near the office's premises, as well as in ethnographic interviews with migrants in other contexts, many people referred to the agency as "part of the Egyptian regime", "friends of Mubarak and Habib el Adly" (the latter was interior minister under Mubarak from 1997 to 2011, and convicted of corruption and mass murder in 2011). One of the UNHCR officers interviewed in May 2012 also reported how, after the 2011 uprising, when refugees gathered to protest outside the building it was not rare to hear the word *fulul* – Arabic for 'remnants', a word commonly used by Egyptians to refer to members of the defeated Mubarak's regime.

[28] Personal communication, interviews, Cairo, 12 and 16 April 2012. Female, age unknown, international UN staff.

Residential Security Standards, regulating security of UN workers beyond their workspace), the MOSS covers areas spanning from the architecture of UN compounds to aid workers' mobility and use of vehicles, including training requirements for national and international staff.[29] Although aimed at establishing minimum security requirements in a standardized and centralized manner, MOSS guidelines are calibrated on the 'security phase' of each specific country, or part of the country, and can therefore vary significantly both diachronically and geographically. In their applications to specific field operations, both MOSS and MORSS classify urban areas as safe or unsafe, for both UN offices and staff residences. Areas designated as safe are mostly those situated far away from city centres, less populated, and characterized by highest concentrations of wealth.

At an international level, MOSS and MORSS guidelines often constitute a reference point also for international NGOs (Duffield, 2010). The influence this integrated security system has on other humanitarian actors is visible also in the Egyptian context. In the immediate aftermaths of the 2011 uprising, two of the most important providers of refugee services in Egypt, the American Catholic Relief Service (CRS) and the UK-based Amera, moved their offices (part of them in the case of CRS)[30] from central Cairo to the Southern neighbourhood of Maadi. The relocations were explained by their managers with the need to enhance accessibility – a significant number of Sudanese households, as well as Sudanese schools and community organizations, can be found in the lower middle-class areas of Maadi – and also to prevent beneficiaries being exposed to the dangers associated with political and social unrest in central Cairo.[31] While these are undoubtedly real concerns, informants among practitioners working in the area commonly described Maadi as much cleaner and quieter then Cairo city centre, with better infrastructures, easier to reach and

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[29]http://www.unsceb.org/content/action-security-and-safety-staffminimum-operating-security-standards-moss (accessed 04 March 2014).

[30] CRS relocated to Maadi its main operational headquarters, while the management office remains in Garden City, in the immediate surroundings of the British and American embassies. Although several episodes of political violence took place in the area between February 2012 and the time of writing, the presence of embassies guarantees a high degree of protection and safety to the premises. The physical separation of the management team (composed of expatriates) from the operational space of the NGO, where staff is made up almost exclusively by Egyptian and refugee workers, is further explored in Chapter V.

[31] Interview, Cairo, 22 February 2012. Female, 40-year old, USA, NGO manager.

perceived as safer.[32] What the areas of Sixth of October City, and Maadi where the offices were relocated have in common is thus their peripheral location, affluence, and popularity with expatriates – Egyptian returnees and investors from the Middle East, the Gulf and East Asia in Sixth of October, Anglo-Americans working in corporate business, NGOs and diplomacy in Maadi. The two areas also host three of the main UN regional offices in Cairo: UNICEF and WFP in Maadi[33] (figure 3), and UNHCR in Sixth of October. While the WFP building is significantly more securitized than its slightly chaotic surroundings – it is located just in front the popular Hadayek el Maadi metro station – the UNHCR one in Sixth of October reproduces, in heightened form, the gated architectures which mark the peripheral areas of the satellite city.

### IV.4.3 Security Training

In the case of aid agencies like UNHCR, the fear and perception of risk elicited by the organization of physical spaces are reinforced by the compulsory training all employees – including external consultants – have to undergo. Designed and standardized at a central level, this includes a basic online course which is mandatory independently from one's field location ("Basic Security in the Field: Staff Safety, Health and Welfare", UNBSF), and a second, advanced course ("Advanced Security in the Field", UNASF) which is only required for workers assigned to areas classified as Phase I – like Egypt – or higher. Both modules "come on two interactive CD-ROMs that combine voice-overs, video clips and role-play exercises with multiple-choice end of level tests" and "culminate in a final multiple-choice examination." (Duffield, 2010, p. 460).[34]

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[32] Field notes, Cairo, March and April 2012. Notes reporting conversations with 3 expatriate workers: female, Russia, 26-year old; female, UK 36-year old; make, UK 32-year old.

[33] See http://www.unicef.org/egypt/contact.html (accessed 25 March 2014) and http://www.wfp.org/countries/egypt (accessed 25 March 2014).

[34] Access to the content of the training is strictly limited. The courses are available at https://dss.un.org, but only to people who have a UN email address. For external consultants, the address is http://dss.un.org/asitf and http://dss.un.org/bsitf. However, this second page also requires a temporary identification code, which I could not have, never having been a consultant or a member of the UN staff. Although I was admitted to the UNHCR building as visitor several times when carrying out interviews, the lack of access to this material constitutes one of the practical challenges, and potential limitations, of conducting research in this field. Similarly, the amount of data available on UNHCR practices regarding the recruitment of PSCs (Private Security Companies, see Vaux et al., 2001; Jäger and Kümmel, 2007) was in this context very limited. Further research on this topic would benefit from the involvement of people who have direct access to UNMOSS, and more extensive fieldwork

The growth of security services and technologies "beyond the State", Abrahamsen and Williams (2011) argue, is a global phenomenon; and the UN training undoubtedly reflect global trends. Yet "global security assemblages are by definition local" in that "the global is produced in actions, and actions are by definition localized" (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2011, p. 214). The fact that UN security procedure are centrally managed by a semi-private structure (UNDSS) does not lead to homogeneity in all field missions. There can be relatively sustained differences in the way in which UN local offices work, and therefore arguably different degrees to which security procedures are implemented and followed. Interviews with UN workers in Cairo show how the local character of security apparatuses lies in the complex, contextual, and often messy actions aid workers perform on a daily basis. Almost all of my informants in Cairo reported to have followed the courses in a fragmentary and non-systematic way, and even to have "not really paid attention." Cairo being – at least before and in the months immediately following the Egyptian uprising – a relatively safe city, this kind of standardized training was regarded as redundant, excessively precautionary and unduly preemptive. Perceptions that the training had been designed for post-conflict situations and highly militarized working environments were sharp,  to the point that – as one worker commented – in Egypt the basic field security course became useful only during and after the uprising – when events like "hearing gunshots" became common in many areas of Cairo[35]. This is not surprising if we consider the following description of the UNBSF and UNASF provided by Duffield (2010)

> […] they feature a white UN SUV travelling along a twisting road bordered in places by trees that could conceal an ambush. Correct answers incrementally advance your journey to the safety of your destination. Wrong ones knock you back, keeping you longer in this threatening environment. Each CD takes about an hour to work through. Upon successful completion, the software prints a named pass certificate. (Duffield, 2010, p. 460).

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should be conducted to explore the actual practices of UNHCR with relation to PSCs. However, these questions exceed the scope of this chapter, whose purpose is to explore how specific forms of contestation by the refugees emerge in relation to the spatial practices of aid agencies, and how both these phenomena relate to broader patterns of urban governance.

[35] Field notes, Cairo, 20 April 2012, and 21 April 2012.  Conversation with female, age unknown, international UN staff.

Although UNHCR does use the white UN SUV for its travelling within Egypt, receiving security training on the scenario described above when working in the Cairo urban context – a diverse and lively metropolis in a middle-income developing country, and which, before 2011, was also largely safe – appeared useless and, to some aid workers, even ironically amusing. Yet the effects of undergoing similar security training should not be underestimated. Abrahamsen and Williams (2011) define what they name "the variably constitutive nature of security" as a contextual assemblage whose "place [is] in the relationship between governance of behavior and the exercise of coercion." (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2011, p. 216). Security policies are thus also about "governing behaviour", and producing subject positions where a 'need for security' is felt – what Duffield defines "risk-averse subjectivities" (Duffield, 2010, p. 461). Silke Roth (2011) has shown how acceptance of risk and the disciplined confirming to security regulations is perceived by many aid workers as a marker of professionalism. The risk implicit in their work, and the need to abide by constantly updated security measures, are thus a fundamental component of their professional identity and condition their behaviour deeply (Roth, 2011).

UN securitized architectures transform practitioners' patterns of behaviour through enhanced perceptions of danger. Also in the Cairo case, and in spite of the dismissive attitude shown by some workers, perceptions of risk among the UNHCR workers I met remained strong. Most of them regarded security training as necessary: rather than questioning the need for it, practitioners complained about the training undertaken being inadequate to the specific context, and anyway never rigorously applied. Overall, the need for security was sharply felt.

For some of the practitioners interviewed, the feeling of working "under siege", as more than one of them put it, was overwhelming. The work environment was described as "tense", and marked by "worries about becoming a target" of angry beneficiaries, as "verbal threats can be really violent."[36] Some of these worries are not without real grounds. In general, at a global level, evidence that aid work is an increasingly dangerous business is robust (Fast, 2011). In most cases, the threat come

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[36] Interview, Cairo, 1 May 2012. Female, international UN staff.

from backlashes from aid's own beneficiaries (Duffield, 2010). Existing statistics on this phenomenon tend to focus on deaths and serious injuries in post-conflict interventions (Fast, 2011), yet also in Cairo aid workers have occasionally been seriously exposed to danger[37]. Overall though, these episodes remain limited in number, and the framing of refugees voicing disagreement as 'dangerous' exceeds the actual possibility that angry and frustrated beneficiaries engage in violent actions. In the following section I look more closely at the dynamics through which this perception emerges.



*Figure 3. CCTV cameras outside of the premises of the World Food Program (WFP), Hadayek el Maadi, Cairo.*

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[37] Episodes which have been reported to me during my fieldwork include a UNHCR officer being punched while walking towards the UN private bus that drives members of staff to their homes in various areas of Cairo, and two practitioners being attacked while conducting the weekly out-reach activity among the crowds waiting for registration outside the UNHCR premises. In this last case, the two UN workers, two women, were allegedly physically assaulted by a refugee woman holding a gasoline can, who would have threatened to set them ablaze (interview with male, 47-year old, locally-recruited UN staff).

**IV.5 Gated architectures and securitized subjects**

Although different from the heavily militarized architectures that define the post-interventionary spaces of aid – for instance, it does not contain residential units for international members of staff[38] – the UNHCR building in Cairo presents many of the characteristics of a gated compound. The building that had hosted the agency till 2007, located in the central neighbourhood of Mohandessin, was classified as non-MOSS compliant both in its physical premises and its location, and there was a need to revise the contract with the private company in charge of security services, which was then already over ten years old.[39]

In the new Sixth of October building, CCTVs and high walls surround the premises, and the presence of police and private security staff – as required by the MOSS, all UN field operations are assigned a locally recruited security officer working in coordination with private contractors – is highly visible. Removed from the street as requested by the MOSS guidelines, the front of the building is isolated through mobile concrete fences. In circumstances other than formal meetings, including the early stages of registration, refugees' contacts with UNHCR staff are limited to brief encounters at the external desk, where practitioners and people are separated by bullet-proof glasses, and to reach-out activities taking place no more than once a week. These typically consist of an Egyptian member of staff, accompanied by one of more interpreters, receiving refugees for short private counseling and information sessions. Out-reach activities normally take place in the waiting area, where the information windows are located, and multi-lingual signs and information leaflets on registration procedures are available. It is there that refugees queue and wait, often for hours, under the steel-plate roof of an annex to the building situated at the left-hand of the main entrance, closer to the street – a point to which I will return below.

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[38] International UNHCR staff in Cairo live mostly in the neighbourhoods of Maadi, New Cairo, Zamalek and Sixth of October itself, areas that UN residential security guidelines identify as safe and where the concentration of expatriates is particularly high. A private bus – with private security guards on board – is available for the both local and international workers who commute to the office and do not have access to private UN vehicles. Other institutions located in the suburbs at the outskirts of Cairo – from private universities and secondary schools to international companies – have similar arrangements.
[39] Personal communication; interview, Cairo, 31 March 2012. Female, age unknown, international UN staff.

The most recurrent adjectives used by both UN workers and refugees in describing the office are 'cold' and 'unwelcoming.' As a young Egyptian practitioner stated recalling the first time he visited UNHCR for a job interview, "they keep you waiting forever, and once you enter you find the inside is just as disempowering and ugly as the outside."[40] Another worker, a locally recruited administrative assistant, described her office in the basement of the building as "isolated and isolating, it makes you feel like you are protected, but also completely unaware of what's happening outside."[41] This perception corresponds to factual reality. Access to UNHCR buildings is severely restricted: all visitors are checked by security guards in uniform, who control IDs and personal belongings.[42] Refugees cannot access the premises unless they have an appointment for an interview – mostly for status determination or resettlement – usually scheduled months in advance.

There are significant similarities between aid compounds and residential gated communities (Smirl, 2010). Atkinson and Blandy (2005) define the latter as a "housing development that restricts public access, usually through the use of gates, booms, walls and fences. These residential areas may also employ security staff or CCTV systems to monitor access" (Atkinson and Blandy, 2005, p. 177; see also Smirl, 2009). Considering the emotional effects of segregation on the perception of the external world among inhabitants of gated communities (see, among others, Davis, 1992; Blakely and Snyder, 1997; Atkinson et al., 2004) can thus help to make sense of UNHCR practitioners' narratives. For instance, Low's (2001) seminal analysis on the narratives of residents of gated compounds in the United States has shown how living 'behind walls' reinforces fear through a number of interconnected affective and discursive dynamics. In the case of Cairo, Petra Kuppinger's work (2004) has posited fear as the central drive behind the exponential growth of this kind of residences,

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[40] Interview, Cairo, 3 May 2012. Male, 32 year old, locally-recruited UN staff.
[41] Fieldnotes, Cairo, 12 April 2012. Conversation with female, locally-recruited UN worker, age unknown.
[42] UNHCR is only one of the several international institutions I visited during my research in Cairo. Among them, tighter security restrictions to access can only be found in the American University in Cairo, whose new campus is located in the desert out of new town known as New Cairo (al-Qahira al-Gadida) and, not surprisingly, in the US Embassy, which I visited in June 2012 to talk to the consulate officers in charge of refugee resettlement programs. The US Embassy in Cairo, one of the largest American embassies in the Middle East, is located in the downtown neighbourhood of Garden City, behind Tahrir Square.

showing how the affective sphere of danger and mistrust is actively mobilized in advertising by Egyptian real-estate companies. In the everyday experience of the space of the compound, security – in the form of technological devices, precautions people are advised to adopt, and affective experiences of safety and integrity – becomes a central element.



*Figure 4. The UNHCR compound in the Seventh District of Sixth of October City, Giza.*

## IV.6 Refugees and troublemakers

For residents of gated communities, the lack of first-hand experience of the people and social interactions taking place outside of the compound promotes fear, and therefore a distorted perception of the external reality (Low, 2003). One of the most frequently reported complaints about working in the Sixth of October compound was "we do not know what happens outside". The effect of this lack of actual knowledge, and experience, are significant. Atkinson and Blandy (2007) have argued that

"defensive living" leads polarized representation of the external world. For them, the gated built environment "reflects deep social anxieties operating as systems of protection and social filtration which protect or deny access on the basis of ownership and affluence" (ibid., p. 445). Gated architectures can be thus read as an attempt to take back city space and 're-civilize' it excluding poverty, pollution, chaos and crime (Atkinson, 2003).

For those working 'behind the walls' of UNHCR, this heightened perception of risk implicit in segregated built environments intersects and reinforces one of the fundamental underpinnings of aid and development: the existence of an 'other' perceived as either 'lacking' (skills, material assets) and vulnerable, or as hostile and dangerous (Smirl, 2008, 2010). Preventing all contact with beneficiaries beyond highly regulated settings, aid compounds contribute to de-humanize refugees, erasing complexities and nuances from practitioners' perceptions. The effects of this dual perception are particularly visible in practitioners' descriptions of the people who stage protests reclaiming assistance, or contesting the long waiting list for refugee status determination interviews. While legitimate 'beneficiaries' – 'real' refugees – are those who queue politely in front of the office and respect the boundaries of aid work, people who dare to voice their concerns, shout slogans, demand to enter the building or simply refuse to leave its surroundings, choosing to stand there "till things change", are immediately perceived as dangerous. The following quotes from interview with two different members of UNHCR staff illustrates this split in the discursive construction of refugees particularly well.

> It is a few troublemakers and the troublemakers are usually the people with the least authentic concerns. People who are seriously vulnerable don't go there and shout and protest. Here we have people camping outside because they want us to pay for their dentist! Yes! Or because they want a new flat, they don't like the one they are living in.[43]

Among the aid workers I met in Cairo, there was often an implicit expectation that refugees 'come to terms' with dispossession, and therefore resign themselves to a very low standard of living. Another practitioner explained that some of the people who had on more than one occasion joined the small sit-ins outside of the building probably

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[43] Interview, Cairo, 06 April 2012. Female, 43 years old, international UN staff.

had "LCD TV screen at home, they just want more and more". Asking for more than the minimum standard of assistance which they are supposed to receive ("they want a new flat", "they want to pay us to pay for their dentist") "trouble-makers", as the officer calls them, lose all legitimacy as 'real' refugees. Demanding "a new flat" or a better quality of health care means refusing to be the "sublime subject" (Zizek, 1989) upon which the international humanitarian project is based (Hyndman, 2001, Smirl, 2008).

The physical barriers of the UNHCR do not only cause polarized views of the external world. They also work to reinforce practitioners' identities as 'aid givers' (Smirl, 2008). This is particularly evident in benevolent explanations of confrontational behaviours based on psychological readings. Even when service providers express sympathetic and humane views of refugees protesting – and some of the people I met did – the same 'dual representation' is often reproduced. In the following passage, a junior officer describes his experience of working in the resettlement section of UNHCR Cairo, with applicants classified as "vulnerable".

> Working in resettlement, you get inevitably exposed to the most vulnerable among the refugees. You meet people who're really in need, who really want to be resettled. And it's so frustrating cause at the same time you know some of them were taken, cause they had been outside protesting, joining sit-ins, they were taken as 'troublemakers'. […] So when I meet them, sometimes in their file I get handwritten notes. People tell you "Be careful, this guy has been violent with this and this other person." And then you meet them and you find out they are the most vulnerable people, and they're absolutely calm, polite, in need… they have gone through the most horrible things you can imagine… and not just once… it's repeated, reiterated trauma… no wonder they are violent! […] what would I do if I were in those people's conditions??! I am not surprised they're protesting: I am not sure I could ever endure, I could survive what they've gone through. [44]

In the words of the practitioner quoted above, a refugee who 'protests' can only be made sense of ascribing a traumatic etiology to her acts (see Pupavac, 2008). Joining sit-ins and arguing with UN workers is only explicable through the traumatic experience "understood within a health paradigm as an attribute of dysfunction" (ibid., p. 279) and, as such, undermining all meaningful political action. Imagining refugees either as violent "trouble-makers" or vulnerable victims excludes the possibility of a capable, political subject willing to claim or renegotiate her rights.

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[44] Interview, Cairo, 3 May 2012. Female, 36 year old, international UN staff.

This dual representation of refugees can also have gendered connotations. Some of the UN workers I spoke to seemed to have no doubts that the people protesting outside were mostly young men, "drinking" and engaging in sexually promiscuous behaviours. Some of them expressed similar views also about the 2005 Mustapha Mahmoud sit-in. A locally recruited member of staff recalled the camp as "dirty, they were drinking and making noise during the night, residents in the area were complaining", commenting on the feeling of sexual vulnerability she felt, as a woman, because of the presence of such crowds. The underlying gendered assumptions of the global refugee regime, which, as Hyndman and Giles (2011) argue, tend to represent mobile masculine subjects as threatening, intersect with and are enhanced by the social anxieties which justify gated architecture in neoliberal urban contexts. As shown by the surveys conducted among residents of gated communities in Europe and North-America and analysed by Atkinson and Blandy (2007), also in these contexts dangers coming from outside are commonly associated with ideated masculine threats.



*Figure 5. Refugees waiting for UN staff and showing signs in front of the UNHCR building, Sixth of October, Giza.*

**IV.7 The boundaries of aid and the emergence of refugee protests**

What does the 'siege' to which UNHCR Cairo workers are, in their own words, subject actually look like? In the previous section, I showed how UNHCR workers' narratives often ascribe sit-ins to the initiatives of small groups of "trouble-makers" or "agitators" who would unethically exploit the weaknesses of particularly vulnerable or isolated refugees and asylum claimants.[45] Episodes of prevarication and even violence undoubtedly occur, and politically active individuals or small ethnic organizations – particularly of Sudanese – do play a role in putting together and animating the protests. But the concerted efforts of few individuals or small organizations can hardly explain a phenomenon that, at the time of writing, has been taking place for around eight years, following rather consistent patterns. Using material from participant observation conducted in March–April 2011 and April–May 2012, in this section I examine the protests taking place outside of the UNHCR building. In doing so, I trace the emergence of contestation in refugees' everyday relations with the securitized spatialities of the office, focusing in particular on two aspects: the transformation of the space where UNHCR applicants queue into momentous protest encampments, and the overt contestation of the spatial boundaries which separate aid workers from their beneficiaries.

The protests that took place in March-April 2011 and April 2012 in front of the UNHCR building illustrate well two of the fundamental tenets of the conception of migrant political agency foregrounded by this thesis: agency as emerging from human-material relations, and the blurred boundaries between everyday politics and overt acts of contestations. Made up of migrants from different nationalities,[46] ages, genders and legal statuses (from new applicants to rejected asylum seekers who had been living in Egypt illegally for over 10 years), the protests were usually animated by a relatively small group of people who would spend the night camping in front of the office, while others would join during the day, either going there deliberately or

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[45] "Agitators" and "trouble-makers" are terms used by 4 of the 8 UN workers interviewed.
[46] Among the people I spoke to there were migrants from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Iraq, Nigeria, Syria, Sudan, and Togo. The people who reported to me to be sleeping at the encampment were from Syria, Sudan, and Ethiopia.

because, visiting UNCHR for other reasons, would find the reasons for the protests agreeable and decide to join. Although some of the individuals seem to camp there regularly, there was a significant turnover among the people who would spend the night in the small encampment. As will be illustrated by the interviews reported below, and further analysed in Chapter VII discussing the Mustapha Mahmoud camp, some people ended up camping there due to a combination of housing problems and grievances towards UNHCR.

One of the most recurrent dynamics in these protests was the reversal of designated usages of space. Improvised encampments set-up by refugees who had to wait long hours to have access to registration material, or simply to get to talk to UNHCR staff, would become a space for gathering, exchanging news and, in some cases, voicing common grievances. Refugees used to camp right where they were supposed to queue, often because, if required to come back the following day, they found it more convenient to simply spend the night in Sixth of October. Paradoxically if we consider that Egyptian State Security urged the agency to relocate to a peripheral area precisely to prevent protests, rendering the office much more difficult to access the relocation de facto caused an increase in number of protests. Most of the UN workers interviewed were sharply aware of that. As one of them commented:

> It is just nonsensical to have moved here to Sixth of October. It made us far removed, inaccessible, almost impossible to reach for the most destitute among our applicants.[47]

Informants who lived in the slum known as Kilo Arba'a wa Nuss[48] – historically home to a large Sudanese community – commonly complained that travelling from their neighbourhood to Sixth of October was too costly and tiring to be afforded more than once a month. Moreover, when refugees register with UNHCR for the first time, or when they undergo interviews, all the family members must be physically present – a

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[47] Fieldnotes, Cairo, 30 April 2012. Female, age unknown, locally-recruited UN staff.

[48] This is the official name, used by most of the refugees I met, of the slum known among Cairenes as Ezbet el Haggana. The official denomination of the settlement (Kilo Arba' wa Nuss means "Kilometre 4.5") derives from its location at the kilometre 4.5 on the Cairo – Suez road, not far from Cairo international airport. The website of the local NGO Al-Shehab contains a detailed account of the history of the settlement, see http://www.alshehab.m2014.net/ (accessed 30 February 2014).

requirement introduced to prevent frauds, like rejected asylum seekers registering twice under a false name. For a family of four, a daily trip from the slum at the east of Cairo to Sixth of October costs at least 20 Egyptian pounds (2.9 USD) – while the average income in places like Kilo Arba' wa Nuss is estimated to be between 1.6 and 2 USD a day.[49] If one considers these simple data, it is not surprising that some people would camp outside of the UNHCR premises for days hoping to be received. As a Sudanese refugee met at one of the sit-ins held in April 2012 put it:

> If I want to talk to someone here, about my case, I need to come at dawn and wait here forever. Then sometimes I don't even get to talk to anyone. I have to go back to Kilo Arba was Nuss, and back here. Why? I just stay here, better. The Sudanese people in the camp [points to the people distributing leaflets] can help me to find a place if I need to spend the night here.[50]

Among different categories of migrants hanging out in the physical proximity, exchange of rumors and information, but also solidarity in helping each other meet material needs were the norm. Observing interactions at the encampments, it was easy to note the proximity between beneficiaries queuing, families camping in the adjacent small garden, and people belonging to organized groups who campaign against the UN office. The distinction between 'political agitators' and 'real refugees' as mere recipients of aid appeared untenable. To be sure, not all the people met during my participant observation where actively participating in protest actions. Indeed, in the space of a couple of months, I met in total only a dozen people who had organized themselves to spend the night at the encampment, and who were actively 'campaigning' through slogans and signs. Other people had joined the actions occasionally while they were waiting outside of the office. Others yet where there to register, make appointments or hoping to gather info on resettlement, and stated clearly to me that they did not agree with such kind of contentious acts.

Yet, among the refugees who claimed not to agree with the ways protests are conducted, levels of discontent are also high. Checking the list of appointments for resettlement interviews displayed on one of the gates of the compound, an informant

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[49] see http://www.alshehab.m2014.net/ (accessed 30 March 2014).
[50] Fieldnotes, Cairo, 31 April, 2012. Conversation in Arabic with male, Sudan, age unknown, unemployed Kilo Arba wa Nuss resident.

commented: "Why do they keep us waiting like this? If there is no hope, why they don't just tell us? So that we find peace."[51] While she had never joined any of the protest herself, in her regular visits to UNHCR "to check the list" she would have long conversations with the people camping, asking for news and exchanging comments on the work of the organization. Frustration and dissatisfaction were obviously shared.

As in the case of the informant quoted above, discontent often coalesced around feelings of frustration for what seems to be an endless experience of 'waiting' – for assistance, but also more comprehensively to a definitive solution to the experience of displacement.[52] Hyndman and Giles (2011) have shown how, in transit contexts in the Global South, the experience of waiting is shared by both asylum seekers and refugees. While the former wait to have their claim examined, recognized refugees wait for a chance to continue their journeys to safer countries, mostly through humanitarian programs of resettlement. In 2012, at the UNHCR Cairo office a team of 10 members of staff – excluding interns and temporary workers recruited for specific emergencies – had to deal with an average 'caseload' of 15,000 RSD files a year. The average waiting time for asylum seekers to complete RSD procedures was of 10 months/ one year and the processing of refugees' resettlement applications, which involves both UNHCR and the embassies of the foreign countries of destination, used to take over one year. [53] In the everyday unfolding of UNHCR service provision, in Cairo, these two categories of beneficiaries often waited together in the designated space next to the office main gate. As already mentioned, people who had their asylum claims rejected – 'closed files' in UNHCR jargon – and are willing to voice their disagreement can also be found hanging out in the same space.

The spontaneous character of these protests, and their emerging from everyday acts like that of queuing in front of the office, resonate with what spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre has defined as "counter-space" (or "counter-presence"; Lefebvre, 1991, pp.

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[51] Fieldnotes, Cairo, 30 April 2012. Conversation with female, age unknown, Iraq, unemployed, married and mother of two, waiting for resettlement for her whole family.
[52] The experience of waiting among refugees in Cairo is further explored in chapter VI.
[53] Personal communication, interview Cairo, 12 April 2012. Female, UN international staff.

381-385; 402-403; 431-432).[54] Influenced as it was by French situationism (Allen, 2003; Merrifield, 2006, 2008), the concept refers to forms of protests in which 'organized spontaneity' is the engine of collective action (Allen, 2003). Such an approach "highlights the embodied, effectual content of action where events are 'seized', so to speak, rather than formally planned" (Allen, 2003). A counter-space is thus a manifestation of collective political agency that amounts to "an alternative means of using space which represents a 'lived' presence […] one that […] takes its shape from the routine of its users and their symbolic attachments." (Allen, 2003, p. 186). In the case of Cairo's UNHCR office, the recurrent transformation of the spaces where people are kept waiting in improvised protest camps constitutes an example of these practices. The Mustapha Mahmoud camp, as will be shown in Chapter VII, was held in the park near the homonymous mosque where people used to find shelter from the sun while waiting to have access to the UN office. Similarly, in the smaller protest sit-ins observed between 2011 and 2012, refugees were literally encroaching UNHCR premises, transforming their surroundings in improvised encampments, and standing on the concrete fences that separate the building from the street. The appropriation of the physical space designated to waiting for assistance allowed people who are classified under different labels – refugees, asylum seekers, and "closed files", that is rejected applicants – and have therefore different degrees of legitimacy and access to rights, to recognize their shared experiences, and form momentous alliances for collective political agency.

As noted by Mitchell (1995) and McCann (1999), in Lefebvre's formulation the 'carving-out' of counter-spaces involves conflict and disruptive actions that expose the contradiction of dominant spatial representations and practices. That the protests

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[54] I am aware of the limitations of the application of Lefebvre's notion of counter-space in such a context entails. Lefebvre's conceptualization of 'counter-space' was inspired by the struggles of politicised urban middle classes in advanced capitalist societies, in what he himself acknowledges as being rather 'elitist' political practices. The examples of counter-spatial practices he provides in *The Production of Space* are those of communities "fight[ing] the construction of urban motorways or housing developments, demand[ing] amenities or empty spaces for play and encounter" (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 381-382). However, here I use the concept as a tool for a specific, contextual empirical analysis, and carefully consider other writers' interpretations of Lefebvre's work, particularly in analyses of racialized spatial segregation (McCann, 1999), resistance to urban marginalization (Mitchell, 1995), and postcolonial urbanism (Kipfer et al., 2013).

worked to expose and contest the spatial order of UNHCR is all the more evident if we consider the slogans, demands, and actions through which refugees addressed directly the issue of the boundaries separating them from aid workers. Between February and March 2011, when the first phase of the Egyptian uprising was about to lead the ousting of Hosni Mubarak, a wave of protests was triggered by UNHCR decision to close its offices and evacuate their international staff. Made centrally by the UN in accordance with UNMOSS guidelines, the decision was seen by migrants as a blatant example of the unreliability of the office, as well as of the privileged status of UN workers. As many of the refugees I spoke to remarked, it was a sign that UN workers could afford a degree of protection that was unthinkable for their clients. The following quote exemplifies this feeling well:

> UNHCR is supposed to protect us. In their images they portray themselves almost as a mother, as if they really cared. And yet they leave when the situation gets tough. What that means? It means they are very far from us, and they are only preoccupied with themselves and their job. I can't leave, I can't go anywhere from here, apart back to Iraq, and it's surely not safe. But they leave now that we really do not know what is going to happen in Egypt. As far as I can see, the country could draw into the same kind of chaos as Iraq in a few months. [55]

Existing literature considers access to fast and privileged channels of international mobility – as in the case of the international UN workers who were evacuated during the Egyptian uprising – one of the most evident spatial manifestations of the gap separating aid workers from the majority of their beneficiaries in postcolonial societies (Smirl, 2008; Duffield, 2010). As the quote above illustrates, also among refugees in Cairo the perception of aid workers – in particular, but not exclusively, expatriate professionals – are regarded as belonging to a mobile transnational elite, and completely separate from the 'immobilized' refugee populations they're supposed to help. Not only does UNHCR's segregated built environment influence practitioners' behaviour shaping their perception of beneficiaries. The reverse is also true: beneficiaries' views of the agency and its workers are significantly influenced by their increasing remoteness.

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[55] Fieldnotes, 10 March 2011. Conversation in Arabic. Male, Iraq, age and profession unknown.

In some occasions, the segregation of UNHCR workers was addressed openly in protesters' slogans. One of the most widely used sentences in the signs I could observe in 2011 and 2012 was a simple question: "Where is the UNHCR?" One of them, which was shown to me in April 2012, read: "I am right here, I sleep in the street, and I face many problems by myself: where are you instead?"[56] The question referred to what was perceived as a lack of meaningful, effective policies of protection and assistance. Yet highlighting refugees' 'presence' in the public space – "I am here, I sleep in the streets" – it also exposed how remote and defensive UNHCR can look in the eyes of those who wait outside of their premises.

Refugees' perceptions of aid workers as belonging to a "segregated rich elite", points for the need to understand the contestation of the spatial boundaries of aid in the wider context of the politics of Egyptian urban development. For Asef Bayat (2012) the highly visible presence of the urban poor in the public spaces of Cairo and other cities of the Middle East is a product of what he names the "inside-out" effect of neoliberal urbanity. Bayat contends that the privatization of space and urban infrastructures that neoliberal "accumulation through dispossession" (Harvey, 2007, 2008) entails leads to "survival through repossession" by the subaltern. "Survival through repossession" he argues, is not only a struggle around access to basic services – water, housing and electricity – but also, and very visibly so, a form of resistance where "political and social space" is at stake.

> Poor peoples' encroachment concerns not merely physical control over land, street corner, or public parks. It is extended also to social and political spaces – to the domains of culture, urban order, mode of life, the sensory domain, in a word urban texture. In the city-inside-out, the subaltern are seen and felt to be almost everywhere. (Bayat, 2012, p. 123)

Unlike Lefebvre's (1991) notion of counter-space examined above, Bayat's (2012) "survival through repossession" does not refer specifically to practices which involve conflict and overt contestation. Rather, the phenomena he considers are the public presence of street vendors, disenfranchised families squatting in public space, and groups of urban youths "wandering", and similar acts of ordinary, gradual and incremental appropriation of public space (Bayat, 2009). I suggest that the case

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[56] Fieldnotes, 19, 20, and 26 April 2012.

analysed here shows how Bayat's notion of survival through repossession also has a contentious side – what he describes as "quiet encroachment" is in fact often not so quiet. In a neoliberal urban contexts, the apparently pacified prevalence of segregated, privatize space is also actively and openly contested through protests that are rooted in everyday practices of appropriation, reversal and autonomy. The dynamics of emergence of refugee protests targeting UNHCR in Cairo are another example of how neoliberal urbanity fosters subaltern practices of contestations where the boundaries between everyday strategies and active engagement in contentious politics blur.

## IV.8 Conclusions

This chapter has analysed boundaries of refugee aid in Cairo, and how they affect relations between refugees and aid workers. In the physical space of contemporary humanitarianism, gated architectures, security procedures and heightened perceptions of risk shape aid workers' perceptions of the local contexts where they operate, resulting in a distorted view of their beneficiaries.

The chapter has also made the case for an analysis of the spatial practices of humanitarianism which takes into account their convergences with patterns of neoliberal urban segregation in the Global South. Similarly, I have argued that considering the production of street politics that characterizes neoliberal urbanity (Ismail, 2006; Bayat, 2010, 2012) is central to understand the dynamics of the emergence of the sit-ins through which refugees contest the spatialities of UNHCR Cairo.

Concluding the analysis, it is worth highlighting how this chapter has presented a description of 'the boundaries of aid' in which the socio-spatial distance between practitioners and refugees is sharply defined and, although highly contested, seemingly impossible to overcome. Is that always the case? Or should we rather look at humanitarianism and its contestation as a complex 'assemblage' of heterogeneous and variously located organizational elements and material infrastructures, as well as of ambivalent subjectivities, in which boundaries are constantly crossed, and redefined? The latter seems the most accurate definition if we think about the case of UNHCR Cairo presented in this chapter. The somewhat contradictory and 'messy'

application of security procedures, and the role of state security apparatuses, as well as of migrants' contentious actions, in the office's relocation, point for the necessity to understand the spatial practices of the aid industry as the complex intertwinement of different and contradictory elements.

Yet the analysis presented in this chapter also shows how sensitivity to the complex, 'assembled' nature of humanitarian space should not lead to lose sight of 'the broader picture'. In Cairo, refugee aid does have very sharp boundaries, and these boundaries do intersect and reinforce local patterns of neoliberal urban segregation. While the processes that lead to the emergence of these boundaries should be accounted for in their complex, dialectic and heterogeneous character, their outcomes should be clearly assessed bearing in mind, in particular, political-economic dynamics that are also global, or transnational, in scale. Looking at the experiences of refugees employed as aid workers in the NGO sector, the next chapter examines another dimension of humanitarianism in which boundaries are contested and redefined, through a variety of everyday practices. Yet, as it will be shown, spatial boundaries and 'material' contradictions entangled in political economy are reproduced also in that context, with consequences that are central for the emergence of refugees' political agency.

# Chapter V: Crossing the boundaries of humanitarianism? NGOs, refugee community workers and the 'politics of disaffection'

## V.1 Introduction

For decades, scholarship on international aid and development has addressed the question of politics in two main ways. On the one hand, much of the critical literature has focused on the depoliticising effects of development and aid, particularly when these have been read through the Foucauldian lens of governmentality, or subject to postcolonial critique (Ferguson, 1990; Escobar, 1995; Kothari, 2006a; 2006b; Duffield, 2007). On the other, social movement and development studies have explored the often ambivalent role of NGOs in engendering social and political change, representing 'civil society' and marginalised communities (Hann and Dunn, 1996; Gardner and Lewis, 1996). Between these two extremes, as Julia Elyachar (2002, 2005, and 2010), among others, has argued, lies what had for long remained an unexplored reality: the one of aid and development as industries which mobilize economic relations within their own circuits, relying upon heterogeneous forms of labour.

Over the last few years however, a growing body of research spanning anthropology, international studies, and development politics has started to acknowledge how, while observers debate on the causes, dynamics, and consequences of their failures, 'actually existing' aid and development continue to have transformative effects, involving primarily the people who live and work within, or in close contact with, 'spaces of aid' (Smirl, 2008; Duffield, 2010; Fechter and Hindman, 2011). "Empowering" refugee women through community workshops, vocational training, and microfinance, for instance, might seldom achieve its aims, as beneficiaries typically resort to various forms of more or less strategic behaviour to circumvent the principle of its implementation, maximising their material advantages (Verna, 2011, Elyachar, 2002, 2010). But the existence of these interventions – although, as in the Cairo case, limited in scale and scope – is undoubtedly significant for the 'local' and migrant people who, through them, have access to employment and an income *within* the aid industry itself. Today, at a global level, the vast majority of the workers employed in the aid industry are in fact locally recruited, and, in most cases, precariously employed

(Duffield, 2010, Fechter and Hindman, 2011). Yet ethnographies scrutinising the everyday lives of development practitioners have almost exclusively focused on international, "mobile professionals" (Fechter and Walsh, 2012). The local labour force that sustains the development industry and permits its reproduction is rarely considered.

It is the experience of this category of workers that I turn to in this chapter. I thus look at refugees working in community organizations, beneficiaries who borrow ideas from development projects and use them to start their own businesses, and aid-workers recruited locally, mostly among the many educated and multi-lingual refugee youths of Egypt. Are there politics in the relations of labour that the aid industry mobilizes recruiting this 'indigenous' work force? Of what kind? And what is their relation with the principles and stated outcomes of aid and development interventions? For refugee workers, I argue, labour in the aid industry is associated with two, contrasting experiences of political subjectification. On the one hand, employment within the NGO sector – and the associated promise of inclusion in an internationally oriented and cosmopolitan socio-economic environment – lead to the emergence of subjectivities which embrace the values of self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship promoted by neoliberal development. On the other, reproducing colonial legacies (Kothari, 2011; Eriksson Baaz, 2005), geopolitical hierarchies and local patterns of socio-spatial exclusion, relations of labour within the aid industry belie the humanitarian ethics of 'care' and the narratives of empowerment upon which the international humanitarian and development projects are based, causing disaffection, frustration, and even overt contestation.

The analysis of the politics of refugee aid, I have argued in Chapter II, requires the adoption of a contextual, relational and materialised approach to the question of migrants' political agency. In the context of this chapter, this is done in two main ways. First, I move from a contextualization of the development industry in the broader political economy of labour in Egypt, considering in particular how the increasing precarization of work in the third sector – including NGOs – leads to the mobilization of forms of "immaterial", emotional and affective labour (Foner, 1995, Fortunati, 1995, Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002). Secondly, analysing the

subjective experiences of local and refugee workers, I employ an ethnographic approach that is attentive to the materialities that constitute the 'assemblage' of refugee aid. I thus consider how, in workers' everyday lives, the hierarchical and precarious character of work within the aid industry has effects which are visible in the organizations' spatial practices, and experienced through affective and embodied states. As in the analysis of the UNHCR compound outlined in Chapter IV, I thus move from an approach in which "auxiliary space" – the space in which aid intervention is carried out – is not simply a 'container', but a fundamental playground of both local and international politics (Smirl, 2008), including refugee politics.

Empirically, while resting upon a larger body of ethnographic observations collected throughout my whole fieldwork, the analysis presented in this chapter draws on in-depth interviews with international practitioners and refugees working, volunteering and gravitating around six Cairo-based NGOs and CBOs in particular, operating in the neighbourhoods of Abdeen/Downton Cairo, Ain Shams, Ard el Lewa, Hadayek el Maadi, and Dar el Salam.[57] The refugee workers included individuals of different gender, age and professional experiences – from professionally-trained community facilitators, to women running cooking workshops, and people who had founded and managed their own small no-profit community project.

Offering insights on the role of NGOs in the design and delivery of aid interventions in Cairo, the chapter thus complements the analysis of refugee aid begun in their previous one looking at the spatial practices of UNHCR. As will be further detailed in the second section, much of the on-the-ground assistance work funded and guided by UNHCR is today in fact 'outsourced' to international and local organizations. NGOs design, deliver and monitor aid interventions, recruiting the workers and volunteers involved in their implementation, and it is these aid agencies that refugees are more in contact with. The organizations for which the migrants involved in research for this chapter worked included international charities offering legal aid and psychosocial

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[57] The names of the NGOs involved are not reported in this chapter. When cases of individual aid workers are analysed, names have been changed. In two cases, as explicitly requested by my informants, nationalities and other biographical details have been withheld or altered. These last two cases are noted in the relevant instances.

support in Cairo, community-based organizations (CBOs), and small single-issue NGOs employing local staff but managed by international (mostly Anglo-American) aid workers, and funded by international donors. All of them were officially recognized UNHCR partners in Egypt, refugee aid thus constituting their primary sector of intervention, and UNHCR the main source of funding.

At the time when field research for this chapter was conducted, three of the organizations involved had been active in Egypt for years. Yet, like many other local and international NGOs, they were struggling for survival amidst the grip of security forces' surveillance, significantly increased after the 2011 uprising, and a chronic lack of funding. All the organizations had somewhat heterogeneous and troubled histories. Some of them had gone from being local charities or activist groups to being incorporated into bigger international organizations, which were better able to secure funding form UNCHR – and thus more secure and stable employment for their workers. A wide variety of career trajectories and backgrounds could be found among both their local and international staff. Their relations with the Egyptian state and international donors, as well as with the main international organizations active in refugee governance in Egypt (mostly UNHCR and IOM, but also foreign embassies), were complex and often tense. Overall, both their histories and the realities of their work on the ground were marked by success and looming failures, and contradictions and acts of stern courage and dedication coexisted in the professional lives of their workers and volunteers.

These differences and complexities notwithstanding, all of the NGOs I have been in contact with conducting research for this thesis share a consistent, regular recourse to local workers, volunteers, interpreters and refugee community facilitators in their interventions. The recourse to indigenized and precarious labour – today a characteristic of the aid industry at a global level (Duffield, 2011; Fechter and Hindman, 2011) – was all the more necessary because of their challenging financial situations (workers recruited on a volunteer basis or with local contracts constitute a minor financial burden) and of the practical challenges posed by carrying out social and community work in Cairo's informal neighbourhoods.

The chapter is articulated into two main parts. In the first, I contextualise the analysis of the relations of labour through which refugees are integrated into the aid industry through a brief outline of labour conditions in Egypt since the 1990s (section V.2). I then move on to analyse the two main modalities through which the outsourcing and indigenization of refugee aid operate, namely the incorporation of the affective and emotional resources of local and refugee workers, and the 'subsumption' of their community networks to the planned outcomes of development interventions (section V.3). In the second part of the chapter I focus on the experiences of refugee workers employed in the aid and development sector. In particular, in sections V 3.2 and V.4.1 I explore the processes of subjectification through which local workers' affective labour and community networks are mobilized to reproduce the ethos of self-sufficiency and self-entrepreneurship that characterises neoliberal development. Finally, in section V.4.2 I analyse some of the 'material paradoxes' that mark the inclusion of local and refugee workers into the sector, focusing not only on economic inequalities, but also on workers' embodied encounters with the hierarchies and colonial legacies inscribed the spatialities of aid, and examining the 'politics of disaffection' resulting from these encounters.

## V.2 Contextualizing Egypt's labour crisis

> We try to help [the beneficiaries] because there are no jobs. The problem here is that there is no work, and therefore no money. Even for me, the problem is always the same, I do this community volunteer work cause it's work, and in the future I can hopefully become a social worker and have a salary. In Sudan I studied library management. I worked at a library in Khartoum for many years, till I had to leave. It's not like I particularly like this job, but it's a job, and it is good for me, even though is just temporary. Obviously I don't want to stay here in Cairo. I applied for resettlement, but never heard back from UNHCR… I have a brother in Australia and I'd very much like to go and live with his family. I tried, but it is not easy now…[58]

In this extract from an interview collected in May 2012, Zahra, a Sudanese woman in her early forties, described her reasons to undertake volunteer social work in a community organization based in Downtown Cairo. Her words speak to a truth that many other community volunteers in the refugee aid sector confirm: volunteer work is, first of all, work. Operating in a particularly static economic context, where lack of

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[58] Interview, Cairo, 24 May 2012. Female, 41-year old, Sudan (Khartoum), volunteer social worker.

formal, salaried employment is the depressing norm, the Cairo NGO milieu, and in particular the refugee aid sector, are for many – migrants and locals alike – primarily a source of qualified employment, and of income.

As already remarked in the introduction to this thesis, the refugee question in Egypt cannot be divorced from the analysis of the macroeconomic changes the country underwent over the last three decades. Lack of economic opportunities are mentioned as the first obstacle to integration in all the reports on refugee livelihoods in Cairo (Sperl, 2001, Feinstein International Centre, 2012; Goździak and Walter, 2012). Egypt's chronic scarcity of jobs has been regularly advanced by governments – pre and post-uprising governments alike – as a reason for maintaining legal restrictions to refugees' right to work, and for opposing policies of local integration more in general (Kagan, 2011)[59]. This politicised tension around access to work has in many occasions given rise to feelings of mistrust, and even episodes of xenophobia, particularly in coincidence with rapid influxes of new groups of refugees, such as Iraqis in 2006 and Syrians in 2012.

According to the largely underestimated statistics produced by the Egyptian government and reported, among others, by World Bank official databases, as to June 2013 the total unemployment rate in the country was stable at 13%, and over three quarters of the unemployed population were young people aged between 15 and 29.[60]

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[59] As explained in Chapter I, Egypt signed the Geneva Convention in July 1951. The 1967 Protocol was signed in 1981, however, reservations were made to 5 of its provisions: personal status (article 12(1)), rationing (article 20), access to primary education (article 22(1)), public relief and assistance (article 23), and most importantly labour legislation and social security (article 24). Although Egypt did not make reservations to the articles of the Geneva Convention which protect refugees' rights to employment directly, the reservations to the Protocol on the subject of labour legislation allowed the government to adopt a law (article 11 of Ministry of Labour's Resolution 390 of 1982) requiring potential employers to prove that no Egyptian national can be contracted before a work permit is issued to a refugee (see Library of Congress Research and Reports, Legal Status of Refugees: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq, available at: http://www.loc.gov/law/help/refugees/legal-status-refugees.php#egypt, accessed 23 September 2014). As a result, work permits are extremely rare, and it is common for refugees in Egypt to be employed informally not only in the NGO sector, but also, as detailed above in section V.2, in the domestic and care work sectors. Informal, temporary work is also common in services such as restaurants and café, and in emerging sectors such as outsourced international call centres.

[60] Available at http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/egypt/overview (last accessed 01 March 2014). The data available in the WB database are based on official statistics by the Egyptian Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS).

As in many other countries in the MENA region, in Egypt unemployment affects mostly youth and new entrants in the job market (ILO, 2014), and graduate unemployment and underemployment are a major issue (Bayat and Herrera, 2012). As noted by Ray Bush (2004) in his critical appraisal of commonly adopted measures of poverty in the Middle East

> Egypt needs to create 900,000 jobs a year to employ new entrants to the job market, as well as trying to absorb the stock of unemployed and underemployed. […] Globalization does not offer labour intensive production and policy-makers and donors do not support it either (Bush, 2004, p. 684).

Since structural adjustment began in the 1990s, not only has unemployment grown, but the quality of jobs available, including for educated urban middle-classes, has significantly deteriorated. First of all, real wages have dramatically dropped. IMF-led financial stabilization had an impact in particular on the income of state-employed workers. Mitchell (2002) synthetized these effects noticing how, in 2002, "a schoolteacher or other educated public-sector employee [took] home less than $2 a day" and "other public sector wages remained steady, but could be maintained only because the salaries remain below a living wage." (Mitchell, 2002, p. 286). At the time when research for this thesis was conducted, the average monthly salary of a lecturer in Egyptian public universities amounted roughly to the equivalent of $250 (EGP 1,500)[61].

Besides real wages' decrease, working conditions also underwent a steady process of informalization and precarization.[62] Although amendments to labour laws implemented since the 1990s have been limited to the removal of Nasserite protection for land tenants (Bush, 2004; Asaad, 2005), the nature of available jobs has rendered

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[61] Personal communication, fieldnotes, May 2012. Male, 36 year old, Egypt associate professor in a public university in Cairo.

[62] In the context of this analysis, the term 'informalization' is employed to point to "the evasion and loosening of the institutional framework of labour regulation in an attempt to achieve greater flexibility and to avoid the cost of social insurance" (Assad, 2005, p. 86). While this term is used to describe to the shrinkage or evasion of norms regulating labour relations, by precarization I refer to the more generalised deterioration of working conditions, including temporary work contracts, low salaries, underemployment and low quality of available jobs (see, among others, Davies, 2005; Neilson and Rossiter, 2008; Appay 2010, Millar, 2014).

actual conditions of employment highly unstable. Structural adjustment measures have in fact led to the downsizing of all the major productive sectors which were offering stable remunerative jobs, with the exception of tourism, and their replacement with highly volatile and speculation-driven tertiary activities. Particularly for the younger generations of middle and lower middle-class Egyptians in search of graduate jobs, neoliberal development produces mostly unemployment and work precarization. An example of this is given by the numerous call-centres providing customer services to international communication companies, most of which are based in the neighbourhood of Madinet el-Entag el-E'lamy, in Sixth of October. Owned by European or Gulf corporations, outsourced international call-centres in Cairo employ mostly young women and men with basic IT skills and proficiency in English, or in one of more Arabic dialects beyond the Egyptian one. At the time when research for this thesis was conducted, these companies offered a first work experience not only to a significant portion of Egyptian graduates, but also to the many young refugees from the Middle East living in Sixth of October City. Although in some of these enterprises salaries were overall competitive, the length of contracts rarely went beyond 4 months, and the demanding working conditions led many employees to leave even before the end of their probation period.

In the same wealthy suburbs which constitute the geographical centre of the new Egyptian economy, the most remunerative form of employment accessible to refugees – especially, but not exclusively, refugee women – is domestic work (see Jureidini, 2009). African migrants in particular are in high demand for their level of education and language proficiency, which make them particularly apt to work with expatriate clients, and because they are generally considered 'more reliable' than Egyptian workers. In 2013, the average pay for a full-time domestic worker in Egypt was estimated to be around $2 (EGP 15) per day[63]. For this category of workers, there exists no legal protection in Egypt (ILO, 2013).

In such a context, development agencies, and the NGO sector more in general, are one of the few sources of qualified employment, one that is at the same time socially

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[63] See the analysis published in 2013 by the French NGO Éxchanges et Partenariats: http://emi-cfd.com/echanges-partenariats/?p=1550 (accessed 20 July 2014).

prestigious and economically viable. From refugee aid to human-rights advocacy, and including foreign funded NGOs working on democratization programs and local associations promoting women and youth empowerment, the development industry de facto amounts to a relatively-privileged, internationally-oriented sector of the job market. This is true for some sectors of the Egyptian professional middle-classes, for which temporary jobs as interpreters, social workers and community facilitators, as well as the adventurous route of self-entrepreneurship in the NGO sector, have replaced stable employment in state bureaucracies. But it also applies to the migrants and refugees who, mostly working their way through their personal contacts, manage to have access to positions within the aid industry, frequently moving from the role of beneficiaries to that of practitioners.

As discussed in Chapter I, UNHCR livelihood policies, aimed as they are at sustaining 'self-reliance', show a pragmatic sense of the limits imposed by the Egyptian economic context. Community programs usually have the objective of helping people reach economic subsistence mobilizing resources within their urbanized community networks. These interventions, however, usually leave people material conditions unaltered (Sperl, 2001). For refugees willing to improve their socio-economic conditions, the transformative power of aid and development consist mainly in their being an industry which, within itself, creates circuits of (self)-employment and income (see Elyachar, 2002, 2005).[64]

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[64] Bearing in mind the context of rampant unemployment outlined above, and the soaring poverty rates in contemporary rural and urban Egypt (Bush, 2004), a few remarks on the socio-economic status of the workers which are the focus of this chapter are also needed. In no way can these in fact be considered as poorest and socially most vulnerable among refugees and migrants in Egypt. The majority of the people involved in research for this chapter were highly educated and had urban middle-class backgrounds. As many of the aid workers quoted in the following sections acknowledge, the privilege of employment within the NGO sector is reserved to people with access to higher education, and usually with a sufficient command of local and foreign languages (Arabic and English). The migrants who find employment in the aid industry benefit in general also from material support provided by family members abroad. However, some of the workers interviewed had had their first encounter with the aid industry as beneficiaries and, for most of them, migration to Egypt had implied a significant process of downward social and occupational mobility.

**V.3 The aid industry as an employer: outsourcing, indigenization and affective labour**

There is a remarkable scarcity of both quantitative and qualitative data on aid and development agencies as employers. Surprisingly for a phenomenon which is otherwise extensively scrutinized, and criticized, estimates of the actual numbers of people employed in the aid industry are in fact extremely difficult to produce (Duffield, 2010.) The reason for this, in the case of Egypt as well as in other contexts, is that, like most other forms of contemporary 'flexible' labour, aid work is increasingly fragmented and precarious (Fechter and Hindman, 2011). At a global level, so the story goes, the sector would be marked by growing trends towards professionalization (Dicheter, 1999; Lewis, 2003, 2005; Mosse and Lewis, 2006). The voluntarism which had characterized the emergence of the NGO sector in the 1960s and 1970s (Duffield, 2010) has left room to hierarchical organizations where specialization, rationalization and audit culture prevail (Fechter and Hindman, 2011).

At a closer look, however, the picture appears much more complex. If anything, professionalization has led to a sharp polarization in the division of labour within development (Fechter, 2010). A 'managerial class' has risen within the biggest international organizations and NGOs, whose work is pervaded by corporate-like practices, and marked by relatively stable career paths. Acting as "coordinating professionals" (Fechter and Hindman, 2011, p. 5), and working increasingly through modalities of 'remote control' (Duffield, 2010), especially in post-conflict settings, transnationally mobile aid managers are nowadays mostly in charge of 'externalizing' the actual work of development (Roth, 2011; 2012). In what follows, I examine how aid outsourcing has affected the work of UNHCR Cairo and its partner NGOs.

**V.3.1 Outsourcing and indigenization**

Among the UN offices, UNHCR is one of those which most heavily rely on outsourcing for the implementation of its programs. According to a report published by the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), as of 2010 the UN office had over 3,000 implementing partners all over the world. The exact number of operational partners however – smaller organizations, that is, that do not have direct access to UNHCR funding – was unknown (OIOS, 2010). To the best of my knowledge, there

are no systematic and centrally collected data on UNCHR's recourse to community and ethnic organizations, local NGOs, charities and faith-based humanitarian organizations.

The Cairo office illustrate UNCHR's global trend towards aid outsourcing well, highlighting its visible material and spatial imprint. While keeping its senior officers at a safe distance from their beneficiaries, the office's 'fortified humanitarianism' – examined in the previous chapter – relies mostly on its local and temporary workers to carry out its 'protection' mandate on the ground. UNCHR's sharply hierarchical division of labour thus begins immediately outside its premises, where community interpreters and local workers who know Arabic regularly carry out 'outreach activities' among the crowds of applicants who camp on the side-walks 'waiting'. Many of the UNHCR junior officers working on temporary contracts met conducting research for this thesis had been recruited through the international charity International Catholic Migration Mission (ICMC).[65] While these workers often enjoy contractual conditions which are similar to those of UN permanent staff, a significant number of the security workers deployed around the building belong to PSCs (private security companies), and are subject to significantly less beneficial contractual conditions.[66] Although official data are scarce, security is arguably one of the aspects of the office's work which has been most significantly externalized (although remaining under the supervision of a locally recruited UN security manager).

But UNHCR's outsourcing is not limited to private security firms. Although often through the mediation of bigger international NGOs (implementing partners), which have the technical know-how and the contacts necessary to secure UN funding, it also involves the highly diverse and heterogeneous world of volunteer groups, community-based organizations, small, single-issue NGOs, religious charities, and even politically active right-groups (operational partners). Alongside 'collaboration' with governmental partners (the ministries of Education, Health and Social Affairs, Foreign

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[65] http://www.icmc.net/ (accessed 6 April 2014).
[66] Personal communication, fieldnotes, 14 May 2012. Conversation with male, age unknown, Egypt, UN security worker. For an analysis of the recruitment practices of PCS in developing countries see Abrahamsen and Williams, 2010.

Affairs through the dedicated Refugee Affairs Department, Interior, and Social Solidarity), UNHCR Egypt has 14 officially recognized implementing partners, and 12 operational partners (UNHCR, 2013). While some of them are other UN offices like UNDP and UNICEF, or 'hybrid' international organizations like the IOM, the vast majority are NGOs. Among them, one finds big international organizations like *Terres des Hommes*, CARITAS, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and Save the Children, but also a vast and heterogeneous group of local charities and Egyptian right groups. In addition to that, UNHCR Egypt can also count on a large numbers of CBOs with which it has established collaboration. These mostly include national and ethnic associations active in the neighbourhoods of Cairo where the concentration of migrants is particularly high, such as Madinet Nasr's Seventh District in the case of Somalis, and the vast *ashaweyat* (informal neighbourhoods) in the areas of Ain Shams and Ezbet el Haggana, which are home to large part of the poorest Sudanese population in Egypt. While large international NGOs write projects and oversee budgets, small, single-issue organizations do the actual work on the ground. In this model of organizational outsourcing, contacts with beneficiaries are typically delegated to three categories of workers: Egyptian social workers, refugee interpreters and community facilitators, and young international volunteers, mostly Europeans and North-Americans. This last group are typically unwaged, or, less often, recruited with the same contracts as local workers.

The forms of labour found in the underworld of aid outsourcing are difficult to classify. A term commonly employed to refer to these phenomena is that of 'aid indigenization' (Gray, 2005; Duffield, 2010). Originally employed by anthropologists to indicate the incorporation of external elements into the institutions and practices that define 'locally-bounded' societies (Leach and Mearns, 1996; Carneiro da Cunha, 2009; Gilberthorpe, 2013), indigenization has been widely used in both academic analysis and policy formulations in international development and social work (Walton and Abo El Nasr, 1988; Gray 2005; Gray et al., 2008; Law and Lee, 2014). In this context, the term normally refers to the involvement of local workers, use of local languages, and incorporation of local practices into aid and development interventions (Gray, 2005). Indigenization would thus amount to the process of integration of the 'externality' of development into a local context, leading to projects

and practices being mastered and controlled by locals[67]. In this sense, the term has a positive connotation, and it has been commonly regarded, in both development and applied anthropology literature (Wong, 2002; Gray, 2005; Hahn and Inhorn, 2009), as a goal to pursue.

More recently however, the positive, almost progressive connotation traditionally given to the incorporation of indigenous elements into development projects has been subject to critical reappraisal. Approaches prescribing attentiveness to 'indigenous knowledge' and practices have thus been criticized for advancing a 'static' view of local cultures, and not considering how the lived reality of development is marked by many grey areas in which the local/international dichotomy de facto collapse (Smirl, 2008; Harrison, 2013). Moreover, such approaches have been regarded as prone to hasty assumptions on the presumably 'pure' and non-capitalist nature of 'local' cultures, ignoring how indigenous practices, knowledges and cultures can be deeply embedded in the reproduction of inequalities and hierarchies in the context of neoliberal development (Briggs and Sharp, 2006). As highlighted by the unevenness – of salaries, working conditions, access to benefits and promotions – which characterize the experience analysed in the following sections, the recruitment of refugee workers in the aid sector offers important insights on the limits of positive, normative notions of indigenization.

### V.3.2 Affective labour

Hochschild's (1983, 2012) concept of "emotional labour" – labour, that is, in which the emotional involvement normally reserved to one's private sphere is reproduced in paid work settings – as well as Hardt and Negri's (2000, 2004) more comprehensive notion of "affective labour", have been widely applied in feminist literature on care and domestic work (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002; Federici, 2004; see also, Anderson, 2012).[68] In recent ethnographies of development, these notions have been

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[67] Oxford Dictionaries provide the following definition for the verb 'to indigenize': to "bring (something) under the control, dominance, or influence of indigenous or local people", http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/indigenize?q=indigenize (accessed 4 March 2014).

[68] I am aware of the importance of retaining a distinction between 'emotion' – referring to the domains of feelings, identity and subjectivity – and that of 'affect' which is better defined as related to the domain of "the impersonal, life, and the objective" (Anderson, 2014, p. 12, see

employed to describe also the experiences of care, dedication, and emotional involvement in aid work (Fechter and Hindman, 2011). I suggest that the concept of 'affective labour' provides a productive lens to analyse the dynamics of aid work indigenization among NGOs assisting refugees in Cairo. As this section will show, the concept works well to capture the intense and demanding nature of the tasks refugee workers are required to cover, while at the same time capturing their ambivalent character, in between paid work and voluntary care for one's community.

The NGOs that collaborate with UNHCR in Cairo typically resort to the work of migrants and refugees to cover three tasks: receiving clients in drop-in centres, running community workshops and talking groups, and implementing out-reach activities, in particular visiting poor households in informal neighbourhoods.[69] As explained in Chapter I, in Egypt refugees are self-settled and distributed across different areas in all major cities, and thus often very difficult to reach for aid agencies. Drop-in centres are therefore the privileged modality of aid delivery. Clients address NGOs actively and directly visiting their premises, and the first contact they have is usually with community workers who can communicate in their native language, and are also fluent in Arabic and English. Migrants and refugees employed as receptionists are not only required to give basic information and instructions, but also expected to perform a first, emergency form of 'care work' for people who can be distressed, and

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also Ngai, 2005). In the context of this work however, I use the notion of affect – and affective labour – as a broader analytical category encompassing both the sphere of subjective emotions and that of impersonal physical and sensuous interactions involving bodies and the environment. I distinguish between different forms and configurations of affect (Anderson, 2014) – like in the case of the 'atmospheres' of protest camps analysed in Chapter VII – and between affect and emotion only when the distinction is essential to the purposes of my analysis of the ethnographic material.

[69]Translation services are another task for which migrants and refugees are commonly employed by NGOs and UNHCR in Cairo. However, interpreters constitute a different case than other aid workers: rather than being under contract by a specific organization, they usually work as free-lance, and, in Cairo, they have higher level of professionalization and specialization. Since 2002, the American University in Cairo has in fact been running a Community Interpreter Project, in which professionals with knowledge of Arabic, English, Oromo, Amharic, Fur, Somali and Tigrinya get extensive technical training in legal interpretation. Although psychosocial workers and community facilitators have at times access to similar forms of training involving local and international academic institutions, their level of specialization and professional independence is significantly lower than that of interpreters. This is why this chapter does not include interpreters in the analysis of refugee work within the aid industry.

occasionally adopt confrontational behaviours. Many refugee workers lament the fact that they are far more exposed to emotionally demanding situations and even abuse from clients than their expatriate colleagues. In the following quote, an Ethiopian refugee recalls his experience of work as receptionist in an international NGO.

> OK, what I am telling you dates back to a year ago because now I am not that involved in that anymore, I left… all the people who were doing the same job left. It was hard to stand… but I know other people who work there… those who are doing that job now are mainly my friends, and I know now they're trying to introduce some work, some security training and security standards. But with that work, in the way it is structured… I mean what are you going to welcome people, families with children, with a bodyguard holding a gun? How are they going to take it, how are they going to accept it?[70]

Another job for which refugee community workers are commonly employed is outreach activities. Programs involving home-visits of Sudanese refugee households in the slums of Dar-el-Salam or Ezbet el Haggana, for instance, are impossible to carry without practitioners with language skills and local knowledge. Also in this case, as shown in the following quote, refugee workers feel that they are disproportionately exposed to risk and demanding tasks, especially in relation to care work.

> In my case there were no precautions, and no security at all. Nothing ever happened to me, but other people did get exposed to potentially very dangerous situations doing that job… threatened, even kidnapped. I recall once, I got a call from another psycho-social workers. He was out there with a young woman who was ill, and he wanted a woman to talk to her… he was there and I was in the neighbourhood too. So I went. I went there alone and I stayed there form the morning to the evening, and eventually we managed to transfer her to the hospital. From the point of view of the help we gave, what she got was an excellent thing, the best thing that could have been done for that person in that state. But I was there alone, you know, a woman, in a neighbourhood I didn't know and where all sort of things happen… and it was… the psycho-social worker who was with me was a man, so that reassured me… but still I felt that was unfair […] [71]

While forms of 'affective work' are required from virtually all categories of aid practitioners, across hierarchies, in Cairo the affective work of refugee aid is disproportionately delegated to migrant community workers – those workers, that is, who have better knowledge of the 'local' context. As noticed by Uma Kothari, in the

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[70] Interview, Cairo, 16 October 2011. Male, Ethiopia, age unknown, former receptionist in an NGO, unemployed at the time when the interview was conducted.
[71] Interview, Cairo, 12 May 2012. Female, 34-year old, Sudan, psycho-social worker.

case of transnational aid professionals "familiarity with specific geographic areas is not considered particularly valuable in a business that explicitly valorises technical skills" (Kothari, 2006a, p. 248, see also Kothari, 2006b). In this regard, she explains, the development industry operates in discontinuity with colonial services, where in-depth knowledge of the place where officers operated, as well as of local language, were often regarded as essential assets. Yet, in the actual implementation of contemporary aid interventions, the technocratic detachment of transnational professionals is achieved through a colonial continuity: the one that reproduces embodied and spatial hierarchies that relegate locals to the most labour-intensive and personally demanding tasks. As Kothari (2006a) writes in fact

> Although the development professionals' expertise is in technical know-how, when overseas they too are required to maintain an authoritative management while simultaneously giving the impression of promoting a more participative exchange with 'locals' (Kothari, 2006a, p. 248; see also Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

In the case of refugee aid in Cairo, this impression of "participative exchange with locals", as well as of emotional involvement with the vicissitudes of one's beneficiaries, is achieved through the work of refugees and locals. This is even more evident in the case of the psycho-social support groups for refugee households run by some NGOs in Cairo. At the time when research for this thesis was conducted, those kinds of workshops targeted Iraqi refugees in particular. Although in 2011 the number of Iraqis in Egypt was already declining due to both self-repatriation and access to resettlement (Kagan, 2011), some NGOs were still offering services that were targeting specifically this group of migrants. Mostly belonging to urban middle-classes who enjoyed a relatively good standard of living before the 2003 war, and who had been severely hit by the wave of sectarian violence started in 2006, Iraqis were perceived as having different needs from the rest of the refugee population in Cairo. Aid workers considered the incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychological issues to be particularly high among people who had left Iraq between 2006 and 2008. Moreover, the process of downward social mobility which had characterised the displacement of this categories of migrant was perceived as requiring specific forms of psycho-social support.

The first Iraqi community facilitator I met in Cairo, in March 2011, was Umm Rashid, a woman in her mid-forties. Labour issues were central in the migration story of Umm Rashid's family. Originally from Basra, she had lived most of her life in Baghdad, where her husband – a former university professor – was still living together with their older son. In her very fluent English, Umm Rashid explained to me how the family had opted for a temporary separation in which, as for most people who left Iraq after 2003 (Chatelard, 2011), both security concerns and economic reasons had played an essential role. While the family hoped to have the chance to reunite in the near future, her husband, who was working as an interpreter for a German company in Baghdad, and her older son, a medical doctor, had decided to stay in Iraq in order to keep their relatively well paid jobs. The mother and the two younger children had instead decided to leave, primarily for security reasons, but also because university education, although only accessible through private institutions, was much more affordable in Egypt than in Iraq.

The migration history of Umm Rashid's family, like those of many other Iraqis in Egypt, points for the centrality of economic and work reasons in determining refugees' mobility patterns, choice of destinations, and in shaping family relations. As her case shows, the same concern about securing access to employment, is also a fundamental factor shaping migrants' relations with humanitarian agencies in the country of asylum. When I met her, Umm Rashid was in fact running the "Iraqi support group" organized by a small Christian international charity based in central Cairo. Although an unpaid volunteer, she occasionally received reimbursements for transportation and food. Most importantly, she explained, that activity gave her and family the chance "to meet many people". Her contacts within the aid sector, she explained, had already got her son two well-paid jobs as an assistant in two large international research projects on Iraqi refugees in Cairo.

Umm Rashid was working under the supervision of a young Belgian social worker – also a volunteer – to organize weekly "talking groups" attended by a limited number of Iraqi families with children. She described the group as a space where people could meet, "overcome their isolation", talk freely about their problems and receive information on available social assistance and resettlement applications. Like many

other community workers, Umm Rashid, as the Belgian aid worker explained, had been selected for that position for being fluent in both English and Arabic, having good connections within her community, and being "nice and easy to talk to, but also very resilient."

Both Umm Rashid and the Belgian volunteer shared a rather positive opinion on the impact of the support group activities. If bettering actual living conditions in Egypt and chances for a safe return to Iraq was very difficult, they explained, "at least people knew they were not alone", and small solutions for single, practical problems could often be found. Yet Umm Rashid described her work also as tiring and emotionally draining. "It's like listening to my neighbours, family and friends, as I have always done, but now here, these people are not my friends."[72] Herein lies a qualitative difference in this kind of 'emotional labour'. Unlike the international volunteer acting as her supervisor, who was also participating in the group-sessions, Umm Rashid's involvement with the beneficiaries went well beyond the structured space of the office or the time dedicated to the talking group. Beneficiaries, for instance, had her telephone number, and it was her that they addressed for most of their needs. This happened not just for linguistic reasons, but also for the relations of trust that linked Umm Rashid to her neighbours and other Iraqi households.

Umm Rashid's case illustrates well "the tension between the caring side of aid work and the day-to-day financial needs" of its refugee practitioners (Hindman and Fechter, 2011, p. 7). But it also shows how, for refugees in Cairo, becoming workers in the aid industry in fact also involves undergoing a process in which their local, 'native' knowledge and positions within informal community networks are turned into professional skills. In her analysis of 'women empowerment' and micro-finance programs in Cairo, anthropologist Julia Elyachar (2010) describes these phenomena through the notion of "labour *potentia*" – or the potentiality for labour. The social connections and informal networks linking housewives in Cairo's popular neighbourhoods, she argues, create an infrastructure though which goods, information, and money circulate, and which amounts to a form of labour *in potentia*.

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[72] Fieldnotes, Cairo, 11 March 2011. Female, 44-year old, Iraq, community worker.

This potentiality, she shows, emerge to daylight when women get involved in development projects that explicitly prescribe the use of their sociality for implementing economic activities, for instance, starting small women-run businesses through micro-finance.

The story of how Awad, a Southern Sudanese community leader in the neighbourhood of Helmiyet el Zaitoon, became a psycho-social worker is a poignant example of how an increasingly indigenized aid industry incorporates refugees' social and affective relations transforming them in labour. But it also works well to introduce the cracks, and the paradoxes, that mark the politics of refugee aid as labour. For years, whenever he, a relative or friend had a problem, Awad, went about solving it "the classical Cairene fashion" (Elyachar, 2011, p. 454). Like the Egyptian women described by Elyachar (2011), he would just go on visits. Moving ably within his neighbourhoods and its social fabric – both Southern Sudanese and Egyptian – Awad would subtly ask for favours where he knew he could count on reliable connections, help solving small disputes finding practical solutions (a bigger flat, a lower rent, someone who could set up electricity for free), or put people in contact where he knew they could be of help to each other.

At the beginning of 2012, through "a friend of a friend", Awad had entered in contact with an organization offering training in "psycho-social and counselling services" for refugees. Together with other migrants who had been recognized as experienced facilitators or community leaders, he had therefore been selected and offered a contract as a "psycho-social worker". The purpose of the service was to employ adequately trained community workers to assist refugees living in three different areas of Cairo. The task they were expected to cover spanned consultancies on practicalities such as housing problems and access to health care, and psychological counselling sessions in which community facilitators worked together with Egyptian medical professionals. When we met, Awad was undergoing the 6-month compulsory training the psychosocial support program entailed. His days used to start in the early afternoon, when he would receive the first calls and go on visits, to then go on with over four hours of training in the evening. Both the training and the practices were

paid, for a total salary of about EGP 1,200 ($170) a month. Awad described his new job as follows:

> I basically do what I have always done, for years, since I came to Cairo. But now I get paid for that, and I have to do it faster, and with so many people and families I didn't know before. My phone rings from nine to twenty times a day, and it's all people who have heard I am being a community volunteer and want to just get in contact with me… It is so tiring, and demanding… the people I am dealing with have bigger problems than the ones I was in contacts with before, or maybe they just ask for more because they think I can help more. And it is so difficult to deal with people who are distressed, crying… at the end of the day I feel that I had a lot of pressure on me all day, is difficult.[73]

Awad was somewhat sceptical regarding the actual impact of an internationally-designed aid intervention which required him to basically "do what he had always done". "They are supposed to help us to find better solutions for our problems, and they pay us to just do what we always did. It's hard to understand," was a comment I often heard during my visits to his family in Helmiyet el Zaitoon. Like many of the beneficiaries and local workers, Awad had expectations about 'proper' aid and development being done spending money, building infrastructure and teaching people something new and 'modern' (see Elyachar, 2002; De Vries 2007). Moreover, he was acutely aware of how some of his colleagues and acquaintances were resorting to more or less subconscious strategies in which 'community ties' and 'community leaderships' were staged precisely to attract the attention – and the funds – of aid organizations (see Elyahcar, 2002).

In spite of these doubts though, and even if he regarded his job as both physically tiring and emotionally demanding, Awad believed he had no reasons to complain. He was aware of the relative privilege of having a job as an aid worker, and the fact of having been recruited on a temporary basis did not prevent him from having long term plans: completing the training, moving up to the task of 'supervisor', and eventually, having gained enough experience, starting his own NGO. Awad's emotional investment in his job was somewhat ambivalent. Although diligent and meticulous in his work, in him feelings of care for his beneficiaries coexisted with a strong focus on

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[73] Interview, Cairo, 20 June 2012. Male, 39 year old, South Sudan, psychosocial and community worker. Interviews and conversations with Awad took place in Arabic – translations are mine.

his own plan for professional and personal development. These co-existence of self-entrepreneurial ambitions and commitment to beneficiaries and to one's 'community' is shared by many aid workers, and lies at the core of the transformative effects refugee aid – even when failing to meet its formally-stated targets – continues to have, and of their political impact. It is to these ambivalent subjectivities that I turn to in the next section.



*Figure 6. Market in the neighbourhood of Ain Shams, Cairo. The neighbourhoods hosts a large Sudanese community.*

## V.4 Embracing neoliberal Aid? Neoliberal subjectivities and the politics of disaffection

### V.4.1 Self-entrepreneurial refugee subjectivities

For the most highly educated and skilled among my refugee informants in Cairo, self-entrepreneurship within the NGO sector was by far the most common route to qualified employment. Many of the migrants I met, particularly those from the

growing Congolese and Western African communities in Egypt (mostly Nigerians), had had experiences of start-ups in the NGO sector even before leaving their home countries. The following extract from an interview with Louis, a young man from Togo registered in Egypt as an asylum claimant, speaks to the complex intermingling of migration histories, political activism, and invidualized career ambitions which, for many migrants, characterize the route to self-entrepreneurship in the development sector. Before travelling to Cairo, Louis had left his home country to study in Ghana, where he had had his first professional experience in an NGO.

> In Ghana, I studied business administration. It was nice there. I came back to my country after finishing my studies. In Ghana I had worked for a while, I was in contact with one NGO in particular. I had gained experience working with them, and when I went back I decided to start a branch of their organization in my country. It took me a few months, but eventually I managed to. Everything was going well when one day I receive a visit from the police saying that I had a problem with authorizations – which was true, but all organizations in my country do. I was detained for a short period of time, matter of days, and then they released me, but the office of my organization had been sealed off and I couldn't use my passport anymore. I couldn't leave the country, it [the passport] had been invalidated somehow. So my lawyer provided me with a fake one. I mean, the name on it is a fake name, not my real one. At the moment in general, also on Facebook, I am using my mother's surname. So, I left again to Accra… Ghana, and then to Egypt. I had the chance, and I thought I would try – not a good idea! […] My father is well off back home… he can support me and sends me money every month, so here I can live well. My lawyer will make me have my real passport back, and I will be able to travel again. I am just waiting for that… this is what I am waiting for here… then I'll go back to Ghana. Yes, I'll go back to Ghana and start my own NGO business there.[74]

Louis had no plans for settling in Cairo, and was waiting to go back to Ghana to try his luck in the NGO sector again. To the contrary, for migrants who had been in Egypt for a longer time and, like many Sudanese, could thus count on solid local connections both within the aid industry and their own national or ethnic communities, Cairo looked like the right place to start one's own community business, mostly due to the availability of UN funding.

Community schools – run by refugee associations or, less commonly, by international religious charities, the latter usually under the supervision of expatriate staff – are among the most important recipients of material and financial support by international donors in the Cairo refugee aid sector. At the time when research for this chapter was

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[74] Interview, Cairo, 18 June 2012. Male, 24 year old, Togo, unemployed. Interview conducted in French. Translation is mine.

conducted, in Cairo there were 18 community schools founded and managed directly by refugee groups, and only one – the Maadi African Hope Centre – run by an international organization. Although usually not getting direct funding from UNHCR, the amount of money invested in primary education for refugee children – in the form of grants, study material, and teachers' training – is significant. When I started my fieldwork in 2011, the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) – an American NGO authorized to operate in Egypt since the 1950s, and one of the main UNHCR implementing partners in the country – had just started a 10-year UNHCR-funded program to distribute 7,000 scholarships to refugee families in order to support the enrolment of children in primary schools. Together with vocational training workshops, and ITs and language skills, primary education is thus one of the domains in which refugees more often find employment, or found their own organizations. As highlighted in the following quote, having an autonomous organization in the education sector is often regarded as embracing one's own independence, while at the same time contributing to help others to develop a set of skills that will make them also personally self-directed and economically self-reliant.

> [In the Sudanese community school] I teach maths and sciences, but I also do some volunteer work with the families who need support… I like that I can do what I like, and use all my skills. Now we have an evening-course, we employ young Sudanese graduates to teach people IT, at different levels. There is much to do to help people in my community to gain the skills to find a job, to communicate…[75]

These narratives resonate with the experiences of skilled workers in emerging neoliberal economies of the Global South described in recent anthropological and development literature (Gooptu, 2009; Prentice, 2012). Studies of neoliberalism in Western societies have shown how its emergence has been accompanied by that of new technologies of governance of the self, in particular, those aimed at fostering the 'entrepreneurial self' (Gooptu, 2009, see also Heelas, 1991; Rose, 1992; Rose and Miller, 2008). Self-directed and goal-oriented, enterprising subjects value autonomy and self-sufficiency, as well as the ability to seize opportunities with optimism and creativity (Heelas, 1991), and the will to take risks (O'Malley, 1996, Amoore, 2004,

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[75] Interview, Cairo, 18 November 2011. Male, age unknown, Sudan, volunteer in a community school.

Peck, 2010). The emergence of neoliberal 'technologies of self' does not characterize only the highest ranks of professionals within the most profitable business sectors, nor are they limited to Western contexts. The NGO industry also increasingly work producing self-reliant, enterprising subjectivities, among their workers and beneficiaries alike (Muehlebach, 2011; 2012; Muehlebach and Shoshan, 2012, Vrasti, 2013).

In the case of refugee aid in Cairo, the biopolitics of self-reliance which constitutes the most important tenet of UNHCR interventions, described in the introduction to this thesis, is not simply imposed in a depoliticized vacuum, or openly reversed and contested as in the Mustapha Mahmoud protest camp analysed in Chapter VII. It also works by producing subjectivities keen to actively embrace self-sufficiency as an ethos aimed at achieving not only economic security, but also social promotion and personal emancipation. In the following quote, Intisar, a young woman enrolled for a masters at Cairo University, expresses well the desire for individual autonomy that drives many towards the route of self-employment in the development sector.

> There is not much I can do here when I finish my masters… so I don't know [what kind of job I want]. Now, I have this contact with this community school, and I just started a secretary job there. I think it's good for me, for now… But I think a possible thing, a thing that I see as possible as there is much demand now, is starting my own private IT school. If I can get the loan from [names international organization] then maybe in future the UN will fund it, you know, there is interest, also for refugee education. For me, being a secretary… I am qualified and if I manage to open that business it will be different.[76]

Running one's own organization also means getting physical access to the privileged spaces of an upscale, internationally-oriented economic sector, as exemplified by the following extract from an interview a with a young community worker

> A:  Well you know… I wanted to do it because I want to do something for the other refugees, but also because is good for you as a person, socially…
> Q: You mean running a CBO, is good for you? Is it a good job?
> A: Yeah of course, you access all the organizations without problems, you even access UNHCR. Now you know, I meet and get to know all the people there… and I get a salary for the last intervention I worked on of 1,000 or 1,500 EGP ($145-215). And I got to know so many practitioners… I also liked it when we were having the training

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[76] Interview, Cairo, 10 May 2012. Female, age 23, student and part-time secretary. Nationality has been omitted.

there in the American University… and you know what I liked the most back then? I really enjoyed being in a nice place, spending time in a place with AC… the fact of being in a nice place such as the American University campus… many people I know here could never dream to go.[77]

These words are highly representative of the motivations that drive many refugees in Cairo to start careers and look for job in the NGO sector. Refugee aid in fact, rests on what could be defined 'a material paradox'. While beneficiaries are supposed to be content with the economic subsistence most interventions aim to guarantee, often coming to terms with the unsafety and poverty of life in Cairo's *ashaweyat* (informal neighbourhoods) development practitioners are kept separate from them, and in the comfort of protected, enclosed spaces. Finding a job within the aid industry, or founding one's own organization, becomes thus the most effective way of crossing the 'boundaries of aid', achieving a status which materializes through the embodied experience of getting access to safe, clean, and cosmopolitan spaces of the development industry. Also, in this case then, refugees' relations with the aid industry, and the politics defining this relation, cannot be understood without considering the materialities and spatialities of these encounters. In the following sections I complete the analysis of the 'material paradoxes' of aid considering how refugees' failed work experiences within the NGO sector lead to the emergence of a 'politics of disaffection'.

### V.4.2 Material paradoxes and the politics of disaffection

Self-entrepreneurship in the development sector, and the associated adoption of a neoliberal ethos of self-sufficiency, often turn out to be rather economically volatile and existentially precarious experiences. With the exclusion of a restricted number of local practitioners who manage to capitalize on their contacts working simultaneously for many organizations, or can count on reliable sources of financial support through their transnational connections, in urban Egypt, self-employment in the NGO sector mostly fails to deliver economically (Elyachar, 2002). This is particularly true for refugees willing to move from the role of beneficiaries to that of practitioners starting their own organization within the aid sector, who are often confronted with the chronic

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[77] Interview Cairo, 13 March, 2021. Male, 30-year old, Somalia, trained as a psycho-social worker, volunteer in a Somali CBO.

lack of financial and logistical resources of the international organizations – like UNHCR – which are supposed to fund them. But refugee self-entrepreneurship does not seem to work better when people attempt to transfer skills from the aid and development industry to other economic sectors. Refugee women trying their luck in the seemingly ever-growing market of community-run catering businesses illustrate this point particularly well.

Under names such as 'nutritional awareness' or 'livelihood workshops', training women to bake *injera'* (the yeast-risen, spongy flat bread typical of Ethiopian and Eritrean cuisine) or to cook other kinds of cheap and nutritious traditional food (such as *ta'meya*, the Egyptian version of *falafel*) is an omnipresent activity in NGO programs targeting refugee women in Cairo, and more in general in interventions targeting poor women in most of the developing world (Verma, 2011). The purpose is typically to get family mothers to learn strategies to minimise household expenses, and enable them to set up small, community-run catering businesses, as an income generating activity for their enlarged families.

Meti, an Ethiopian housewife and mother of four living with her husband and children in a modest flat in one of the neighbourhoods of Giza, had run one of those workshops for a few months in 2011, in a small charity that figured amongst UNHCR's list of CBOs. Although, as she explained to me, she did not receive any formal salary for her activity, she used to enjoy the workshops very much as, through them, she had the chance to meet many 'international' people. A few months after the cooking workshops ended due to the organization's logistical problems, Meti and her family found themselves facing financial hardship. Her husband, as he himself explained to me, found asking for help from UNHCR and humanitarian organizations "uncomfortable and somehow not honourable", thus preferring to rely on their family members for material support.[78] Meti, however, was much more pragmatic than him. Tired of the financial restrictions living on the small amount of money the family received every month from her husband's family, at the beginning of 2012 she decided to take things into her own hands. Knowing Egyptian and several other Middle Eastern

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[78] Fieldnotes, Cairo, 6-12 November 2011. As requested by her and her family, in accounting for her story the informant's name, nationality and neighbourhood of residence are not the real one.

cuisines, in addition to that of her country, Meti decided to use the experience gained through the workshops starting her own small catering business. Through her husband, she managed to negotiate a deal with one of their Egyptian acquaintances who owned a coffee shop in their neighbourhood. For weeks, she baked cakes, rolled *mahshi* (stuffed zucchini or wine leaves) and prepared other kind of Middle Eastern delicacies for the small Egyptian restaurant.

In spite of the initial hard work and visible enthusiasm though, it did not take her too long to realise how the venture was, in her own words, "just not convenient". Having four children and a husband to feed, the new job she had so optimistically embraced meant she was spending most of her days in the kitchen, and for very little money. This is how, in one of the last conversations we had on the topic, she explained to me why she did not wish to repeat the disheartening experience anymore:

> I tried that too, I mean to help my family, and it just did not work… it's over, that attempt did not work. It's different from the workshops… it's so much work to cook for a restaurant, and in the first month I made very little money … It is just not convenient. I hoped I'll be able to help my family, but it just did not happen. Now I know the kind of little jobs you can get here in Egypt is this, and I just hope my family can leave the country soon [through resettlement]. I do not understand why they tell people to do these things, I mean the UN and the churches [Christian charities offering support to refugees] … maybe they do not realise what it takes, how much work… and for what?[79]

Meti's experience reveals the lived reality of refugee self-entrepreneurship in Cairo for what it often is: an unsustainable amount of work for very little money, and economic conditions that rarely go beyond mere subsistence. As clearly expressed in her words these economic failures manifest themselves through the embodied experience of a humble, tiring job that fail to keep the promise of improving living conditions. A job which, compared to those of people who have successful careers in the aid industry, appears often belittling.

When people try their luck in the aid sector, things often go just as poorly. With UNHCR's budgets shrinking, and international NGOs operating amidst the grip of state security and the threat of financial debacle, the aid sector can hardly offer

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[79] Interview, Cairo, 03 February 2012. Interview conducted in Arabic, assistance with translation has been employed.

sufficient financial coverage to most of the NGOs. UNHCR is unable to provide funding for the high number of community organizations it recognizes, even when those organizations are involved in the community consultation meetings run by the office[80], or delegated some of the assistance in specific neighbourhoods. As the following quote – like the one from the interview with Meti reported above – illustrates, this inability to effectively include community and local workers reinforces perceptions of the aid industry as inaccessible, and fundamentally removed from the lived reality of its beneficiaries.

> UNHCR is not approachable, is not an approachable agency… For me, even when I asked them for a salary for me, I mean, as a community leader who is working with them and for them, in an organization they recognized… we just needed funds… they said no, they said we do not have the budget for that… they refused.[81]

In other cases, confident of their skills and capacities, refugee aid workers have expectations that go well beyond the mere fact of 'having a salary'. Fadil's story is particular telling in this respect. Arrived in Egypt in the late 1990s, he had ever since been very active within the Darfuran community in Ain Shams. In the early 2000s he had founded a small community organization offering English and IT training and organizing workshop and other 'cultural activities' targeting the Darfuran community. Ably building contacts with local media and international organizations, as well as keeping strong ties with Darfuran organizations in Europe and Africa, by 2005 Fadil had managed to obtain the official status of UNHCR-recognized CBO for his association, which he was then managing together with three Darfuran friends.

Between May and June 2012, I volunteered in Fadil's organization, teaching English to a group of young Sudanese women, two days a week, for a total of five weeks. At that time, UNHCR was paying the organization's rent in a small flat in Ain Shams (figure 6), and occasionally providing them with small budgets for specific activities.

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[80] According to one of the senior officers interviewed, between 2007 and 2011, UNHCR Cairo had run 50 meetings with community-based organizations, and 120 refugee consultations (interview, Cairo, 30 March, 2011). At the time when our meeting took place, the officer affirmed that UNCHR was about to resume the community consultations suspended during the uprising. However, according to the refugee workers interviewed for this chapter, as to May 2012 the meetings were still suspended.

[81] Interview, Cairo, 16 May 2012. Male, 41 year old, Sudan, former journalist and community worker.

However, being highly educated, politically active, well-respected among local Darfuran residents and particularly effective in their initiatives, Fadil and his colleagues had higher expectations about what the newly acquired status of 'UNHCR operational partners' would entail for them. The following episode, related to me by Fadil in June 2012, is particularly revealing in this regard:

> We got an invitation to attend a conference in Jordan. We went to UNHCR and we told them: We need travel documents, for the three of us, as representatives of our organization… But the people there were very… anxious. Anxious about that: is that allowed can we really do that? Can we? And they eventually said: no. The people even called them, from Jordan, we gave them the UNHCR number… and they could not believe that… but… there are so many restrictions to people's mobility here, to the connections you can have with the world outside of Egypt. There are people who are in jail you know? They are in jail because they received more than 10,000 dollars from outside.[82]

As examined in the previous chapter, access to international mobility is one of the embodied boundaries that most sharply define the relation between refugee aid practitioners and their beneficiaries (Smirl, 2008), and one around which resentment and contestation more often coalesce. After this experience, Fadil gradually detached himself from UN-related projects, and worked to re-establish relations within the Darfuran community, as well as with his family abroad, which, in his own words, he had neglected due to "involvement with the UN". Pragmatically however, the organization decided to maintain its formal affiliation to UNHCR and local networks of NGOs, and Fadil and his colleagues seemed to still retain some hope for future career chances in the sector. Like many of the people interviewed for this chapter, they showed a somewhat individualistic investment in personal career plans, and seemed to have embraced the ethos of self-sufficiency, risk-taking and financial independence which, in Cairo, characterises neoliberal post-development also in the context of refugee aid.

Indeed, it should be made clear, for a limited number of local and refugee workers professional experiences within the aid industry did seem to work, and lead to personal and social emancipation. For the majority of the workers I met in Cairo, however, the lived reality of aid work was significantly different. Confronted with the unfulfilled

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[82] Interview, Cairo, 17 June 2012. Male, 41-year old, Sudan, former journalist and community worker.

promises of the NGO industry, Fadil, Meti, and many others thus decided to leave, and, although retaining 'tactical' contacts with aid agencies, started to devote their energies to relations, and sources of material support, which were somewhat autonomous from humanitarianism. When they decided to stay, they did so with a 'pragmatic' sense of the limitations and precariousness of their work, showing a detached disaffection which was by far the most common attitude among refugee workers recruited in the sector.

## V.5 Conclusions

In this chapter I have explored the everyday politics of indigenized labour in the refugee aid industry in Cairo considering the experiences of refugees employed – or self-employed – in the NGO sector. In particular, I have shown that the incorporation of indigenized labour within the aid industry is associated with two contrasting experiences. On the one hand, it creates 'neoliberal subjectivities' (Rose, 1999; Gooptu, 2010) that embody the values of self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship upon which the project of neoliberal development is based. On the other, being exposed on a daily basis to poor working conditions – low salaries, precarious contracts, and long hours – and to hierarchies which, in the NGO sector as in the UNHCR case, have also a very visible spatial dimensions, local and refugee workers exhibit an ambivalent attitude towards the humanitarianism and development industry.

Is there agency in the relations, subjectivities, and affective experiences refugee work in the aid industry mobilizes? It is not possible – nor useful – to come out with a clear-cut answer to this question. My point in this chapter has been rather to draw attention on a hidden aspect of the material and spatialised reality of refugee aid, highlight its transformative effects and shed light on the contradictions, dissonances and ambivalent subjectivities associated with it. Exploring the experience of refugees employed in the aid sectors has served to trace the emergence of an ambiguous 'politics of disaffection', whose effects should always be understood contextually.

Nevertheless, we can surely see relations of power being reconfigured when refugee workers navigate successfully through the industry's hierarchies, or set up their own businesses. Even more importantly, it is possible to see novel position-taking

emerging when people decide to quit, and, like Fadil, opt for a re-engagement with autonomous forms of community work and community politics, partially disenfranchised from 'the rules of the game' of the aid industry – rules of the game that, as this chapter has shown, can have very exploitative outcomes for refugee workers and refugee communities.

It is to these autonomous – yet profoundly relational – living, organizing, and getting together that I turn to in the last part of this thesis. While in Chapter VII I analyse the Mustapha Mahmoud protest camp as spatialised form of political agency in which autonomy and prefigurative politics were set against the depoliticised domains of humanitarianism and Egyptian securitocracy, in Chapter VI I look at everyday practices of solidarity and material support emerging spontaneously from refugees' experiences of 'waiting' – for assistance, for a chance to resettle, or for economic opportunities – in Cairo.

# Part C
# Socio-material infrastructures:
# agency beyond resistance

## Chapter VI: Waiting in Cairo? Provisional lives, socio-material infrastructures and the 'politics of the present'

### VI.1 Introduction

> Why do you want to ask people about their life here? Most people who are here… most people who are here are just waiting. They're just waiting to go somewhere else.[83]

This quote, from a young Iraqi met in May 2011 in a café of Sixth of October where I was going to interview one of his friends, was meant to question the meaning – and the relevance – of my research. Accompanying his words with a quick brush of his hand, Ali – an Iraqi man in his early twenties who had lived in Egypt since 2009 – was suggesting I was doing something useless, or, at best, missing a very important aspect of the lives of the people I claimed to be 'studying'. Like many other Iraqis in Cairo, Ali showed the typical fatigue of the 'over-researched' refugee (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2013): he had met, he explained, too many researchers asking the same questions. "There is nothing to do here", he concluded, "even if we're studying, or working, no one wants to stay here."

Although, like all Iraqis arrived in Egypt after 2003, he had right to *prima facie* refugee status, Ali had chosen not to register with UNHCR. His family back in Iraq had enough financial resources to pay for his studies in a private dentistry college in Sixth of October, and being in Egypt on a student visa, rather than on a refugee blue card, allowed him to have access to faster and smoother procedures to renew his residence permit. Going for a degree in Egypt, as it emerged in the conversation we had in that first meeting, was a choice he had resorted to, in agreement with his family, as an alternative to the lack of security and socio-economic opportunity in Iraq (Chatelard, 2010). At the same time, he explained, he was hoping to enhance his chances for future employment gaining a degree to which he would not have had access in his home country. "I am waiting to start my life, my future", he explained.

Ali's experience resonates with the emerging policy category of 'mixed migration' (UNHCR, 2007). This refers to migrants' reasons for leaving their countries as

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[83] Fieldnotes, Cairo, May 2011. Male, 23 year old, Iraq, student.

constituted by an inextricable mix of security and economic concerns, leading to migratory movements in which refugees and 'economic migrants' share the same routes, livelihood strategies and often precarious legal status – or complete lack thereof – in countries of destination. Although he had chosen to avoid contacts with aid agencies – he regarded applying for a UN card as neither practical nor particularly useful – Ali, like many other young Iraqi, Palestinian, Syrian, but also Somali and Eritrean youth living in Sixth of October, considered his condition similar to those of the migrants holding refugee status. "Even if I am not a refugee, even if I am studying my condition is the same: I am only waiting", he concluded on that day.

'Waiting' is now widely recognized as the subjective experience that most pointedly defines contemporary refugee migration (Conlon, 2011). In 2012, UNHCR official reports affirmed that "refugees are increasingly unlikely to find the traditional solutions to their problems, and some 7.2 million people are trapped in 'protracted' exile" (UNHCR, 2012). In UNHCR's definition, a protracted refugee situation is one in which refugees' "lives may not be at risk, but their basic rights and essential economic, social and psychological needs remain unfulfilled after years in exile' (UNHCR 2006: 106). Egypt – particularly after the Sudanese and Somali crisis of the 1990s, and even more so since the 2003 Iraqi war and the crisis in Syria started in 2012 – is home to a significant number of migrants who are caught in protracted refuge. In Cairo as in many other cities – and refugee camps – in Africa and the Middle East, refugee waiting "has become the rule, not the exception" (Hyndman and Giles, 2011, p. 361).

In urban Egypt however, 'waiting' is also a socially-produced condition commonly found, in different forms, well beyond the space of the refugee regime. Waiting marks in fact the "transition to nowhere" that characterize the delayed and troubled passages to adulthood of urban unemployed graduates in Cairo and Alexandria (Herrera, 2012; see also De Koning, 2009), as well as the experiences of precarious dwelling of urban-rural migrants, and of development-induced displacement in Upper Egypt. Moreover, in a context of generalized social unrest and political violence, experiences of 'heightened time' and painful suspension also mark everyday life in domestic and intimate spaces, as family members wait at home while their beloved ones are out 'to

protest' (Winegar, 2012; Abu Lughod, 2012; on waiting in the context of political unrest and political transition, see also Abaza, 2012). In Egypt as in many other postcolonial contexts, different forms of waiting have thus become the characteristic linking otherwise heterogeneous conditions of subalternity (Bayart, 2007; Jeffrey, 2008, 2010).

In the now significant body of work which, across various disciplines, explores subjective accounts of refugee and subaltern waiting, this condition is usually described as a "long-lasting and intractable state of limbo" (Hyndman and Giles, 2011; p. 361; see also Bayart, 2007; Jeffrey, 2008, 2010). Waiting is understood as marked by heightened feelings of life suspension (Uehling, 2002; Gray, 2011) which both derive from and reinforce the processes of "de-subjectification" associated with regimes of biopolitical exception (Vitus, 2010; Hyndman and Giles, 2011).

Recent ethnographic explorations of the effects of neoliberalization in developing countries have adopted a somewhat more nuanced approach to the question of waiting (Han, 2011; Millar, 2014), in some cases highlighting its role in fostering political mobilization, and even revolt (Jeffrey, 2008; 2010; Herrera, 2012). Also in this body of work, however, prevalent interpretations conceive the 'politics of waiting' (Jeffrey, 2010) among subaltern subjects as marked by hope, patience, and by a depoliticizing longing for the future (Appadurai, 2001; Bourdieu, 2000; Lombard, 2013). In this chapter I set out to complement and problematize these analyses, accounting for emerging forms of political agency through which – although with ambiguities and contradictions – the present is 'reclaimed'.

In the nearly two-year long correspondence that followed that first encounter in which he had called my attention to his and his friends' 'endless waiting', I had the chance to observe more closely what Ali's daily life in Egypt was actually like. His story, I suggest, highlights a different and less accounted for aspect of the everyday politics of waiting. As it gradually emerged from our conversations, Ali was in fact part of a network of friendship in which, in the time he would otherwise describe as "wasted at the café", he was involved almost on a daily basis in exchanges of money, information, and several forms of mutual help, often requiring a significant amount of organization

and care work. In the space of a year, Ali had taken up two casual jobs in two different call-centres, helped a friend to set-up a small Iraqi shop in the Seventh District of Sixth of October, and assisted several others who arrived to Egypt or moved back to Iraq – finding flats, moving and selling old furniture, providing guidance and advice on life in Egypt. Moreover, his family's relatively good financial conditions and the fact that, being on a student visa, he was not subject to the legal restrictions to travel associated with the status of refugee[84], permitted him to travel twice to Iraq to take care of his extended family and share their most significant life events, like marriages.

Ali's experiences of friendship and mutual help in Cairo should not be romanticised. Particularly in the conversations we had in person, descriptions of this 'thick' network of social relations were often intermingled with comments that revealed a remarkable degree of anxiety about the time he was 'wasting' in Egypt. These feelings had also a tangible, material dimension. Ali would frequently complain about how inadequate his apartment was – a small flat shared with three other students which he described as "empty, and yet too narrow", and about how "boring" he found the suburb where he was living. The Iraqi-owned cafés where he used to hang out with his friends were ambivalently perceived as spaces of both comfort and frustration, where the sense of safety experienced through friendship coexisted with the acute perception of being in Cairo 'doing nothing'. In December 2013, a year after the end of my fieldwork, Ali decided to interrupt his studies and move back to Iraq. Surprisingly enough, leaving without a degree did not aggravate his feelings of having wasted time. To the contrary, he explained his decision to me with relief, describing it as an act of relinquishment from the endless waiting that had characterized his life for years.

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[84] The 1951 Geneva Convention and its protocols do not allow refugees to travel to their home countries, as those who do can have the status withdrawn. This restriction explains why, at the time when this research was conducted, it was not uncommon for the Iraqi refugees who could afford it financially to request residence permits as students, or students' parents, and then use their Iraqi passport to travel home. As to the documents issued to refugees to travel to third countries, according to the 1954 Memorandum of Understanding refugees in Egypt can request travel documents with return visas to the Ministry of Interior and of Foreign Affairs (see Library of Congress Research and Reports, Legal Status of Refugees: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq, available at: http://www.loc.gov/law/help/refugees/legal-status-refugees.php#egypt, accessed 23 September 2014). However, my observations suggest that the application of this last norm is, at best, uneven.

Given his legal and financial status, and the strong connections he could count on in the homeland, Ali was a somewhat privileged example of migrant in a refugee-like condition. Yet his trajectory was far from unique among my informants in Cairo. Taking Ali's case as a point of departure, this chapter explores refugee waiting in Cairo in relation to questions of political agency. Can there be in agency in refugees' immobility, provisionality, and inactivity? What kind of agentful subjectivities can emerge from the spatio-temporal and socio-material relations refugees find themselves immersed in while waiting in a richly diverse, but also highly exclusionary and fragmented urban environment? Can people stuck in what appear like endless, haunting experiences of 'wasted time' resort to unexpected and novel position-takings, challenging the relations of power they are immersed in?

Combining insights from refugee studies (Stepputat, 1992; Conlon, 2002) with recent literature on temporality in postcolonial cities (Simone, 2004a, 2004b; 2008, Lombard, 2013) the analysis is articulated along two main axes. First, it shows how refugee waiting in Cairo is the product of two intertwined dimensions: the "heightened time" (Jeffrey, 2008) of migration and humanitarian regimes, and the 'disrupted time' of what I define as the socio-material 'provisionality' – of housing, transportation, and personal safety and integrity – that characterizes everyday life in Cairo. Secondly, it analyses the strategies and position-takings migrants resort in order to avoid or minimize waiting, showing how 'suspended time' can become a space in which solidarities, affective bonds, and social connections are forged. I suggest that these practices can be read as a 'politics of the present' emerging precisely from the affective and material experience of living 'provisional lives'. The 'politics of the present' are defined by an affective condition which, although without completely erasing the longing for stability, privileges detachment over the oppositional stances that characterize what we would commonly identify as 'resistance' (Millar, 2014; Nouvet, 2014), and sociality and relationality as experienced in the present over 'the politics of hope' associated with waiting (Lombard, 2013).

I illustrate these points through the in-depth analysis of a single ethnographic case, that of Leyla, a young Somali woman living in the neighbourhood of Madinet Nasr, in a small flat shared with other two women refugees, also from Somalia. Providing

rich insights on the ambivalence that characterizes subjective experiences of waiting among refugees in Cairo, Leyla's case works particularly well to highlight both the potentialities and the inherent fragility of what I name 'politics of the present'. As such, it is highly representative of the themes emerging my wider research on refugee waiting.[85] Methodologically, my observations are based over twelve months of close contacts and extensive involvement with Leyla and her closest social contacts, recorded through material including journal entries, notes from participant observation in different public contexts, and repeated home-based interviews.

The chapter is divided in two main sections. In section VI.2 I examine what I deem to be the most relevant literature on migration and waiting. In doing so, I show how recent theorizations of temporality in postcolonial urban contexts can be applied to the case of refugees in contemporary Egypt. In particular, I focus on to the work of Abdulmaliq Simone and his analyses of provisional socio-material infrastructures in African cities (2004a, 2004b, 2008, 2011). In section VI.3 I then move on to explore Leyla's case. The analysis proceeds as follows. First, in subsections VI 3.1 and VI 3.2, I explore Leyla's relation with what I name humanitarian bureaucracies – UNHCR and its registration procedures – and examine her own personal plans for future migration as experiences of 'suspended temporality'. Subsection VI.3.3 examines another dimension of Leyla's waiting, namely the disruption caused by the struggle and small emergencies which characterize everyday life in Cairo's poor neighbourhoods. In the last part of the chapter I reflect on the 'politics of living together' in provisional urban contexts as emerging from Leyla's experience. The conclusions offer some remarks on how the politics associated with the socio-material infrastructures analysed in this chapter problematize the notion of resistance.

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[85] Parts of the material included in the introduction to this chapter has been published under the title Diaspora, Immobility and the Everyday Politics of Waiting: Young Iraqi Refugees in Contemporary Cairo. In Gorman, Anthony and Sossie Kasbarian. (Eds) *Diasporas in the Modern Middle-East: Contextualizing Community*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014 (in press).

**VI.2 Refugees and the provisional city: the politics of waiting**

**VI.2.1 Waiting and global migration**

As already remarked, refugees' experiences of waiting are attracting growing academic attention (Conlon, 2011). Existing analyses span accounts of the role of 'waiting for return' in fostering feelings of community and national belonging in refugee camps (Stepputat, 1992), and approaches focusing on the 'mundane', 'everyday' forms of waiting involved with refugees' travel, transit and (im)mobility (Uehling, 2002). Recent contributions have also described spaces of exception such as detention and asylum centres as characterized by forms of 'extreme' waiting (Vitus, 2010, Mountz, 2012). In a similar vein, critical border studies have also shown increasing attention to the uneven temporalities produced by global migration and humanitarian governance (Andrijasevic, 2009, 2010; De Genova and Peutz, 2010; Van Houtum, 2011; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). Border regimes, it has been argued, actively use technology to facilitate and accelerate forms of privileged mobility (see, among others, Sparke, 2006), but also, to a greater extent, to control and slow unwanted migration (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013).

Developing simultaneously with the so-called 'mobility turn' in geography, anthropology and migration studies (Knopp, 2004; Cresswell, 2006, 2010), this body of work has problematized taken-for-granted epistemologies that associate migration with mobility, flows, circulation and 'connected-ness', thus contributing to map a counter-geography of stranded-ness, forced immobility, and of the various experiences of 'life-suspension' associated with contemporary regimes of economic migration (Conlon, 2011).

Calling for analyses that account for the embodied, lived dimensions of protracted immobility, feminist literature has offered essential contributions to this counter-cartography (Conlon, 2011; Hyndman and Giles, 2011; Mountz, 2011; Tyler, 2013). Importantly to the purpose of this chapter, feminist writers have thoroughly questioned the prevalent association of refugee waiting with lack of agency. Alison Mountz (2011), for instance, has proposed an analysis of asylum seekers' waiting as both a space of organized activism and as a time when "sickness, marriage, childbirth, local language acquisition [are] strategies pursued to survive" (Mountz 2011, p. 390).

Rematerializing the temporality of globalized asylum regimes through attention to everyday embodied experiences, her approach maps a 'politics of waiting' which challenges prevalent understanding which encompasses both everyday struggles and organized resistance.

Feminist engagements with refugee waiting, however, have remained mostly limited to spaces of exception such as borderlands, refugee camps, and asylum centers. Such 'border bias' characterizes in fact most of the existing literature on migrants' politics, where, as I suggested in Chapter II, the role urban contexts play in defining the contemporary geographies of migrant and refugee waiting, particularly in the Global South, is still underexamined.

**VI.2.2 Waiting and the city: the politics of urban provisionality**

The relation between waiting and global migration has also been explored beyond the globalised space of the refugee regime. In particular, research on labour migration within emerging neoliberal economies (Xiang, 2006; Chari, 2006; Rogaly and Thieme; 2014), as well as on the transnational migration of women domestic workers (Parreñas, 2001; Mahdavi, 2011) has highlighted the salience of the subjective experiences of spatio-temporal suspension for these categories of migrants.

For writers who have attempted to theorize waiting as a time-space of political subjectivation, these ethnographies have provided ground for tracing the commonalities between the waiting experienced by refugees and the disrupted temporalities associated with other conditions of subalternity, well beyond spaces of border enforcement (Bayart, 2007; Jeffrey, 2008, 2010; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). In this regard, the work of French postcolonial theorist Jean François Bayart (2007) constitutes one of the most relevant examples[86]. For Bayart (2007) the heterogeneous

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[86]Jean François Bayart's (2007) postcolonial genealogy of neoliberal globalization constitutes one of the most recent example of a long tradition of research which, within postcolonial studies, has played a pivotal role in theorising the political salience of the temporality of waiting (Jeffrey, 2008). To name but one of the most famous examples, in the introduction to his *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) famously argued that European colonialism worked also through positioning colonized subjects in the "waiting room" of political modernity – "the 'not yet'" to which the colonized nationalist opposed his or her own 'now'" (Chakrabarty, 2000; p. 9; on colonized subjects and states of 'non-being' see also Fanon, 1963-2007). In the context of postcolonial study, the writings of Edward Said (2001)

experiences of 'waiting' of migrant workers, refugees, and disenfranchised youth –
what he names, through a term derived from French colonial historiography, "new
floating populations" – are all products of neoliberal capitalist states' attempts to
contain the 'unwanted' circulation of "surplus humanity" (Bauman, 2004; Bayat,
2004). As for Appadurai (2001) and Katz (2004), for Bayart (2007) neoliberal
economic change has unsettled people's experience of time and place, instilling
feelings of inertia and limbo. Importantly for the analysis proposed in this chapter,
Bayart's work underscores the centrality of cities as spaces where, at a global level,
heterogeneous forms of subaltern waiting coexist and intersect.

Urban geography has recently devoted increasing attention to the temporality of urban
life in the Global South (Simone 2004b, 2008; McFarlane 2011a, 2011b; 2011c; Till
2012; Lombard 2013). While assemblage geographies have theorized the role of
everyday rhythms and 'incremental' learning through embodied experience of the city
in fostering gradual social change (McFarlane, 2011a), other approaches have
highlighted the unevenness of time-space in postcolonial urbanism (Till, 2012;
Simone, 2004a; Lombard, 2013). Examining the role of memory in processes through
which 'communities of care' are built, Till (2012) has called for attention to the
multiple temporalities that characterize the urban experience in the Global South as a
way of recognizing and accounting for marginalities and exclusion produced through
urban development.

Also for Abdulmaliq Simone (2001, 2004a, 2004b, 2008) waiting "for freedom,
prosperity, covenants, and opportunities" (Simone 2008, p. 97) has become a
fundamental dimension of everyday life in cities of the Global South, where diasporas
play an essential role in defining new geographies of waiting (see also Venn, 2009).
"Clearly" he writes discussing the case of sub-Saharan urbanism, "cities have been
penetrated in perhaps unprecedented ways by diasporas", and "the predominant stories
that get told in cities concern those on the move, or at least trying to move" (2008, pp.
97-98).

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and Homi Bhabha (1994) are also often referred to in the context of discussions on 'liminal
temporalities'.

Simone's (2004a, 2004b, 2008) work also offers important insights on how waiting materializes in postcolonial cities. His theorization of infrastructures as "platforms providing for and reproducing life in the city" made up of complex combinations of "objects, spaces, persons, and practices" (Simone, 2004b, p. 408) is particularly useful in this regard. Simone (2004b) underscores in fact the constitutive provisionality of these socio-material processes that allow life to be lived in contemporary African cities – the quintessentially temporal dimension, that is, of 'being temporary' and not 'built to stay'.

I suggest that Simone's (2004a, 2004b, 2008) analysis of urban infrastructures as 'provisional' provides an effective analytical tool for the analysis of experiences of waiting among refugees in Cairo. In this regard, three points at least are worth highlighting that resonate with the ethnographic material presented in this chapter. First, in Simone's formulation, provisionality has both a temporal and a material connotation. Unlike the concept of 'precariousness' (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005; 2008; Millar, 2014), today increasingly used to describe the working lives of migrants with reference to labour and legal status (Davies, 2005; Mottura and Rinaldini, 2009; Anderson, 2010; Schmitz, 2013) provisionality is an intrinsically socio-material condition. As such, it conceptualises subjective experiences of suspended and disrupted temporality as embedded in the unstable character of urban infrastructures and built environments. For the refugees interviewed for my wider project, the time spent waiting in Cairo is often narrated as materializing in daily encounters with provisional housing and transportation, as well as with shrinking and unwelcoming public spaces[87]. Second, Simone (2004a, 2004b) understands provisional urban lives – particularly in the case of migrants – as characterized by both *disrupted* and *suspended* temporalities. In his analysis, feelings of suspension associated with uncertain socio-economic conditions – and, as in the case explored in this chapter, with waiting for refugee status, or to continue one's journey – are intertwined with an everyday life made up of disrupted rhythms. As he writes:

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[87] See Pascucci (2014), where I analyse the experiences of waiting of a group of young Iraqi refugees in the context of their daily 'hanging out' in coffee-shops and malls in suburban Cairo.

the actions, identities, and social composition through which individuals attempt to eke out daily survival are more provisional, positioning them in a proliferation of seemingly diffuse and discordant times. Without structured responsibilities and certainties, the places they inhabit and the movements they undertake become instances of disjointed histories […] (Simone, 2004a, p. 6).

Third, provisional urban experiences are described by Simone (2004a, 2008) as imbued with political potentialities. The tensions that characterize outwardly dysfunctional daily activities in the context of provisional urbanism, he contends, can become spaces for unexpected social connections and alternative experience of labour and production to emerge.

> The complexities of multiple engagements with exterior worlds, engagements long sought as the valorized modality of internal cohesion and problem solving, are inscribed in the daily spaces that we otherwise would see as excluded or impoverished. At the same time, the complexities and burgeoning creativity of [African] urban life is revealed in these moments of ruptures, redistributing what has come before and opening up what is yet to come. New uncharted directions […] are formed in the interstices of the apparently dysfunctional. (ibid.)

Simone's (2004a) observations about provisional urban life as capable of "opening up of new possibilities" from spaces of exclusion and "apparently dysfunctional" infrastructures are further explored in the last part of this chapter, reflecting on the relations built by Leyla in both her domestic space and in the wider neighborhood where she lived. Introducing her case however, I start from the analysis of her experience of waiting in the context of her encounters with humanitarian agencies.

**VI.3 Refugee waiting and provisional lives: the case of Leyla**

**VI.3.1 Refusing to wait: avoiding humanitarian bureaucracies**

Leyla, a 24-year old, unmarried Somali woman, had arrived in Cairo in 2008. When I met her, in autumn 2011, she was living in a relatively poor area of the Seventh district of Madinet Nasr, sharing a flat with two other young Somali women, with whom she had become good friends. In our first interview, Leyla introduced to me her condition as follows:

> I have lived here in Madinet Nasr since I have arrived to Cairo four years ago. Always in the Seventh District, although before I was in another flat, with my uncle. Now I am a student, I study at a technical health institute. They offer courses to become a nurse or a dentist assistant. If I hadn't enrolled for that course I could not have the residence

permit, so I did. Well, I have my UN card [the refugee blue card], so I can have a visa anyway, but with that one is more difficult. It took me a long time to register, travelling to Sixth of October many times… it's tiring! It's a fight! And the UN card is not so useful, I don't know… better to have it than not, but what does it mean? I cannot go back to my country because it is unsafe, OK, but it is not like the UN card really helps to stay here safely, or to go anywhere else. It's better to have the student visa. But, you know, I enrolled for my degree also because I am here anyway, I mean here in Egypt, what else can I do?[88]

Leyla's remarks about registration with UNHCR highlight the centrality of the messy daily functioning of humanitarian bureaucracies (Dunn, 2012) in the determining the temporalities of refugee life in Cairo. Understanding the modalities of refugees' initial encounters with UNHCR – for registration and status determination – is essential to grasp how humanitarianism is immersed in, and contribute to, experiences of socio-material provisionality. Since the mid-2000s, faced with ever-growing numbers of beneficiaries and financial requirements – mostly caused by the Iraqi and Syrian emergencies, of 2006 and 2012 respectively – UNHCR Cairo has seen a significant increase in the average time required to carry out the basic bureaucratic procedures of its protection mandate. In 2011, the highly contested adoption of biometrics technologies (fingerprinting and photographing) for asylum seekers' registration in all UNHCR field operations had the effect of making the procedures more complicated and even slower[89]. As already explained in Chapter IV, at the time when research for this thesis was conducted UNHCR Cairo was faced with a 'caseload' of around 15,000 RSD files a year. The waiting time for asylum seekers to complete registration procedures – a first appointment to hand in the forms, a second for collection of biometric data and a third to collect the asylum seeker 'yellow' card – ranged between 2 weeks and over 2 months. The waiting time for RSD interviews and outcomes,

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[88] Interview, Cairo, 23 October 2011. In-depth interviews with Leyla have been conducted in Egyptian Arabic. Assistance with translation and transcription has been employed. The conversations I had with Leyla and her friends in the context of more informal research encounters took place both in English and in Egyptian Arabic.

[89] UNHCR has introduced biometric registration procedures to prevent frauds, in particular, to minimize resorting to practices like registering for a second time under a false name by rejected asylum claimants. One of the UNCHR senior officers interviewed in Cairo described as "very tense" the discussions around biometrics that had been going on within the organization before their introduction. Many officers feared that the new registration procedures would have distorted the perceptions of the aid agency, further 'securitized' its work, and led to increased mistrust among applicants (interview, Cairo, 19 April, 2012).

which according to UNHCR's own guidelines should not exceed 6 months, was between 10 months and 1 year.

For Leyla, however, the experience of uncertainty and suspension caused by interactions with humanitarian agencies was not merely about the amount of time procedures required, but also, and most importantly, about what was perceived as their fuzzy and dysfunctional character. Unlike Ethiopians and Eritreans, Somali and Iraqi migrants in Cairo are recognized by UNHCR as *prima facie* refugees, meaning that they need not go through refugee status determination procedures to obtain legal asylum (Kagan, 2011; Goździak and Walter, 2012). Although this significantly reduces their interactions with UNHCR bureaucracies, among the refugees I met these were still perceived as a farraginous experience, one which was also of limited utility. Leyla's comment about registration with UNHCR being a "fight" was motivated by the difficulty in finding one's way among the lack of information that characterized the work of the UN office. But it also referred to the time-consuming and practically difficult tasks registration with UNHCR involved: the need to travel to the remote suburb of Sixth of October – over two hours from their house – to reach the agency's offices, and waiting for hours under the sun once there, surrounded by highly distressed people "shouting and fighting" and by continuous demonstrations. In the numerous encounters we had in their house, one of Leyla's flatmates who also had a UN blue card, reported that the way UNHCR worked was just very hard to understand[90]. Another of the three young women – who, like Leyla, was living in Cairo without her closest family – had decided to avoid registration. The following extract from the interview I had with her in spring 2012 offers good insights on her reasons to do so.

> Q: Are you registered with the UN?
> A: Oh, no, you too also ask that? (laughs) Everybody, let me tell you something, everybody asks me that… Look, no. They confuse me.
> Q: They confuse you? What do you mean? Who confuses you? The people asking this question? Or the UN?
> A: Yeah the UN, of course! They must… you must go there wait for 2 weeks, then come back after two weeks… I don't understand what they say and it is not helpful… I have to go all the way from Madinet Nasr, I have no time every day to stay there from 8 am to 5 pm. From Madinet Nasr to 6th of October… then for one… how is it called?

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[90] Fieldnotes, Cairo, December 2011. Female, age unknown, Somalia, unemployed.

> Q: Card? Stamp?
> A: Yes, the card, the stamp on your passport they make you wait 2 weeks so after 2 weeks you must go back… what is that? You know what happened to me? I went a couple of times, waited there under the sun… with all those people who are protesting… the thing is: I wasn't even sure I had got it right, how the whole thing worked, and even when I understood I decided not to do that. It is not even useful to me, because I don't want to be resettled to Canada or to the US. I prefer to go and live with my family in Uganda…[91]

These accounts resonate with Dunn's (2012) description of the perception of chaos that marked encounters of Georgian IDPs with humanitarian bureaucracies. Humanitarianism, Dunn (2012) writes, was described by her informants as

> a whirl of incomprehensible activity […]. Life inside the humanitarian bureaucratic order was less about oppression and disempowerment than it was about disorientation and bewilderment. As an elderly woman in Tserovani said, 'To put it simply, we're just very confused' (Dunn, 2012, p. 19).

As I have suggested in Chapter III, humanitarianism as an 'adhocracy' relies not only on "epistemologies of planning and order" but also "on other forms of knowing, including guesswork and improvisation." (Dunn, 2012, p. 10). These 'fuzzy epistemologies' are all the more evident in the case of migrants who apply for resettlement schemes, the programs of humanitarian mobility targeting individuals and households classified as bearers of particular vulnerabilities (Kagan, 2011). At the time when research for this chapter was conducted, resettlement applications entailed a complex process of referral and examination which involved UNHCR, a limited number of NGOs offering legal assistance, and foreign embassies (Australia, Canada and the United States). According to the officers I spoke to, selection procedures lasted on average over two years. Among refugees, perceptions that decisions about individual resettlement cases were made through "fairly randomized" processes, and often highly influenced by the applicants' ability to secure support from NGOs, were sharp (see Chapter III).

Faced with a similar disorientation, many migrants in Cairo resort to strategies that allow them to circumvent the waiting produced by humanitarian bureaucracies. As in

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[91] Interview Cairo, 23 May 2012. Female, 24-year old, Somalia, student. Interview collected in Somali, with Arabic translation by her flatmate. Transcription and translation from Arabic to English were mine.

the case of Ali discussed in the introduction, individuals and families with access to other forms of legal regularization – in particular student visas, which are also issued to the parents of underage students – tend to avoid registration altogether. In other cases, like Leyla, they use their UN cards as a form of 'additional' protection – in particular for the immunity from deportation they are supposed to guarantee[92] – relying on their student resident permits for access to most basic services while in Egypt, and keeping contacts with humanitarian agencies to a minimum.

## VI.3.2 Suspended time

Although, like most of her friends, Leyla had deliberately decided to avoid unnecessary encounters with both UNHCR and NGOs – she was only attending the free English course offered by a small charity in central Cairo – several other elements were contributing to her feeling that 'she could only wait', as she put it. In our first interview, she described her reason for staying in Cairo as "waiting for my family to arrange my marriage"[93]. Once her two brothers living in the US – who were also supporting her financially – would have found a groom and collected a sufficient amount of money to pay for her dowry, she would have got married in Egypt and then moved to the US through family reunification. Seeking resettlement to the West through engagement and marriage plans is a strategy commonly pursued among Somali refugees in Cairo (Al Sharmani, 2007). Partners with a job and legal status in industrialized countries are perceived as more desirable, and through the mediation of families or, less effectively, of the internet, actively sought. The implications of these practices for migrants' gendered identities, livelihoods, and transnational social ties are widely explored (see Grabska, 2010). My work with Leyla highlights an aspect of these practices that is less accounted for, namely the fact that, in most cases, such plans fail to materialize, or, at best, require years to be put into practice.

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[92] Deportation of migrants holding refugee status - as well as arbitrary detention, intimidation and violent threats by security forces have been happening frequently in Egypt since 2003-2004. Reports by human right organizations have highlighted how, since 2013, recently arrived Syrian refugees have also been targeted, see http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/11/10/egypt-syria-refugees-detained-coerced-return (accessed 10 May 2014).

[93] Interview with Leyla, Cairo, 8 December 2011.

When we met, Leyla's plans were also rather loose. In our first interview, the prevailing feelings about her life in Cairo were thus described as follows:

> There are many things I don't like here [in Egypt/Cairo], of course, but at the moment as I live here but I am not from here I can't do anything. I can only wait… Of course I want to move to another country… who doesn't? All Egyptians want, even them…They want to have a better job, and make more money. It is so hard to live here. I can't live here. If I just had a passport, I would just go away…But my passport, the Somali passport, is not important, it does not count.[94]

Similar experiences of "heightened suspense" (Jeffrey, 2008) are commonly described in the literature on refugees, in particular when migrants are waiting for return (Stepputat, 1992; Uehling, 2002). These troubled transitions – and the associated feelings of 'longing' for stability (Jeffrey, 2008) – can be read as the by-product of the dissonances and disruptions which are constitutive of the temporalities of contemporary migration regimes (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013).

Leyla's remarks about wanting "to have a better job, and more money" however, also points to how waiting for chances for further migration intersects with the 'delayed temporalities' associated with lack of socio-economic stability. For young refugees like Leyla and Ali, whose story I briefly recalled in the introduction, these experiences of suspension often translate in a diffuse perception of 'losing time'. As Jeffrey (2008) writes:

> excluded from objects of desire, such as an education, marriage, and financial independence; [youths] are incapable of moving into socially ascribed age-based categories, especially adulthood […] and they are unable to conform to dominant visions of how people should comport themselves with respect to time – they `miss years' or have `gaps' on their resumes, for example. (Jeffrey, 2008, p. 956).

Like Ali, Leyla considered her status as an unmarried woman as the direct consequence of her migration history. Like most Somalis who arrived in Cairo after 1999, Leyla was not what policy literature refers to as a "secondary mover" (Moret et al., 2006): she had in fact reached Egypt directly from her homeland, without living previously in another country. Her migration history had thus been shorter, and less fragmented, than those of the many Ethiopians and Iraqi migrants I met throughout

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[94] Interview with Leyla, Cairo, 23 October 2011

my fieldwork, who had often spent months or years in Sudan or Syria before finding a relative stability in Cairo. Nevertheless, in Leyla's narratives Egypt was always implicitly characterized as the initial part of a longer journey, and the time spent in Cairo regarded as subtracted to 'real' life plans.

Leyla's expectations about getting married and leaving Egypt, however, were also superseded by the 'dysfunctional busyness' of her everyday life in Cairo. Her daily activities, as I had the chance to observe for the nearly whole year we have been regularly in contact, required an intense – if at times reluctant – engagement with the 'present' and 'local'. Establishing relations with neighbours, planning travels that involved hours of commuting, going to her friends' house – an over twenty-minute walk from her place – to have access to an internet connection, and keeping contacts with Somali associations in order to get updates about her country's situation were all 'labour-intense', time-consuming tasks whose outcomes were most of the times anything but granted. It is to the "everyday emergencies" (Penglase, 2009; Millar, 2014) which punctuated Leyla's everyday life in Cairo which I turn to in the next subsection.

### VI.3.3 "Everyday emergencies"

While our first interview took place in the premises of the NGO where she was attending her language course, for our second meeting Leyla invited me to visit her house in Madinet Nasr. We thus agreed to meet at the busy microbus stop at the beginning of Abbas el Akkad Road (figure 7), from where we would have taken a second, smaller microbus till the Seventh District (Hay el Saba'), and then walked to her flat.

A new quarter developed in the 1970s by the Egyptian military and their private sector partners[95], Madinet Nasr – often referred to in Cairo by its English name, Nasr City – is described by sociologist Mona Abaza (2006) as "a geometrical arrangement of cement matchboxes lining the longest streets in Cairo" having "no heart, no centre" (Abaza, 2006, p. 204). "Its ambiguous shape", Abaza continues

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[95] For a detailed analysis of the history and planning of Madinet Nasr, see also Janet Abu Lughod (1971).

symbolizes the taste of the returning middle-class professionals who spent the last two decades, if not more, as migrant workers in the Gulf oil-producing countries. These former migrant workers purchased property in Nasr City as they prospered, and many view Nasr City as a place that smells of new money'(ibid.)

As in Sixth of October, where large groups of Iraqis, Syrians, Sudanese are settled, return migration of Egyptian workers from the Gulf, but also the arrival of refugees and foreign students, have radically altered the social, cultural, and religious landscape of Madinet Nasr. Since the 1990s, the neighbourhood has thus been transformed from the military-planned "arrangement of cement matchboxes" and suburban shopping centres described by Abaza (2006) into one of the largest and most socially mixed areas of Cairo.

At the time when research for this chapter was conducted, the "smell of new money" remitted by workers in the Gulf was not what characterized the social fabric of Madinet Nasr any longer. Near Leyla's house, in the outskirts of the Seventh District, the encroachment of informal housing hosting Egyptian internal migrants and seasonal construction workers was highly visible. The construction of the new campus of Al Azhar University and the consequent influx of Asian students in Islamic studies (see also, Abaza, 1994) had also had a profound impact on the local social landscape. These changes resulted is a peculiar mix of Wahhabi lifestyle – visible in clothing and religious practices – and mundane diversity in the form of Somali and Indonesian restaurants, cafés, and shops.

As we walked down the busy road connecting central Cairo to the newly built neighbourhoods near the international airport to reach the stop where we would have taken the second microbus, I was struck by the confidence and familiarity with which Leyla was able to navigate this diverse environment. In our first conversation, Leyla had repeated several times how, after four years in Cairo, she was still feeling like a stranger ("I live here, but I am not from here… I can't do anything"). Yet she looked very comfortable in moving throughout a neighbourhood she otherwise affirmed not to like, and where, she explained, she had sometimes felt unsafe. By the time we reached our final stop, close to her house, Leyla had also shown remarkable easiness in communicating in several languages – Somali, Arabic, and a bit of English – with

our fellow travellers, mostly foreign Al Azhar students who had recently arrived to area, kindly giving directions and information about  microbuses' routes.

In his research on Indian cities, Colin McFarlane (2011a) has highlighted the centrality of processes of 'learning' in urban everyday life. Embodied learning, he argues, in the form of mundane everyday practices such as walking, is essential for processes of dwelling, inhabitation, and even belonging to take place. Urban learning leads subjects to experience a progressive appropriation of city space, allowing for the its incorporation and adaptation to different subjectivities (McFarlane, 2011a). In the course of 4 years, as she herself admitted, Leyla had also 'learned' how to move around the neighbourhood, and was now relatively 'skilled' in carrying out daily tasks like commuting and shopping.

The concept of urban learning, however, does not capture entirely Leyla's relation with the urban environment. In other interviews, Leyla described her daily life as marked by a sense of uncertainty, and by the fatigue of continuous 'interruptions' due to the need to attend for things that did not work well, both in her house and outside. In the following extract, she describes her experience of commuting between her house and Giza, were her technical school was located.

> … I feel like I spend my life on the *microbus*. I wake up at 6 cause I start at 9 am… well if I am lucky I get there at 9 am: the streets are jammed… well, actually in the morning it is a bit better, but in the evening when I come back… it can take more than 3 hours. 3 hours on the microbus. And it is very bad, the microbus, it is not safe, accidents happen all the time. And people have no respect for women and for elderly people. People fight all the time! Women shout, so much, because men are standing too close to them, or try to touch them! So you see? We fight every day. You know when you go out and never know what time you'll be back, and you are so tired![96]

Rather than by the confidence resulting from gradual, incremental learning, Leyla's life was marked by small, repeated experience of lack of control and efficacy. In fact, the processes of learning that allowed her to move around Cairo with apparent easiness were also 'provisional', requiring as they did continuous adjustments to relatively unpredictable disruptions.

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[96] Interview with Leyla, Cairo, 20 February 2012.

Although Leyla was overall happy with the flat she shared in Madinet Nasr, similar experiences of interrupted rhythms characterized also her domestic space, as shown in the following quote:

> [...] then you know, there are all sorts of problems... electricity cuts, for hours, sometimes for days, it depends... It is not the usual cuts that happen in Cairo, I think it is this building... also with the water... you know. And I had to call the Egyptian neighbours to connect some cables, I don't know exactly what they did, but it does not always work... Also, for the internet I go to the neighbours, the Somalis, as we cannot have it here. I pay and I use their computer... it is not practical but it's the only way as near the house there is nothing else.[97]

Leyla's relations with both her house and Cairo's urban environment suggest the need to integrate the concept of incremental urban learning accounting for what Penglase (2009) and Millar (2014) call "everyday emergencies." Defined by Millar (2014) as the "multiple forms of insecurity [that] destabilize daily life" (Millar, 2004, p. 34) in contexts of deprivation and urban informality, for many refugees in Cairo these insecurities constitute the way in which the provisional temporalities of the refugee condition materialize, fragmenting everyday rhythms. These emergencies, as Millar notes, encompass not only "health vulnerabilities, makeshift housing, environmental hazards" but also "debt, incarceration, and crime and violence" (ibid.) In the following quote, Leyla recalls the experience of police harassment of one of her friends, a young man from Somalia I had the chance to meet at the NGO where they were both attending the language course.

> Sharif yes... he had many problems during the revolution. Police went to their house twice... even if nothing happened he was very scared he would be arrested too, as some Sudanese were arrested and robbed by the police... And even now after the revolution I think he is still scared as we hear all the time about those things... Even if he told you he was not scared... he always says he goes out anyway, everywhere, because he wants to see the world, but I know he is scared.[98]

Leyla's remarks on her friend's problems continuing after the revolution point to the ordinariness of everyday emergencies. In contexts of urban informality, as Millar (2014) writes, "disruptions and insecurity not only suspend but constitute normality" (Millar, 2014, p. 34). It is very significant that Leyla described her friend as "not

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[97] Interview with Leyla, Cairo, 20 February 2012.
[98] Interview, Cairo, 23 October 2011.

scared", and living his life normally in spite of the fear the experience of police harassment had caused to him. Although the emergencies she was facing in her daily life were different, Leyla's attitude towards her precarious housing arrangements was similar to that of Sharif.

> Q: Would you like to change houses? Move somewhere else?
> A: No… no, I like it here. I am happy with my friends. It's normal, I got used to it… And where would I go? Here [in the Seventh District of Madinet Nasr] there are many Somalis, my friend's [housemate] family lives here and they helped us to find this flat… What can I do? For this price, you know, I could only live in a place like Imbaba [laughs] but not like, on the main street… in a very popular and poor [*shaaby*] place. Here it's the same maybe, but it's better… and I am not alone.[99]

Suspended time and everyday emergency are the two intertwined temporal dimensions that characterize Leyla's experience as a refugee and a resident of a Cairo popular neighbourhood. Her encounter with UNHCR can also be seen as one of these emergencies: a confusing, time-consuming endeavor whose usefulness she regarded with skepticism. As I will discuss in the next section, while based on a degree of 'strategic' evaluation of practical and financial elements – getting a student visa to renew her residence permit, cutting her rent costs – the practices Leyla had resorted to deal with these emergencies were also defined by openness towards the possible outcomes of the relations she was immersed in (Simone, 2004b). In the final part of this chapter I reflect on the politics of the present emerging from these practices.

### VI.3.4 Provisional infrastructures as "politics of the present".

When she had arrived in Cairo in 2008, Leyla too had spent a few months living in her uncle's house, also in Madinet Nasr, to then move into the flat where she was now living when the uncle migrated to Canada. Leyla did not know her housemates – all Somali women in their early twenties – before moving in with them, she had in fact been put in contact with them through her uncle's family.

Sharing a flat with family and friends is the most common housing arrangement among African refugees in Cairo (Goździak and Walter, 2012). For the many Somali refugees living in the Seventh District of Madinet Nasr, shared housing permits to cut

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[99] Interview with Leyla, Cairo, 20 February 2012.

rent costs, which are higher for foreigners than for locals, and to benefit from the close proximity and help of other migrants (ibid.). In the case of unmarried women who live in Cairo without their parents or siblings, the most common solution consists of living with a member of their extended family. In a typical case, (male) family members abroad negotiate this housing arrangement with relatives in Cairo (Al Sharmani, 2007). It is frequently expected that, either in addition to or in substitution of a monthly rent, young women offer domestic services to their hosts. For Somali as well as for Sudanese women in Cairo, domestic work in general is the most accessible form of employment (Goździak and Walter, 2012; Jacobsen et al., 2014).

The flat she was sharing was significantly smaller than the previous one – a small kitchen and living room, and another shared room with three beds – and less well-equipped, as the problems the women had with electricity cuts prove. In the 4 years she had spent living in Madinet Nasr, Leyla had developed links which worked to reduce the impact of the many everyday emergencies faced in her flat. First of all, sharing domestic work and organizing weekly outings, she and her flatmates had managed to restore a sense of regularity, control and efficacy into their daily life.

> … Here I am not alone but I do not have to do a lot of work for other people [as opposed to living with older family members]… we help each other and we do all the same amount of work… now we buy food together, it's cheaper… when I come back home in the evening I know someone has made food… when I come I eat. If I come back home first, I do it… we also go together to Abbas Al Akkad on Friday afternoon, not really every week, but most weeks. It is better now, to have something to do together every week… now I know on Friday we do the shopping and go visit people together and it is good…[100]

Life in these 'provisional' socio-material conditions also allowed for forms of sociality Leyla had never experienced before, also outside of her domestic space. Significantly, the first connections she had developed among the Somali community in Madinet Nasr had been established getting a young Somali man to mediate for them access to the neighbours' electric system.

> I didn't know them [her housemates] well… when I came here, we were not friends, I didn't know them and the other Somalis … So at the beginning I was alone… but then when we needed help with electricity from the neighbour to get better electricity… my

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[100] Interview with Leyla, Cairo, 8 December 2011.

friend's cousin from a Somali association in Madinet Nasr came to talk to them and they helped us. Then I got to know them, the association of Somali students, and I even went on a day out to Al Azhar park with them…[101]

In both anthropological and development literature on refugees in Cairo, migrants' networks of mutual support are described almost exclusively as binding people who share the same national background (Al Sharmani, 2007; Goździak and Walter, 2012). The proximity involved in these provisional housing solutions can however also lead to other kinds of encounters. It was precisely recurring to their help to fix things that were not working in her house that Leyla had developed significant relations with her Egyptian neighbours. After months of continuous disruptions, when I first visited them, Leyla and her friends were getting electricity from another house through an extension cord. The deal had been offered by the family living on the same floor – Egyptians who had moved to Cairo from the Nile Delta region of Qaliubiyya – who had also set up the cord, in exchange for a small amount of money. The link established through the shared electric system had then been reinforced by the help the neighbours had offered during the uprising in 2011.

I didn't like the Egyptian neighbours, I didn't trust them… I don't know… but then because we have that problem with electricity… what can you do? And then I saw they were respectable (*muhtaram*) people… Now we talk, also when there were problems during the revolution, they have been kind to us.[102]

The intense sociality which characterized the streets around Leyla's house, where residents tended to spend a significant amount of their productive or unproductive time outside of the home, had also facilitated daily encounters with other Egyptian residents. These "dynamics of publicness", which Asef Bayat (2012; see also Hackenbroch, 2013) regards as the way in which urban poor inhabit the enclosed and privatize neoliberal city, had led Leyla to develop feelings of solidarity towards Egyptians, to the point that she was able to identify with them and their predicaments.

We do not do anything wrong, we pay our rent the rent… and it is so difficult to live in Egypt, you fight everyday… also Egyptians, it's the same.[103]

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[101] Ibid.
[102] Fieldnotes, conversation with Leyla, Cairo, 23 May 2012.
[103] Ibid.

Writers adopting an autonomist perspective such Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013, see also Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tianos, 2008; and Tyler, 2013) have seen in the "infrastructures of connectivity, mutual support, and care among people on the move" new and emerging "mobile ontologies" of the commons (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2008, p. 179). Their theorization is particularly useful in that – like Simone's (2004b) provisional infrastructures – it highlights the emergence of a socio-material politics which, as Leyla comments on her Egyptian neighbours exemplifies, pre-exists and exceeds the boundaries of established political belongings. Papadopoulos and Tsianos's (2013) remarks on how migrants' infrastructures of connectivity "circulates beyond the enclosures of public, private and civil society institutions" (ibid., p. 191) are also particularly relevant to the case of refugees in Cairo. What we can see in the relations established in their neighbourhood by Leyla and her friends is in fact a network of mutual support emerged autonomously among people who have chosen to keep their contacts with NGOs and humanitarian agencies to a minimum. As such, Leyla's decision in this regard resonates with 'the politics of disaffection' from the aid and development industry analysed in Chapter V.

Leyla's perceptions of her life in Madinet Nasr, however, also suggest that the infrastructural networks Papadopolous and Tsianos (2013) identify as 'mobile commons' should not be romanticised. In Papadopoulos and Tsianos's (2013) analysis, migrants' autonomous networks are conceptualised as a way to counter migration control, and safeguarding migrants' ability to move – they configure, in their own terminology, an alternative mobile political ontology. However, for refugees in Cairo local urban infrastructures – unlike transnational ones – do not work only to restore or facilitate mobility. Rather, they constitute a socio-material politics of the 'here and now' through which the present is inhabited in the contexts of prolonged, fragmented journeys and protracted immobility. Rather than the oppositional political ontology of a 'mobile commons', they echo what Doreen Massey (2005) calls the 'simultaneity of stories so far' through which spaces are constituted relationally (Massey, 2005, p. 9). As 'stories so far' in fact, they do not erase the longing for future stability and 'more structured' social relations and lifestyles.

> I like to live with other girls, and not with family, to be honest… It's nice that I can do what I want…But you know yeah, in the future I want to live close to my brothers of course… I hope. But now… this is good for now, but I don't want to live here for long. No one wants.[104]

Unlike in the case of the migrants interviewed by Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013), there are no mobile subjectivities, or performances of migrant and subaltern cosmopolitanism (Jeffrey and McFarlane, 2008), at work here. As Simone (2004b) acknowledges, most migrants settled in African cities "dream of a quick score that would enable them to return home with significantly enhanced prestige and purchasing power." (ibid., p. 423). The norm, he writes, are instead years spending struggling with poor economic conditions and harassment from police and landlords – what this chapter has described as "everyday emergencies." Simone's (2004b) assessment of the political outcomes of migrants' infrastructures is therefore more minimalist, and less optimistic. For him the infrastructures developed by African urban residents amount in fact to a "re-deeming of bare life" (ibid., p. 428).

Nevertheless, the politics of provisional infrastructures should not be regarded as a politics of last resort, where agency can only take the constrained forms of a survival or coping strategies, either. As of our last contact in October 2013, Leyla was still living in her flat in the Madinet Nasr's Seventh District. There had not been any significant advance in her plans for leaving Egypt – she was still waiting. The Muslim-Brotherhood-led protests that had taken place in Madinet Nasr in summer 2013[105], and the subsequent violent repression, had led to a multiplication of the disruptions marking her daily life. At the same time, however, Leyla also described to me how these difficulties had led her to have more frequent and significant contacts with the Somali community in Madinet Nasr. Far from finding herself isolated and 'stuck' at home, she had increased the number of visit to friends to watch TV, access the internet, exchange news. Paradoxically, rather than being disrupted, her sociality had been made more intense by the need of experiencing safety in a condition of closed proximity to political violence. Cairo refugees' provisional infrastructures are a way

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[104] Interview with Leyla, 23 October 2011

[105] A good collection of articles on the Muslim Brotherhood protest camp in the Rabea Al Adaweya area in Madinet Nasr, Cairo, can be found in the ezine of the Arab Studies Institute (ASI) *Jadaliyya*. http://egypt.jadaliyya.com/ (accessed 10 May 2014).

of inhabiting the present that "allows innumerable possibilities of combination and interchange" and "preclude any definitive judgment of efficacy or impossibility" (Simone, 2004b, p. 428).



*Figure 7. Commuters at the microbus stop at the junction between Awwal Abbas el Akkad and Tariq el Nasr, Madinet Nasr, Cairo, where Leyla transited every day on her way to the technical institute where she studied. The junction is located at a few hundred metres from Rabea Al Adaweya Mosque where, in summer 2013, common citizens and Muslim Brotherhood's supporters held their encampment to protest the ousting of former president Muhammad Morsi. In our contacts through social networks in August 2013, Leyla's friend Sharif, who also lived in Madinet Nasr, complained about the heightened presence of security forces in the area due to the sit-in, expressing his enduring fear of police harassment.*

## VI.4 Conclusions

Adopting an approach which conjugates attention to temporalities with spatial and material analysis, this chapter has shown how, for migrants and refugees in Cairo, waiting is produced through two intertwining dimensions: the temporalities of humanitarian bureaucracy, and the rhythms of 'the urban everyday' (see Ismail, 2013) in cities of the Global South. The latter, I have shown, are marked by 'everyday

emergencies' that confer their provisional character to refugees' urban lives. Through the in-depth analysis of a single ethnographic case, the chapter has aimed to highlight both the political potentialities and the contradictions of the provisional socio-material infrastructures that sustain the lives of refugees in Cairo. As Leyla's case illustrates, longing for future migration can in fact coexist in subjective accounts with a refusal to comply with the expectations of patience and docility implicit in the organization of humanitarian bureaucracies. Similarly, empowering experiences of solidarity and communal living are often accompanied by feelings of frustration and anxiety about the future, feelings which sometimes appears to 'erode' the present (Jeffrey, 2008).

I want to conclude this chapter offering two reflections around two of the main questions this thesis aims to address: the issue of political agency as resistance, and the relation between everyday politics and emerging forms of contestation.

It is easy to see how the concept of (everyday) resistance fails to capture experiences of mutual help, cohabitation, and sharing of material support and resources *in* and *for* the present while waiting in Cairo explored in this chapter. Suggesting an "oppositional stance" that results from a more or less conscious position-taking, resistance does not render the "affective register" of the "politics of the present" in deprived urban contexts (Millar, 2014, p.49, see also Nouvet, 2014). Leyla's attitude in 'coming to terms' with her provisional life in a shared flat in Cairo, establishing – without actively seeking them – relations that facilitated her daily life, did not involve any oppositional stance. Like 'hanging out' at Iraqi coffee shops for Ali, in the vignette introducing this chapter, it was instead an act in which agency emerged through detachment (Millar, 2014). Similarly, her 'minimizing' relationships with humanitarian agencies speaks to forms of agency which involve inactivity and withdrawal. Analysing socio-material infrastructures that emerge autonomously from the support provided by humanitarian agencies, and in spite of the feelings of 'heightened suspense' associated with the refugee condition, one of my points in this chapter has been to highlight a form of agency which is dissonant with prevalent understandings of resistance.

Having said that, Leyla's description of the 'extreme everyday emergencies' experienced by her friend Sharif through police harassment suggests that resistance is not completely absent in refugees' lives in Cairo. This is, however, a form of resistance that challenges prevalent understandings of 'weapons of the weak' as based on quiet, silent, and invisible practices. Adapting to these kinds of disruptions can in fact involve a considerable degree of conflict, exposure to violence, and, as in the case of Sudanese youth gangs analysed by Lewis (2007), ability to 'fight back'. As observed in Chapter IV, in urban Egypt, even the practices Asef Bayat (2011) calls the "quiet encroachment of the ordinary" (Bayat 2011), through which the poor and the marginalised inhabit the city working and 'dwelling' in public spaces, are often not so quiet – they cannot be. Suffice it to think, for instance, of the disruptions police harassment causes to Sudanese refugees who are self-employed as street vendors. These phenomena highlight a landscape where invisible tactics and imperceptible politics can coexist with and, in some cases, are made possible by, forms of resistance through which individuals and groups fight to maintain access to public space, material assets and mobility. An analysis of refugee political agency attuned to the role of materiality, space, and temporality in contemporary urban contexts helps to illuminate both the intricacies and the potentialities of these phenomena.

# Chapter VII: The emergence of a political community: infrastructures, everyday life and protest in the Mustapha Mahmoud camp (September-December 2005)

## VII.1 Introduction

Over the last couple of years the protests associated with the so-called Arab Spring have attracted growing academic attention (see, among many others, Abdul-Maged, 2012; Dabashi, 2012; Ismail, 2012; 2013; Achcar, 2013; Fregonese, 2013). The case of Egypt in particular, with its iconic occupation of Tahrir Square, has been regarded as paradigmatic of a new season of global uprisings in which protest camps have emerged as the primary form of political mobilization. In a country ridden by inequalities, and in a city so deeply divided by privatization and socio-spatial segregation (Ayeb and Bush, 2013; Amar and Singerman, 2010; Mitchell, 2002) the Tahrir protesters were reclaiming a symbolic pubic space where to reconstruct a shared sense of community and build the foundations for a new mode of political participation (see, among many others, Badiou 2011; Butler 2011). The echo of the inter-religious and gender-equal practices that characterized the Tahrir encampment reached well beyond Egypt's borders, and were emulated by anti-austerity movements in Europe and North-America (Feigenbaum et al., 2013).

Protest camps, however, are not a new nor a novel phenomenon (Feigenbaum et al., 2013a; Ramadan, 2013b). Occupations have characterized student movements across Europe and the USA since the 1960s (Touraine, 1981; Breines, 1982), and sit-ins were one of the most widely employed tactics in the American civil rights movement (Proudfoot, 1962), as well as pre-Arab spring protest movements in the Middle East, such as the 2005 'Cedar Revolution' in Lebanon (Ramadan 2013b). At a global level, the history of protest camps has also often intersected with migrants' struggles against detention and deportation, and for access to citizenship, asylum and basic social rights. Recent examples include the sit-ins conducted by undocumented migrant workers in Murcia and other regions of Southern Spain in 2001 (Bañón Hernández and Romero, 2013), the protests of African refugees in Tel Aviv's Levinsky Park (Yacobi, 2010;

Stephen and Schmautz, 2011), and the protest camp held by rejected asylum seekers in central Vienna in 2012-2013[106].

In the introduction to this thesis I have highlighted how, in Egypt, the encampments and occupations which characterised the 2011 uprising did not emerge from a previous political vacuum. To the contrary, public protests, collective mobilizations and street politics had characterized the country's political and social landscape for decades (Kandil, 2011). However, little is known on how sit-ins and protest camps had been used by different subjects – slum dwellers, factory workers, and ethno-religious minorities among others – in the long-term political and social struggles which led to the events of 2011 (Elyachar and Winegar, 2011). Similarly, in spite of Cairo being home to one of the biggest migrant and refugee populations in the world (Goździak and Walter, 2012), the role of migrants, refugees and non-citizens in Egyptian popular politics before, during and after the uprising has been scarcely explored.

In November 2011, Tahrir Square was still occupied by protesters demanding the end of the military rule which followed the toppling of Mubarak's government. In its immediate surroundings however, what is now known in Egypt as "the battle of Muhammad Mahmoud" was raging (see Ryzova, 2011). The situation reflected a dynamic that characterized the Egyptian uprising since the first days of January 2011: a 'peacefully occupied' square, 'defended' from the assault of security forces through fierce street battles in the neighbouring streets. In those days, I had just started to work assiduously with two Sudanese community organizations in the neighbourhoods of Ain Shams and Hadayek el Maadi, and to visit other Sudanese groups in Imbaba and Dar El Salam. My aim was primarily to research the relations between refugee organizations and UNHCR, and it is in explaining the tensions and difficulties that were hampering communication with the office that, in our conversations, many Sudanese refugees started to recall and comment on the events of the Mustapha Mahmoud protest camp.

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[106] http://refugeecampvienna.noblogs.org/ (accessed 15 May 2014)

In September 2005, six years before the occupation of Tahrir Square in January 2011, Sudanese refugees in Cairo started a sit-in in front of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office. The protests, which lasted for over three months, came to be known as 'the Mustapha Mahmoud camp', from the name of the park, and of the adjacent mosque, in which they took place, in the neighbourhood of Mohandeseen, in Giza. Initially triggered by UNHCR's decision to suspend refugee status determination procedures for Sudanese applicants following the 2005 Sudan Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the protest revolved around the more comprehensive lack of effective 'durable solutions' to the refugee condition in Egypt. Throughout the three months of protests, around three thousand Sudanese migrants of different ethnic, religious, and social backgrounds moved to the Mustapha Mahmoud park, often bringing all their belongings with them. For over three months, the camp existed as a self-sustaining city, with makeshift hospitals, schools, communal kitchens and a children's playground. In the narratives collected during the protests, refugees who had been exposed to police violence before joining the camp describe it as a space where they could finally experience a sense of safety and belonging, and often refer to the camp as to their 'community'. On December 29, 2005, however, after all negotiations between the protesters' representatives and UNHCR had failed, the Mustapha Mahmoud camp was forcefully evicted by Egyptian security forces, causing around 30 deaths[107].

In this chapter I analyse the genesis, dynamics, and consequences of the Mustapha Mahmoud camp as an embodied and spatialised collective act of political agency. Combining insights from literature on migrant protests (Edkins and Pin-Fat, 2005; Moulin and Nyers, 2007), and recent studies of protest camps (Feigenbaum, et al., 2013b), I propose that the camp can be better understood as a set of socio-material infrastructures which allowed for the emergence of a – albeit temporary and vulnerable to repression through violence – political community. From such a

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[107] According to government sources, the number of deaths – caused accidentally by the reaction of security forces to violent attacks from the protesters – would have amounted to 27. However, for most Sudanese migrants met conducting research for this thesis the actual number of victims – like the number of women and children who were violently attacked - would have been much higher: almost one hundred. The political significance of these uncertain figures is yet another manifestation of the' ambiguous (in)visibility' through which the Egyptian security state operates, analysed in Chapter III of this thesis.

perspective, the chapter argues that the materialities, practices and affective states that formed the infrastructure of the protest camp, working to expose and contest the biopolitics of humanitarianism, allowed the protesting refugees to experience relations of care, solidarity and belonging forged autonomously from the aid industry.

After examining, in the previous two chapters, forms of political agency emerging from migrants' everyday encounters with humanitarian governance, here I therefore turn my attention again to a case in which the legal categories and policies of international humanitarianism – as well as its material and spatial presence – were confronted by migrants through an act of overt contestation. The target of the Mustapha Mahmoud protest camp was in fact the UNHCR, and the dynamics which led to the emergence of the initial sit-in have much in common with the protests analysed in Chapter IV. However, in the relatively short time in which it existed, the Mustapha Mahmoud camp became a much bigger, and much more complex and articulated, collective political act. What distinguishes it from the refugee protests that preceded and followed it, I suggest, are not only its size, duration, number of people involved, or the fact that the protesters came out with a coherent list of requests, and engaged in direct negotiations with UNHCR. It is the complexity of the socio-material infrastructure – at the same time sophisticated and precarious – which allowed protesters to live together in the camp, and this to function as a self-contained and autonomous community (but with strong connections to the outside world), to contain the most significant political potentialities. As a space where alternative infrastructures for communal living were forged in the everyday, and exposed publicly, the camp became a way to experience the "politically possible" (Chatterton, 2006; Feigenbaum et al., 2013b).

The first conversations I had on Mustapha Mahmoud with Sudanese community workers, in November 2011, made me realise that there existed a 'social memory' (Assmann, 2006) of the events of 2005: a shared heritage of stories, feelings, and even commemorations that were regularly held, which pointed to the political significance of the camp, within and beyond the Sudanese diaspora in Cairo. Methodologically, this chapter draws on that material, using in particular ethnographic interviews with Sudanese migrants who had visited the camp, or had been in contact with refugees

who had taken part in the protests, as well as with two Egyptian activists involved in the organization of the yearly commemoration of the camp in an independent cultural centre in central Cairo. In addition to that, I also analyse the testimonies collected during the protests by local researchers, available in the archives of the Forced Migration and Refugee Studies (FMRS) Centre of the American University in Cairo, which I could access thanks to the visiting fellowship I was awarded in 2011-2012. After the protests, in 2006, FMRS released a report based on those testimonies, which is now considered to be most accurate and complete account of the events (see Moulin and Nyers, 2007). In the context of this chapter, the report is therefore used as a core reference against which the 'factual accuracy' of the other material I had access to is tested, in an attempt to provide as complete a description as possible. The archive material employed also includes press reports, and documents produced by UNHCR and non-governmental organizations, all released between 2005 and 2006, and other direct testimonies collected by FMRS researchers during the protests but not included in the 2006 reports.

The chapter is organized as follows. In section VII.2 I outline the theoretical underpinnings of the analysis, considering in particular recent literature on protest camps and their infrastructures. In section VII.3 I then trace the origins and outline the context of the 2005 protests, highlighting especially two elements: the high levels of political engagement among the Sudanese diaspora in Egypt and its involvement in refugee advocacy, and the shrinking of humanitarian assistance by UNHCR and the emergence of refugee governance through self-reliance. In sections VII.4 I then move on to analyse in details the three different phases of the protests. First, I examine the initial sit-in, its location in relation to the UNHCR building, the role of relations with the surrounding urban environment in its emergence and consolidation, and the motivations and dynamics that led many refugees to join the camp. Second, I analyse everyday life in the camp, with particular attention to the organization of shared services like schools and medical assistance, and briefly discuss its political significance in relation to the biopolitics of refugee aid. Third, I explore the role of protesters' affective experiences of safety and belonging in the emergence of a political community through the camp. Finally, in the last part of the chapter I examine accounts of the forced evacuation of the Mustapha Mahmoud protests, thus reflecting

on what its violent dynamics can tell us about the inherent 'precariousness' of the camp as a spatialized and embodied act of political agency.

## VII.2 Refugee protest camps: infrastructures and the emergence of political communities

Interdisciplinary research on protests has been for a long time characterized by a bias towards the abstract and discursive dimension of political mobilization (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Arenas, 2014). As argued by Chatterton and Pickerill (2010), in both social movement studies and geographical literature on political mobilization lack of empirical engagement has often meant overlooking the complexity of the practices through which activism and resistance are forged in the everyday. More recently however, assemblage epistemologies (Davies, 2011; Arenas, 2014) and new engagements with the affective and embodied constitution of spaces of protests (Routledge, 2003; Chatterton, 2006; Juris, 2008; Feigeinbaum et al., 2013a, 2013b; Ramadan, 2013b) have significantly shifted the focus of the debate. It is in this context that, simultaneously with the emergence of new globalised forms of protests such as the Occupy movements (Pickerill and Krisky, 2012), protest camps have started to be analysed and theorized (Feigenbaum et al., 2013b; Ramadan, 2013b).

As shown in Chapter II, research on migrant protests also constitutes an important addition to recent efforts to conceptualize the material and spatial elements of new collective forms of political agency. Among other things, this body of work has highlighted the role of the body as a site where the biopolitics of exception are both assumed and contested (Edkins and Pin-Fat, 2005; McGregor, 2011; Tyler, 2013), mapped the topological spatialities of refugee struggles (Mountz, 2012), and pointed to the centrality of affective atmospheres in forging and sustaining migrant collective resistance (McGregor, 2012, Tyler, 2013).

Significantly, one of the most important recent attempts to conceptualise refugee and migrant protests in the Global South moves precisely from the analysis of the Mustapha Mahmoud protest camp. In their article published in 2007, Caroline Moulin and Peter Nyers described the protests that took place in Cairo in 2005 as a re-appropriation by the refugees of the faculty to speak politically, and proposed that we

consider the camp as an expression of "global political society" (Moulin and Nyers, 2007). The core of Moulin and Nyers' (2007) contribution is an engagement with the work of Indian political theorist Partha Chatterjee's concept of "political society", as outlined in the essay entitled *The Politics of the Governed* (2004). In Chatterjee's (2004) well-known argument, in order to grasp the entanglements of contemporary subaltern political agency in the Global South, it is necessary to move beyond analyses centred on civil society and organized social movements, to consider instead the forms of collective participation and resistance of subjects that are excluded from formal polities – slum dwellers, irregularised migrants, refugees, 'undocumented' urban poor. Political society, as Moulin and Nyers (2007) explain, is thus composed by individuals relegated to the margins of formal citizenship but nonetheless ''looked after and controlled by various governmental agencies'' (Chatterjee 2004:38, cit. in Moulin and Nyers, 2007, p. 360). For civil society, Chatterjee argues, political action is channelled through formal organization and liberal-democratic representation. Political society on the other hand, comprised as it is of subjects whose everyday life is already marked by experiences of illegality and informality, express its political agency through acts which configure moments of 'rupture' with existing orders, and explicitly challenge governmental control.

Through the case of the Mustapha Mahmoud protests, Moulin and Nyers (2007) highlight the potential of Chatterjee's theorization for capturing the 'global' character of marginal politics – their transcending, that is, the boundaries of both national political communities and of international institutions. As they write:

> […] the construction of global political society is marked by complex relationships between a world still organized around nation states and international organizations, and the emergence of alternative and contested political subjectivities that speak ''out of place.'' We theorize the political precisely in these ''uncommon places'' (ibid., pp. 370-371).

For Chatterjee, this process of subject formation works through attributing "to the empirical form of a population group the moral character of a community" (Chatterjee 2004, p. 57, cit. in Moulin and Nyers, 2007, p. 362). Theorizing refugee protests as political subjectivities which exceed and problematize the (inter)national political

order, Moulin and Nyers (2008) also highlight how they 'make space' for alternative experiences of communities and living together.

Setting out to complement Moulin and Nyers's (2008) analysis, in this chapter I suggest that the socio-material infrastructures that sustained everyday life in the Mustapha Mahmoud camp are the main way in which the refugees constituted themselves as a moral and political community. Although acknowledging the importance of the camp's everyday practices, Moulin and Nyers's (2007) analysis remains primarily focused on the discursive appropriation by the refugees of the language and categories of international humanitarianism, mainly through the written requests the protestors advanced to UNHCR. In this chapter I argue instead that refugees' "making space" for alternative experiences of community had primarily a material and spatialised dimension, and that it is in this dimension that the emergence of political agency, as a contextual and relational phenomenon, ought to be traced.

Recent attempts to theorize and empirically analyse protest camps have mobilized a notion of infrastructure – broadly derived from assemblage epistemologies and actor-network theory – that is not distant from the one put forward by Abdulmaliq Simone (2004b) in his analysis of African urbanism. As examined in Chapter VI, in the work of the urban theorist an infrastructure is "a platform allowing for and reproducing life in the city" (Simone, 2004b, p. 408) which encompasses materialities, inter-human relations, and the connections people establish with the physical and social environment they find themselves immersed in. In their book *Protest Camps*, Feigenbaum, Frenzel and McCurdy (2013b) adopt a very similar perspective. Like Simone (2004b), they use infrastructure to point to the practices through which protest campers forge "ways of living and protesting together around and through the objects, structures and environments available to them" (Feigenbaum et al, 2013b, p. 16). Drawing on a wide range of historical and ethnographic empirical cases, their work singles out in particular four typologies of objects, practices and relations that are recurrently found in protest camps: re-creation and reproduction in everyday life (food supply, shelter, and sanitation are among the examples they provide), protest and political 'work' (elections of representatives, negotiations with police etc.), communication (sustained use of computers and mobile phones, but also contacts with

media ), and governance (meeting spaces, announcements, and internal rules). As will be shown, all of these typologies of infrastructures were present, in more or less developed form, in the Mustapha Mahmoud camp.

Before proceeding to the empirical analysis, I want to spend a few words on what the existence of these socio-material infrastructures within and around protest camps tells us about the way in which political communities are constituted through them. In this regard, two elements in particular are worth highlighting: the role of affective bonds and emotional labour in forging protesters' relations and defining their political identities, and the 'connectedness' to the external world and surrounding built environment which characterizes urban encampments (Feigenbaum et al., 2013b). I suggest that in the case of Mustapha Mahmoud these elements highlight the embedded and contextual character of refugees' protests, as well as their contradictory – if not ambiguous – relations with governmental and humanitarian agencies. At the same time however, unlike the case of the sit-ins analysed in Chapter IV, in the Mustapha Mahmoud camp these 'affective intensities' and the complex web of connections built by protesters both within and outside the camp allowed for the emergence of more articulated political identities. It is this complex interplay between embedded-ness and autonomy that this chapter aims to analyse.

In the light of these points, in the next section it is worth introducing some of the most salient moments which have marked the history of Sudanese migration to Egypt, as well as analysing the progressive geopolitical shifts which, since the 1990s, have led to the establishment of a regime of refugee governance in the country, and of humanitarian operations targeting Sudanese refugees.

## VII.3 Background of the protests
### VII.3.1 Sudanese migration to Egypt

The history of refugee protests in Cairo – from the small sit-in held in 2004 in the Mustapha Mahmoud area, till the protests targeting UNHCR during the uprising in 2011-2012 – is closely tied to that of Sudanese migration to Egypt. Sudanese are by far the largest refugee community in the country, and migrants from a wide spectrum of demographic and socio-economic backgrounds can be found living in different areas of Egypt's major cities – their presence, as in the case of Sudanese 'youth gangs'

in Cairo (Lewis, 2011) – being often highly visible. The history of their migration to Egypt largely exceeds UNHCR's classifications and statistics – which are, it is worth remembering, of relatively recent creation. Between 1994 and the end of 2005, when the Mustapha Mahmoud protests took place, 58,535 Sudanese nationals sought asylum and registered with UNHCR. By the end of 2005, 31,990 had been accorded refugee legal status and 16,675 had been resettled to third countries, mostly the USA, Canada and Australia (UNHCR, 2006). In the same period of time, 16,000 Sudanese asylum seekers were rejected and eventually became "closed files," and another 10,200 were given temporary asylum seeker protection (ibid.). This last figure is remarkable, yet by no means sufficient to draw a picture of the actual number of Sudanese in Egypt. As of 2006, a year after the Mustapha Mahmoud camp, estimates ranged from 750,000 to 4 million individuals (FMRS, 2006). Geographical and cultural-linguistic proximity have facilitated exchanges and mobility between Egypt and Sudan throughout the postcolonial era. In 1976, the Wadi El-Nil (Nile Valley) Treaty ratified the terms of the reciprocal treatment for citizens of the two countries. Sudanese nationals were permitted to enter Egypt without a visa and were, at least on paper, allowed legal access to employment, welfare and ownership of property. (Kagan, 2012). Although Egypt was already a signatory of both the 1951 Refugee Convention and of its 1967 Protocol, this regime applied equally to all categories of migrants.

Political exiles had always been a significant component of the Sudanese diaspora in Egypt. From the onset of the civil war in the mid-fifties, to the forced migration of groups hostile to Nimeiri's rule[108] in the early eighties, till the outbreak of the armed conflict in the South and Darfur regions, migrant movements between the two countries had often comprised political refugees (Grabska, 2005). Although maintaining their Sudanese nationality, most of these migrants "enjoyed long term residence and successful careers in business or academia" (FMRS, 2006 p. 5), and intermarriages with Egyptians were common (Grabska, 2005). Many Sudanese also engaged in transnational political activities, and a number of Sudanese associations were active in Egypt's major cities (Grabska, 2005, 2009). The existence of a solid

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[108] General Gaafar Mohamed el Nimeiri ruled Sudan between 1971 and 1985.

network of diasporic community associations, encompassing highly politicized groups with strong transnational links to Sudanese political parties and other militant movements, both in the homeland and in other states, played an important role in the Mustapha Mahmoud protests – a point to which I will briefly return below.

**VII.3.2 The emergence of the Sudanese humanitarian question**

In the 1990s, the condition of Sudanese communities in Egypt changed dramatically. Growing geopolitical instability led to a remarkable increase in the number of displaced people in the Nile region (Grabska, 2005). At the same time, shifts in migration governance at a global level situated Egypt within new geographies of border externalization to North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean (Moulin and Nyers, 2007), thus contributing to a fundamental change in state attitudes towards migrants and refugees. In 1995, officially due to the deterioration of bilateral relations between Egypt and Sudan, the Wadi El Nil Treaty was abrogated[109], and a system of entry visas and residence permits for Sudanese in Egypt was put in place. As it has been observed, "this cutoff date corresponds roughly with when the question of Sudanese refugees became a significant issue in Egypt." (FMRS 2006 p. 5, see also Samy 2009; Jacobsen, 2012; Kagan 2011, 2012). Starting from 1994, a system of migration management was created in which UNHCR – as according to the Memorandum of Understanding with the Egyptian State signed in 1954, and till then only sporadically applied – became the exclusive agency in charge of refugee status determination and refugee assistance (Kagan, 2011, Jacobsen, 2012).

Faced with the consequences of repeated crises in Sudan and the Horn of Africa, as well as with local authorities' categorical refusal to consider asylum seekers as more than "temporary guests" or "transit migrants", UNHCR Cairo "developed one of the largest resettlement operations in the world" (FMRS 2006, p. 8). As in other countries in Africa and the Middle East, UNHCR de facto became a "surrogate state" (Slaughter and Crisp, 2008; Kagan, 2011) within the Egyptian state, which in turn limited its involvement in refugee questions "to the respect of the principle of *non-refoulement*,

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[109] The treaty was partially reinstated in 2004 with the introduction of the Four-Freedoms Agreement between Egypt and Sudan. However, the reinstatement did not involve any significant extension to Sudanese refugees' rights (Jacobsen, 2012).

and provision of security" (Kagan, 2011, p. 3). Over the years, while Egypt's commitment to these principles was being progressively eroded, the role of UNHCR as "surrogate state" was consolidated. The establishment of UNHCR as a quasi-sovereign actor is captured by one of the slogans coined by Mustapha Mahmoud protestors, and widely quoted in the literature on refugees in Egypt (Moulin and Nyers, 2007; Kagan, 2012) : "We live in a country of UNHCR." As a result of these changes, in both academic and humanitarian discourses migration from Sub-Saharan and Eastern Africa to Egypt was increasingly framed in the categories of international humanitarianism.

**VII.3.3 Refugee advocacy and Sudanese diasporic politics in Cairo**

For Sudanese associations and political groups in Cairo, advocacy and the role of UNHCR in guaranteeing refugee protection became central issues around which to organize their activities. Many of them – like the two Darfuran organizations whose members were interviewed for this chapter – were established or developed in the early 2000s thanks to the official recognition as CBOs (Community-Based Organizations) by UNHCR, and the access to UN funding which it granted. This led them to incorporate the language of humanitarianism and refugee advocacy into their pre-existing experiences of diasporic political mobilization, often developed in contact with militant groups in Sudan. One of these organizations, *Refugee Voice*, founded in Cairo in January 2005, played a fundamental role in setting up the initial Mustapha Mahmoud sit-in. Significantly, the main activities of the group – which was no longer active at the time when my fieldwork in Cairo was conducted – are described in the FMRS report on the 2005 protest camp as "gathering information about refugee rights and international refugee law" (FMRS, 2006, p. 18). According to the association, the purpose of the sit-in was "to draw the attention of the international community to find solutions to [their] problems." (ibid.)

In Moulin and Nyers' (2007) analysis, global political society is defined as "a site of contradictions" in which refugee politics often works appropriating "the language and practices of governmentality" (Moulin and Nyers, 2007, p. 362) and politicizing them. *Refugee Voice* is a pointed example of how the empowering, if ambivalent, effects of the language of development, human rights and refugee advocacy can intersect pre-

existing experiences of political mobilization among refugees, resulting in one of the 'hybrid' entanglements of political agency which this thesis attempts to theorize in Chapter II.

**VII.3.4 Shrinkage of assistance and refugee governance through self-reliance**

While its language and categories were appropriated by refugee organizations however, the system of humanitarian governance put in place by the UN's "surrogate state" was undergoing changes that would lead to growing frustration and hostility among refugee communities. In the second half of the nineties, shifts in development policies that were global in scale led UNHCR to revise its interventions, particularly in the field of socio-economic assistance (Hyndman, 2001; Hunter, 2009). The downsizing of the Cairo regional office's budget was so significant that, between 1997 and 2001, total funds for care and maintenance (CM) projects went from US$ 2.34 million to US$ 1.49 million (Sperl, 2001). Considering that around 10% of the budget for CM projects routinely goes into agency support activities, Sperl (2001) calculates that "the average expenditure per refugee per year went from US$ 500 to US$ 290, which amounts to a reduction of no less than 42%" (ibid., p. 14). These cuts affected mostly direct assistance in the form, for example, of reimbursement of medical expenses or grants for children's primary education. Although, as mentioned in Chapter I, UNHCR's urban refugee policy was developed in the late 1990s, interventions conceived to enhance refugees' ability to integrate locally providing for themselves – what UNHCR refers to as self-reliance strategy (SRS, UNHCR, 2005; Hunter, 2009) – were implemented in Cairo more systematically and effectively starting from 2004 (Grabska, 2006). It's then that funds were redirected to vocational trainings, psycho-social interventions and community-based activities, while direct financial help was reduced (ibid.). For Sudanese in Cairo, one of the most immediately visible consequences of the defunding of assistance was a reported increase in the number of evictions due to difficulties in paying rent (FMRS, 2006). It is therefore highly significant that many of the refugees who joined the Mustapha Mahmoud protests, often moving their families and all their belongings to the park, affirmed to be experiencing housing problems (FMRS, 2006) – a point that I will further examine in section VII.3.

UNHCR's inconsistent attitude towards resettlement to third countries also contributed to the widespread perception of a complete lack of 'durable solutions' for Sudanese in Egypt. Although the total number of resettled refugees had progressively increased from less than 300 in 1994 to 4110 in 2004 (FMRS, 2006; Kagan, 2011), that same year major changes in recognition policies dramatically affected Sudanese refugees' prospects for resettlement. In June, after the ratification of the last four of the six protocols constituting the Sudan Comprehensive Peace Agreement[110], UNHCR's decision to suspend individual refugee status determination (RSD) procedures left many people in a legal impasse. UNHCR started to provide all Sudanese, regardless of their ethnic or regional background, with 'yellow' asylum seeker cards, which only granted temporary protection from deportation. The suspension of RSDs was justified by the office as aimed to guarantee more, rather than less, protection to Sudanese applicants. Given the new perspectives for peace in their home country, going through individual RSDs Sudanese would have been exposed to the risk of higher rejection rates, and consequently, liable to *refoulement*. Nevertheless, the decision caused frustration and anger, mainly because it made it impossible for all new applicants to have access to resettlement procedures.

The first collective protests in front of the UNHCR premises took place a year before the protest camp was put in place. In August 2004, following the initiative of an Egyptian human right organization active in the field of refugee advocacy[111], a few dozen of asylum seekers and refugees gathered in front of UNHCR's offices in Mohandeseen. Protesters presented a document criticizing the cuts to assistance programs by the UN office, and requested a formal meeting with the organization's representatives. As attempts at negotiations failed, a small riot erupted in which the UNHCR premises were slightly damaged. Police intervention led to 10 people getting injured, and over 22 refugees being detained. At the end of the protests, the issues raised by the migrants remained unaddressed (FMRS, 2006).

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[110] For an overview of the peace agreement, see http://unmis.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=515 (accessed 22 April 2014).

[111] According to the FMRS report (2006), the August 2004 demonstration would have been organized by the South Centre for Human Rights, a Sudanese association that, to the best of my knowledge, was not active in Cairo anymore when research for this chapter was conducted.

**VII.4 The Mustapha Mahmoud protest camp: the emergence of a political community**

**VII.4.1 Re-appropriating humanitarian space**

Examining the refugee sit-ins of 2011-2012, Chapter IV of this thesis has shown how the built environment where aid is delivered, as well as refugees' everyday experiences of humanitarian space, play an important role in the genesis of contestation. In particular, I have argued, refugee protests often revolve around the re-appropriation and contestation of the securitized, 'enclavic' built environment of international aid agencies.

The spatial practices of UNHCR were central also in determining the set-up and development of the Mustapha Mahmoud protest camp. There was, in fact, at least one significant change in UNHCR's procedures after the protests which took place in 2004. In order to prevent rallies near its premises, UNHCR decided that first contacts with both new applicants and clients would be moved to the Mustapha Mahmoud Park, located around a block away from the UNHCR premises (FMRS, 2006). For the whole year between the August 2004 protests and the beginning of the protest camp in September 2005, all initial interviews were held in the park by outreach teams supported by interpreters. The decision added another cause of frustration to what was already an extremely tense situation. Refugees were showing increasing dissatisfaction with the ways interviews were carried out, and complained about the behaviour of UNHCR security personnel controlling the park.[112] As FMRS researchers note, the "holding of asylum seekers and refugees "at arm's length" can be seen as "a physical representation of the increasing distance between UNHCR and the population it purported to protect" (FMRS, 2006, p. 11).

The Mustapha Mahmoud protests began on September the 29th, 2005. According to *Refugee Voices*, the organization which called for the initial rally, around 70 people attended the initial demonstration. However, it took only a few days for the sit-in to turn into an encampment, and in the space of a couple of weeks numbers grew to over

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[112] Fieldnotes, Cairo, 12 June 2012. Conversation with male, age unknown, Sudan, unemployed and volunteering as a community activist.

500 people (FMRS, 2006). In the press reports released throughout the three months of protests, UNHCR repeatedly claimed most of the migrants involved were rejected asylum seekers – 'closed files', in their jargon – and, as such, did not have any legitimacy to advance claims for protection and resettlements (UNHCR, 2005). However, reports by local researchers, as well as testimonies by migrants and activists who visited the camp unanimously confirm that refugees and asylum seekers, alongside a smaller number of Sudanese migrants with different legal status, were also present. Many of the migrants who joined the protests and animated the camp had therefore had contacts with the agency, and they were likely to have experienced access difficulties in the form of long waiting times, and scarce or unclear information.

It is easy to see in the transformation of the Mustapha Mahmoud park into a protest encampment an act of contestation and re-appropriation of the 'boundary-space' between the refugees and the UN office. As recalled by one of the migrants interviewed in 2012:

> At that time people were waiting in the park and there was security and police around when they were filling the forms and getting interviewed… It was a mistake made by UNHCR because they did not want to deal with the people, because UNCHR is not in contact with the people, even now. ..Because when people were gathering every day in the park then it became easy to do things together…[113]

As in the sit-ins analysed in Chapter VI, the protests worked through exposing the growing distance separating the refugees from UNHCR, and contesting the agency's increasing securitization, evident in the fact that initial interviews were held in the park, with the agency's security personnel.

### VII.4.2 Assembling and connecting the camp

Beside exposing and contesting the inaccessibility of UNHCR, the location of the protest camp also allowed it to develop essential connections to the external world. Apart from being less than a block away from the UNHCR building, the Mustapha Mahmoud park was large enough to accommodate a high number of people, and relatively close and well connected to central Cairo, thus strategic in ensuring

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[113] Interview, Cairo, 12 June 2012. Male, age unknown, Sudan, unemployed and volunteering as a community activist.

visibility to the protests (FMRS, 2006)[114]. Public visibility worked to attract media attention to the requests advanced to UNCHR by the refugees and, perhaps more importantly, provided protesters with the opportunity to build networks of material support that were essential in transforming the initial encampment into a self-sustained living space. As reported by Azzam (2006), as the protests became larger and gained visibility, several local NGOs and right groups offered assistance in the form of collected blankets, food and funds. Help, however, did not only come through the 'humanitarian calls for actions' of local civil society. In the weeks that followed the initial sit-in, the relations of religious and national solidarity in which refugees were immersed both locally and transnationally materialised in many unexpected ways. Protesters could count on the possibility of accessing water, food, temporary shelter, and bathrooms, from Sudanese friends living in Mohandeseen.[115] Similarly, the material support offered by the adjacent Mustapha Mahmoud mosque turned out to be essential for their daily subsistence. Protesters had in fact unrestricted access to the mosque's courtyard and prayer rooms, and could use that to take regular rests. Moreover, as the start of the protests coincided with the beginning of Ramadan 2005, the Mosque's Mufti, Ali Gomaa, "issued a *fatwa* approving *Sadaqah* for all Sudanese refugees during *Eid Al-Adha*." (Azzam, 2006, italics in the original text).[116] The protesting refugees thus became the beneficiary of the Ramadan charity by many Egyptian Muslims attending Friday prayer at the Mustapha Mahmoud Mosque. In addition to that, as already mentioned, the protesters could also rely on the solidarity

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[114] Mustapha Mahmoud Square, where the park is located, is traditionally a popular rallying point for political demonstrations in Cairo. Between 2011 and 2013, it was chosen by Egyptian protesters of various political orientations, including the Muslim Brotherhood, as a gathering points for marches against military rule.

[115] Interviews, Cairo, 26 May and 12 June 2012. Male, 38 year old, Sudan (Darfur) community worker, and male, Sudan (Darfur) 26-year old, unemployed.

[116] In Islamic law, the "charity of breaking fast" (at the end of the month of Ramadan) is a religious *wajib* (duty) for all believer who possess a sufficient amount of wealth. It consists in the donation of a minimum amount of money or food to the destitute members of one's community, either directly or through the mediation of religious institutions or charitable organizations. It is usually paid on the day of Eid al Fitr, but it can also be paid earlier during Ramadan. Although the word *sadaqah* originally refers to voluntary alms, it is more commonly used as a synonym of *zakat* and, as such, indicates a religious duty (see Encyclopaedia of Islam, second edition, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/zakat-COM_1377?s.num=0&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=zakat accessed 30 April 2014).

of Sudanese associations and individuals both in the homeland and in Western countries, not only in the form of donations and material support, but also in securing media visibility to their cause through websites such as Sudanese Online.[117]

The heterogeneous relations that allowed the Mustapha Mahmoud camp to develop into a self-sustained space of communal living speak a great deal to the 'connected' character of the infrastructures that sustain everyday life in protest camps (Ramadan, 2013b; Feigenbaum et al., 2013b). Recent literature on social movements and urban uprisings has focused on the transnational dimension of the connections developed by protesters (Featherstone, 2008; Fregonese, 2013; Ramadan, 2013b). Accounting for these multifaceted connections however, it is essential to consider how the camp infrastructures emerged not only through 'positive' relations with and direct support from the external environment – be it local or transnational – but also how they came to constitute an immediate and concrete alternative to the most hostile and dangerous aspects of refugee life in Cairo.

An example of this is provided by the function the camp played in providing shelter to homeless refugees. Mustapha Mahmoud offered in fact a concrete and immediately accessible alternative to the precarious housing arrangements and livelihood strategies of poor refugees. As recalled in the following quote by a Sudanese migrant interviewed in Cairo in 2011:

> Some people were there, like, in solidarity, because they shared the reasons for the protests. A lot of people went there with their suitcases, the children, money, everything, I remember... a lot of people had no house, or a very bad house for an expensive price. No jobs obviously, nothing to do. So if you haven't got a house or are paying a lot of money for it… why wouldn't you leave it, why wouldn't you join other refugees who are offering food, if you can stay there in the tents? [118]

Commenting on the issue of homeless people who joined the Occupy Wall Street encampment in Manhattan in 2011, Barbara Ehrenreich (2011) has argued that urbanised protest encampments work through both exposing and offering alternatives to the highly precarious life of the disenfranchised in neoliberal cities. In urban

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[117] http://www.sudaneseonline.com/ (accessed 30 May 2014).
[118] Interview, Cairo, 10 December 2011. Male, 38 year old, Sudan, community worker.

contexts where the shrinkage and securitization of public space increasingly restrict chances for "sitting, laying down, walking", and socializing, she argues, protest encampments offer a safe space of sociality and material support to many homeless and indigent people.

Also in the Mustapha Mahmoud case, the camp became for many a safe space in which, finding shelter in shared tents, a precariously safe response to their most immediate needs could be found. Throughout the three months of protest, as the number of demonstrators grew, the infrastructure providing shelter to demonstrators and people in need became more sophisticatedly organized. According to the FMRS researchers, by mid-November 2005

> The ground was covered with a layer of mats and blankets. Luggage and other items formed partitions with narrow walkways between living spaces. Separate sections were built for men and for women and children. […] at first, sheets were hung as shelter from the sun. As the weather turned colder, the sheets were replaced with tarps. Meals were prepared in a communal kitchen area on gas stoves, with food bought with money pooled from those in the park and shared. […] Makeshift shops inside the park offered snacks. (FMRS, 2006, p. 26)

Living conditions were obviously not easy: most of the protesters interviewed reported suffering the relative scarcity of food, and often explained to visitors how difficult it was to have access to basic hygienic services (FMRS, 2006). Nevertheless, people were continuing to join and, as will be shown below, protesters reported having developed feelings of attachment and belonging to the place. These dynamics also speak to the dual character of camp infrastructures, which are at the same time home-places and sites of protests, where everyday life acquires full political visibility merging into acts of contestations (Feigenbaum et al., 2013b). It is to this point that I turn to in the following sub-section, discussing the function of the camp infrastructure in exposing and contesting the 'material reality' of the biopolitics of refugee aid.

## VII.4.3 Exposing, contesting, and countering the biopolitics of refugee aid

While the living and social spaces of the camp were being developed, protesters were also working collectively on a list of coherent requests to be submitted to the UNHCR. Proposals were being discussed in regular meetings in the camp, and attempts at negotiations with the agency started in early October 2005. The protesters drafted

several lists of demands – at least 3, 1 in Arabic and 2 in English (FMRS, 2006). One of the most complete lists dates back to 26 October.[119] Most of the 12 demands it contained revolved around the refusal of repatriation and 'local integration' as durable solutions to the Sudanese question in Egypt. However, the refugees also criticised what they referred to as "distinguishing between Sudanese refugees according to their ethnic background or geographical zones", strongly affirming that they were all Sudanese nationals in exile, and, as such, all equally entitled to international protection. As such, they were asking UNHCR to carry out its mandate more effectively, protecting refugees from abuse and arbitrary detention by Egyptian security forces, but also 'taking care' of vulnerable households and individuals, as expressed in point number 11:

> 11. we request UNHCR to care about vulnerable categories as elders, minors without family members, and women at risk. (Moulin and Nyers, 2007 p. 365).

Moulin and Nyers (2007) have seen in these claims the assumption and reproduction by the refugee of the languages and socio-legal categories of humanitarianism. For them, refugees' requests amounted to a "re-taking of the governmentality of care, inserting refugee voices into the bureaucratic processes of categorization, population-making, and care that governs their life" (Moulin and Nyers, 2007, p. 366). While these observations undoubtedly capture a significant aspect of the process of political subjectivation at work in the camp, it is also important to consider that, in the case of Cairo, this "governmentality of care" concealed what was de-facto a biopolitics of self-reliance. As examined in section VII.3, in the years leading up to the Mustapha Mahmoud protests, protection had been reduced to an empty signifier by the shrinkage of financial and material assistance. The humanitarian rhetoric of care had thus become the contradictory discursive mark of a system of urbanized refugee governance in which aid interventions were being gradually replaced with self-

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[119] The list was distributed on Wednesday 26 October 2005 by a group of representatives of the protesters invited to give a short speech at the weekly seminar held by the FMRS centre at the American University in Cairo, in the Tahrir Square campus. The work carried out by junior FMRS researchers – particularly international visiting scholars – in order to document the protests caused serious problems to the centre. According to an Egyptian member of academic staff met in mid-2011, after the end of the protests SSI even threatened the university with shutting down FMRS should any of its members show support for similar acts of public protests in the future (field notes, Cairo, June 2011).

reliance policies. Refugees were expected to mobilize their own individual and community resources in order to secure their livelihood autonomously from aid agencies, thus achieving local integration and becoming "part of the existing urban environment" (UNHCR 2005, p. 9).

I suggest that, while asking for enhanced protection and more substantial aid interventions, the Mustpha Mahmoud refugees were also transforming imposed socio-economic self- reliance into the autonomous infrastructure of an emerging political community.

Most of the testimonies highlight the willingness to 'share' that characterized people who were animating the camp. As explained in section 4, some of the items used to build tents and other living spaces came from external donations. However, the majority of them is described as belonging to people who had spontaneously joined the protests, and decided to share them with the community. This act of re-appropriation acquired political significance making refugees' everyday life publicly visible, in its most basic material constituents. In some of the interviews, the function of the protest camp in exposing the harsh living conditions caused by the shrinkage of humanitarian assistance and by the economic situation in Egypt is acknowledged by the refugees themselves. "The UNHCR offers an integration programme but with no houses, no education, no work. We have been eating beans for weeks", as a protester explained a journalist visiting the camp[120].

At the same time however, protesters often expressed pride at their ability of 'taking matters into their own hands' not just denouncing the poor assistance they were receiving, but also having been able to organize autonomously, in spite of the harsh living conditions in the camp. In the short reports written by researchers and activists who visited the camp between October and December 2005, the living spaces are described as surprisingly clean and tidy, considering that an estimated 3,000 people were taking part in various activities, or just hanging out, in the park during day

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[120] http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4440730.stm (accessed 2 June 214).

time.[121] What we can see emerging from these accounts is an ethics of mutuality and responsibility, in which people felt increasingly driven to take care not only of each other but also of the 'things' they were sharing and of the living spaces they had all contributed to construct. Nearly every day, speeches were delivered in which the people present at the sit-in were invited to "respect the place" because it was "their community" (FMRS, 2006, p. 27).

The appropriation and reversal of the biopolitics of refugee governance thus also worked through the affective and emotional bonds created sharing daily tasks in the camp. Materially 'building' the camp also meant re-appropriating the 'affective labour' mobilized by development and humanitarian agencies through the indigenization of refugee care and assistance. The daily work of taking care for children, elderly, and people who were ill and disabled, or simply needed to be provided food and shelter, became a fulfilling experience in which 'care' was shared in a space which, originally set up to contest them, had become autonomous from international humanitarian agencies. In this space, community relations were forged which were in contrast with the individualizing experiences of paid work in the aid industry, examined in this thesis in Chapter V.

### VII.4.4 Affective intensities

In all the narrative interviews and direct testimonies collected during the protests, as well as in the commentaries collected among members of Sudanese community associations in Cairo in 2011-2012, the protest camp is described as a place of 'affective intensities', which are not limited to the 'emotional' and care work described above. Protesters reported feeling excited by the experience of 'speaking out' for themselves, but also 'safe' and protected by the effective infrastructure they had built together.

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[121] In some research and press-reports, protesters' preoccupation with keeping the camp clean and orderly are attributed to the willingness to counter the rumours circulating about their behaviour, particularly in relation to alcohol consumption and sexual promiscuity. Around a month into the protests, in fact rumours, fuelled by state propaganda, were starting to spread among local residents "of abuse of Egyptian hospitality by 'drunken' and disease-ridden refugees, and other xenophobic statements about 'non-Muslim *kuffar*' stealing Egyptian jobs who should be sent back where they came from" (Azzam, 2006)

In the interviews in which refugees illustrate the dynamics through which they came to join the protests, the nearly fortuitous encounter with the intense 'atmosphere' of the camp is often described as having a 'transformative' effect (Feigenbaum et al., 2013a). Refugees who first visited the site out of curiosity, without a particularly strong political motivation often reported discovering how, taking part in group discussions, they felt "happy to be there, and somehow stronger." As a Sudanese community worker commented describing the sit-ins of 2012, "you are there doing nothing and then you find the protest and you feel anger, or passion, you do something at least." [122]

These kind of affective experiences are common in migrant protests, particularly those taking place in detention centres. In her research on protests in the Yarl's Wood detention centre, in the UK, Imogen Tyler (2013) observes how migrants often refer to protests as moments when they felt themselves 'come alive again'. Similarly, for the migrants held in an Australian removal centre interviewed by critical legal scholar Richard Bailey, (2009; see also Tyler, 2013) protest was a way of getting out of prolonged periods of inactivity and even depression.

McGregor (2012) highlights another element that characterizes the affective dimension of migrant protests, namely religiosity, which she interprets as a performative and embodied act through which migrants in detention centres re-instate themselves as right-bearing subjects. Spiritual and religious performances such as praying together or attending the masses occasionally celebrated in the camp were also present in the Mustapha Mahmoud case. In Cairo, the Comboni Church known to local residents as Sakakini, as well as other missions offering assistance to migrants[123] had always been important points of reference for African refugees, particularly for the large Southern Sudanese community.

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[122] Field notes, Cairo, December 2011. Conversations with male, Sudan (Darfur), 38 year old, community worker, and female, age unknown Sudan (Khartoum), unemployed.
[123] The most well-known is probably the St. Andrews United Church of Cairo, whose refugee service was inaugurated in 1979, and was still very active in 2011-2012, remaining opened and providing essential support to refugee households also during the revolution. (http://standrewsrefugeeservices.wordpress.com/about-2/; accessed 10 June 2014).

The religious rituals performed in the camp however, allowed refugees to experience spirituality in a way that transcended the boundaries of religious belonging. Christians and Muslims were reported to be present in roughly equal numbers in the park, where "at least 16 tribes from all parts of Sudan were represented, and the three largest ethnic groups – Dinka, Nuba, and Nuer – comprised only 30 percent of the total" (FMRS, 2006, p. 18). As one of the protesters interviewed by FMRS researchers notes, the cohesiveness experienced in the Mustapha Mahmoud camp was an extraordinary event.

> I don't believe this thing will happen again, because all the people stayed like one person, if you are from South, West, East, if you are Muslim or Christian, no difference because you can meet five Christians and two Muslims and they stay together and cook together.[124]

The inter-religious cohabitation that characterised the protests was also regarded as powerful signs of their political significance and 'moral' legitimacy. In the following quote from an interview with an Egyptian NGO worker conducted in 2012, this is highlighted comparing the refugee protest camp to the occupation of Tahrir Square by Egyptian protesters in 2011.

> The UN and some Egyptians were circulating rumours about people drinking alcohol… but you never hear that people were praying together, they only say that about Egyptians in Tahrir… but it wasn't a new thing! The Sudanese refugees had done the same. People were all praying next to each other Christian and Muslims… what they said about religious hatred is not always true…[125]

Over six years after Mustapha Mahmoud, the inter-religious and inter-ethnic solidarity which characterized the camp were still recalled by Sudanese refugees in Cairo as a proof of their capacity to mobilize as a cohesive community.

Belonging to the autonomous community of the camp was also experienced through feelings of safety and security.

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[124] FMRS interview with demonstrator, 13 January 2006.
[125] Fieldnotes, Cairo, 30 December 2011. Male, 36 year old, Egypt, NGO worker. Conversation in Egyptian Arabic. Translation is mine.

> And the rest of Egypt, for a lot of Sudanese has never been safe. The camp was safe. And you move in there and you found people in the same situation as you, because a lot of people are, they do not know each other...[126]

Also in this regard, the camp's often ambiguous relations with the external environment were central. Mustapha Mahmoud had its own security systems in place. As in the Tahrir encampments of 2011-2012, visitors were asked for identification documents before being allowed access to the park, and checked for whether they were carrying weapons or alcohol. The food and beverages donated were also often checked to make sure they were not attempts at sabotage through poisoning (FMRS, 2006), another recurrent practice in the occupations during the Egyptian uprising.

Protesters' heightened perception of the need to 'protect' themselves and their space was also due to UNHCR's contradictory stance vis-à-vis the camp (Moulin and Nyers, 2007). As already mentioned, negotiations between the office and the Mustapha Mahmoud refugees started in early October 2005. However, the office's attitude towards the camp remained ambivalent, if not hostile, throughout the 3 months of protests. In the various documents released between September and December 2005, for instance, the agency maintained that the 5 individuals who were acting as representatives were self-nominated, and therefore – like the majority of the people in the camp, who, as 'closed files' were not officially recognized as persons of concern of the office – lacked real political legitimacy. On the other hand however, the few consultations which took place between the agency and the Mustapha Mahmud's protesters happened through the mediation of these self-appointed representative (ibid.). Shifting between discredit and unconvinced attempts at negotiations, and between humanitarian concerns and a categorical denial of the legitimacy of the protests, UNHCR's position put the camp in a liminal state between recognition and dismissal, which caused uncertainty and insecurity.

Egyptian police had been present around the camp, the square, and the surrounding streets since the beginning of the demonstrations. Many protesters reported having good relations with police officers – police liaisons being often a necessary element

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[126] Interview, Cairo, 12 June 2012. Male, age unknown, South Sudan, unemployed.

of the infrastructure of protest camps in different contexts (Feigenbaum et al, 2013b). For many of the Sudanese refugees involved, the protest camp had been the first occasion to experiment a somewhat 'peaceful' and 'collaborative' relation with Egyptian state authorities, as opposed to the threat of police harassment, arbitrary detention and even deportation they experienced in everyday life.

Also in this case however, this precarious collaborative liaison was only possible through the mediation of UNHCR. Over the months, as the position of the office shifted towards more overt opposition vis-à-vis the protesters, the condition of the camp gradually became more problematic. By the beginning of December 2005, all attempts at negotiations between the refugees' representatives and the UNHCR had failed. On December the 22nd a formal letter was sent by UNHCR to the Egyptian Ministry of Defense which communicated that their efforts to reach a negotiated solution had failed – an act that local activists and researchers regarded as having "paved the way to the forced eviction" (FMRS, 2006, p. 33).



*Figure 8. The Mustapha Mahmoud protest camp in December 2005. The Arabic sign reads "Why does the UN forsake us?" (photo by Youssef Assad; http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2011/01/african-migrants-egypt-sit-out-protests; accessed 1 June 2014).*

**VII.4.5 Forced eviction: violence and vulnerability in refugee protest camps.**

The forced eviction of the camp, as accounted by protesters and eye witnesses in the weeks that followed the violent crackdown, is described by FMRS researchers as "emotionally and politically charged" (FMRS, 2006, p. 34). The events that took place in the night between December the 29th and December the 30th are worth reporting in detail as, I suggest, they powerfully speak to the inherent 'fragility' of the political subjectivity grounded in – and limited to – the material and spatial practices of protest camps.

At around 1 am on December the 30th, police started to fire water cannons at the park every 15 minutes. Water cannons were alternated with rounds of talks in which authorities repeatedly offered to transfer the refugees to a 'safe' camp site outside of the city, a proposal that the protestors refused because of lack of information about the location and characteristics of this 'camp'. A couple of hours later, according to eye witnesses, "riot police began "warming up" by chanting slogans, running in place, and jumping up and down" (ibid.). The accounts collected among protesters reveal how, in just few hours, the feelings of safety, belonging, and even excitement and pride that had characterized the camp in the previous days were replaced by pervasive fear and uncertainty. In the following extract, one of the Sudanese interviewed in Cairo in 2011 comments on that night's events recalling what protesters he had met after the eviction had reported to him:

> You can imagine… there were all that police, thousands… and till the day before they were there peacefully and then in that night their attitude starts to change… Everything changes, even though the people knew UNHCR was not on their side from the beginning, it was in that night, because they always attack people at night… the people started to feel like there was tensions, women were crying and some people wanted to leave, they were terrified but at the same time they did not want to believe that would happen… No one left, because they were not allowed but also because… you go and leave everyone else there? Some people were just not aware, not even after they started with the water…[127]

Water cannons were turned on for the last time at dawn, when, blocking escape routes, security forces entered the park and started to forcefully remove people. Although Egyptian authorities have systematically denied excessive use of force during the

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[127] Interview, Cairo, 3 December 2011. Male, Sudan (Darfur), age and profession unknown.

operations, protesters and eye witnesses among local residents reported use of tear gas, electrified batons, violent beating up of children and women, and even gun shots. Testimonies by the people who survived the attack convey a sense of loss of control, and a heightened perception of being powerless and vulnerable.

> I was not aware of anything until they were hitting me. I think there were five policemen for every refugee. When we started to defend ourselves, there were many more coming. They came and attacked. I saw one person I knew. They were beating him and when he fell down, they broke his neck. One of the police broke his neck with his baton. One pregnant woman also died in the same place.[128]

In many cases, the beating continued when protesters were already on the vans that would have transferred them to local prisons. The crackdown left at least 27 people dead, while over 650, including individuals holding official refugee status, were detained for months and in most cases released only after the direct intervention of UNHCR.

If we understand occupations and protest camps as sites where the 'politically possible' is experimented (Chatterton, 2006; Feigenbaum et al, 2013b) through socio-material infrastructures which 'make people do or don't do' (Latour, 2005), then it is imperative to reflect on what these affectively charged, embodied experiences of forced evacuation suggest about these 'political possibilities'. As spaces where the intimacy of everyday life and the vulnerability of 'bodies' (Butler, 2011; Butler and Athanasiou, 2013) are displayed publicly, protest camps – and even more so protest camps held by non-status migrants and other categories of non-citizens – are not only temporary, but also radically precarious.

The tragic epilogue of the protests had consequences which were still sharply felt when research for this chapter was conducted. In the following extract, a Sudanese migrant interviewed in 2012 for research on refugee community organizations commented on the consequences of Mustapha Mahmoud, expressing views that were largely shared not only among Sudanese migrants, but also among the aid workers and local activists met conducting research for this thesis.

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[128] Interview with demonstrator, collected by FMRS researchers, Cairo, 13 January 2006.

> … Number of soldiers were huge, the evacuation was so violent especially for women and children… a lot of people were killed. And that, you know, all that had two main consequences: first of all, for years, nobody went to UNHCR anymore. Obviously, who could trust them anymore? There was also this sense that there was nothing left to do in Egypt, like there is nothing left, no hope to change things. It was like… and then, the second consequence is that people started going to Israel. If there is nothing left to do in Egypt, for a lot of people this is the only thing they can do, even if it is deadly dangerous… you know they were many people, those who were killed, Egyptians say 30 people… refugees say 200.[129]

While these words speak a great deal about the limitations of the political possibilities opened up by the protest camp, it should also be noted how, at the time when research for this thesis was conducted, not everything was lost of the sense of the 'moral community' built through the Mustapha Mahmoud camp.

> I think we all still remember, even Egyptians do. People don't talk about that as much because here it is never easy to talk about politics. But even the people who arrived after that, even if they are not Sudanese, like the Oromo, even among them there is respect for the Mustapha Mahmoud people. Even Egyptians have a candlelight vigil to remember that, every year.[130]

Six years after its violent eviction, the protest camp was still recalled as an act through which Sudanese refugees had recovered a sense of 'dignity', not only reclaiming their rights to humanitarian protection, but also publicly exposing their capacity for living together beyond ethnic, political and social divisions, and in spite of living conditions which, particularly for the migrants who most recently arrived in Egypt, are often marked by violence and extreme socio-economic precariousness.

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[129] Interview, Cairo, 20 June 2012. Male, 38 year old, Sudan (Darfur), community worker. Interview conducted in Egyptian Arabic. Translation is mine.
[130] Ibid.

*Figure 9. Egyptian riot police surrounding Mustafa Mahmoud Park before the raid on the Sudanese refugee protest camp in 2005. (photo by David Morse; http://www.salon.com/2006/01/13/cairo_sudan/, accessed 20 May 2014 ).*

## VII.5 Conclusions

In this chapter I have analysed the Mustapha Mahmoud protest camp highlighting the connections, practices, materialities and affective bonds which united the thousands of refugees who, for over three months, lived and mobilized together in the park located in front of the UNHCR building. Drawing on recent literature on protest camps and 'grounded' ethnographic approaches to political mobilization (Chatterton, 2006; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010, Feigenbaum et al,. 2013a; 2013b), I have argued that the infrastructure sustaining everyday life in the camp played a central role in the process of political subjectivation which took place through the Mustapha Mahmoud protests. The Mustapha Mahmoud protesters did not constitute themselves as a political community only resorting to discursive acts such as the demands formally submitted to UNHCR. Analysing the set of infrastructures that made everyday life and protest possible in the camp, I have argued, is essential to capture the dynamics of the emergence of this temporary political community. Not only were Sudanese refugees publicly exposing the harshness of their daily life, contesting a biopolitical regime of urbanised refugee governance in which migrants are often left to provide for themselves in conditions of extreme precariousness. They were also experimenting

alternative ways of living together, establishing relations of care and solidarity autonomously from the aid industry.

This thesis has argued that one of the main characteristics of the expressions of political agency emerging from migrants' relations with humanitarian governance – and, to a lesser extent, with the state – in Egypt lies is their problematizing the distinction between 'everyday politics' and overt contestation. Among migrants in Cairo, organized forms of political mobilization are often rooted in everyday practices and established, long-term relations, and begin with the re-appropriation and reversal of designated usages of specific places. In the Mustapha Mahmoud camp, the merging of these two dimensions of political agency – the everyday one, and the engagement in overt contestation – was particularly visible. Reproductive work and domesticity became a part of, and a tool for, protest.

The convergence of everyday life and protests in the space of refugee protest camps also highlights how, in the case of refugee protest camps, 'resistance' proves a limited analytical category. On the one hand, as Chatterjee (2004) argues, as a 'politics of the governed', refugee protest camps cannot but emerge from disruptive acts of contestation and resistance through which spaces are taken away from the control of established powers, allowing for the carving-out of 'autonomous' communities. Transforming the park from a space where they were kept waiting into a site of protests, the Mustapha Mahmoud refugees provided a clear example of this. On the other hand however, this disruptive act worked to secure the space for a political experiment in which everyday life *became* protest, and an act of political utterance in itself. The reasons that drove so many refugees to partake in this alternative space of 'concrete' solidarity exceeded the position of a consciously 'resisting subject', and had more to do with the need to find practical solutions for one's everyday life, and with the desire to experience the camp's intense sociality.

Concluding this chapter, I want to highlight how the ethnographically grounded, material and spatialised approach informing this thesis is particularly useful in avoiding any form of 'romanticization' of refugee protest camps. Analysing protesters' accounts, I have deliberately adopted a sympathetic approach towards their

sense of belonging to the camp's community, highlighting mostly the potentialities of their political experiment. Internal hierarchies, gendered division of labour, tensions, and even episodes of violence were however also part of the relations through which the camp was built (FMRS, 2006). Similarly, my account of the eviction has aimed to convey respect for the protesters' vulnerability, and to clearly expose the extreme violence to which they were subjected. These contradictions and limitations, however, are an important element of every space of political possibility whose emergence is made possible by the contingency of material and spatial relations, be it a protest camp or a network of urban infrastructures sustaining refugees' livelihoods and sociality in the everyday. As such, they confirm my point on the limitations of unquestioned applications of the category of 'resistance' in analysis of migrant and refugee politics, and the need to explore alternative concepts for the study of how political agency emerges at the margins of formal polities, in 'exceptional' spaces, and conditions of extreme deprivation and structural violence. It is to this question that I turn to in the next, concluding chapter of this thesis.

## Chapter VIII: Conclusions: beyond depoliticization and resistance

In an article entitled "Revolution in Bad Times" – part of an exchange with writer Tariq Ali that appeared in 2013 on the *New Left Review* – political scientist and urban theorist Asef Bayat (2013) has pointed to the proliferation of development and aid agencies and to the "NGO-isation" of social activism as two of the main causes of the failures of the Egyptian uprising. In contemporary Egypt, so his argument goes, the forms of collective resistance and mobilization required to bring meaningful political change are de facto impossible, because the industry of development has substituted politics with technocratic management, and an individualised ethos of self-sufficiency.

I started this thesis with a vignette illustrating how the questions on the political agency of migrants and refugees and its relation with humanitarianism that are the focus of this work emerged through my ethnographic 'encounter' with the Egyptian uprising. Concluding it, it is perhaps useful to go back for a moment to this as one of the debates raised by the events that took place in Egypt and in other countries of the Arab World in 2011 and 2012, and which are in part still unfolding

The argument put forward by this thesis can in fact be read as a problematization of Bayat's (2013) claim. Through the two empirical sections, my analysis has shown instead how the allegedly 'depoliticizing effects' of refugee aid are constantly challenged by its own beneficiaries. However, I have argued, the forms political agency takes within – or at the borders of – the space of refugee aid in Cairo exceed the categories of 'everyday politics', 'resistance' and 'protests' as prevalently applied in migration, refugees, and subaltern studies, urging us to rethink these categories through ethnographically-grounded theoretical analysis.

While summarizing the main points advanced in the two empirical sections, in this concluding chapter I want to further reflect on these forms of political agency. How does the case of refugees in Cairo question the association of agency with 'activity',

'mobility', and with the oppositional stances presupposed by the category of 'resistance'? What alternative theoretical tools can be employed to study the political agency of migrant and refugees?

This thesis, it should be noted, has not aimed to provide definitive answers to these questions. As stated in Chapter II, the objective of my analysis was not to come out with a definition of what migrants and refugees' political agency is or should be, establishing criteria to distinguish what counts as political from what does not, or advancing systematic theorizations on 'politics beyond citizenship'. Rather, my objective was to document and analyse everyday practices, strategies, conflicts, as well as collective, organized mobilizations that challenge the material and spatial relations defining humanitarian governance in a very specific context, that of refugee communities in Cairo and the NGOs and international organizations that provide assistance to them. In doing so, each of the four chapters of this thesis has presented a somewhat self-contained ethnographic analysis and mobilized what are often highly specific bodies of literature, Yet a fundamental issue runs throughout the different sections: that of humanitarianism as a 'political space', and of what forms the political agency of refugees can possibly take in that space.

There are two main reasons why refugee aid in Cairo should be understood as thoroughly entangled with politics. The first resonates with the argument put forward by writers in anthropology and development studies who have "linked the rise of humanitarian organizations […] to the neoliberal transformation of the state" (McKay, 2012, p. 303; see also Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000; Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; Elyachar, 2005; Ferguson, 2006). In postcolonial states where neoliberal economic reforms have been implemented, so the argument goes, the re-orientation of state institutions and practices to market logic has led to transnational institutions replacing state apparatuses in performing governmental functions (McKay, 2002).

In the case of UNHCR Egypt, the taking on by the UN office of governmental functions in establishing and carrying out asylum policies has preceded and exceeded

the chronology of neoliberal reforms in the country. As such, the emergence of the "UN surrogate state" was mostly influenced by the historical specificities that have determined the existing legal and political institutions regulating citizenship, belonging, and displacement in the Arab World (Kagan, 2009, 2012).

Yet refugee aid in Cairo is also shaped by the entwinement of neoliberal governance and humanitarianism described by recent literature on African politics in particular (see Ferguson, 2006). This is true not only because, re-designing protection around the concept of 'self-reliance' – more recently coupled with that of 'resilience'[131] – UN policies targeting refugees in urban areas have since the 1990s aligned themselves with the neoliberal development paradigms of individual entrepreneurship and self-sufficiency (Gooptu, 2009; Peck, 2010). It is also visible in the spatial and material imprint of refugee aid in Cairo, that is, in what this thesis has defined as the 'boundaries of aid'. Chapter IV in particular has shown how UNHCR built environment and security practices merge into the segregated suburban geography that defines Cairo's neoliberal urbanism (Denis and Vignal, 2006; Bayat and Biekart, 2009; Peck et al., 2009). The sharp separation of refugees from aid workers thus mirrors that of Cairo's wealthiest strata from the urban poor, and, as I have argued, the practices through which the latter occupy and reclaim public space (see Bayat, 2012) have much in common with the dynamics of the refugee sit-ins examined in Chapter IV.

Describing these phenomena, my analysis has built on recent contributions that have theorized the spaces and materialities of development and humanitarianism – including its 'internal' economic and labour relations – as a fundamental theatre of international politics (Smirl, 2008; Duffield, 2009). In doing so, I have shown how the impact of refugee aid lies primarily in its 'material' manifestations and, most

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[131] See, among other documents, the Oral Update on the UNHCR's statement to the United Nations Economic and Social Council, 1-3 July 2014. (http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendocPDFViewer.html?docid=53b6a9179&query=resilience, accessed 20 July 2014).

importantly, that it is in adjusting to, re-negotiating, and challenging these relations that refugee political agency finds expression.

Herein lies the second reason why, I argue, humanitarianism needs to be understood beyond received assumption on its 'depoliticizing' effects. Among refugees in Cairo, perceptions of the 'boundaries' and 'material paradoxes' of aid – the segregation of practitioners from their beneficiaries, the failure of development interventions in improving their living conditions, the proliferation of humanitarian bureaucracies and the prolonged 'waiting' they cause – are sharp and, as the narratives collected for this thesis have shown, often articulated with clarity. My analysis has suggested that it is precisely in the spaces where these 'material paradoxes' become evident that 'agency' should be located. Humanitarianism, that is, has its material politics, and it is confronting these politics that the agency of migrants and refugees can find expression.

In order to explore these politics, I have worked through a methodology, based on assemblage epistemologies (De Landa, 2006), in which attention to materiality, space, and affect is combined with sensitivity to the role of political economy in shaping the social as "a process of composition" (McFarlane, 2011a, p. 23; on assemblages and political economy see also Brenner et al., 2011). As explained in Chapter II, throughout the thesis I have employed the concept of assemblage as both an *object* – that is, as a way of referring to the relations between humans and non-human objects that "make up the world through their interaction" (ibid.) – and a *tool* of inquiry (McFarlane, 2011a). In this second meaning, I have used assemblage as a methodology which posits the centrality of context, relationality, and emergence in determining agency. Rather than an essential attribute of a self-contained subject of politics – as in the tradition of refugee, peasant, and subaltern studies, where marginality, exclusion, and resistance, as Ismail (2013) puts it, are often 'ontologised' – agency is here understood as an intersubjective process that can (and cannot) emerge from the contingency of material relations.

What does this methodology reveal about the acts through which refugees in Cairo expose and counter the 'material paradoxes' of neoliberal development and aid? The first and most important element to be highlighted is probably its usefulness in capturing the nuances of refugee politics as "a site of contradictions" (Moulin and Nyers, 2007, p. 370). For Moulin and Nyers (2007), refugee politics work "reappropriat[ing] the language of governmentality, politiciz[ing] it, and [finding] new resistances (and perhaps some old oppression as well) within them." This thesis has largely confirmed this point: refugees in Cairo do indeed appropriate the language, values, and practices of humanitarianism, and they do so both in their acts of contestation, and in the everyday practices through which they engage with humanitarian agencies. My analysis has provided several examples of this – from refugees who opt for entrepreneurship within the NGO industry as a way of securing a job, to protests in which the language of human rights and the humanitarian rhetoric of protection are incorporated into slogans and demands.

In Chapter II, I have examined how, through the influence of the writings of Michel Foucault (1990) and, perhaps even more crucially, James Scott (1985) the concept of 'resistance', particularly when is considered in its mundane, everyday manifestations, continues to monopolize empirical explorations of migrant and refugee political agency, across a variety of disciplines. Analysing the dynamics that lead to the emergence of the hybrid, contradictory forms of political agency theorized by Moulin and Nyers (2007) my work has called for a problematization – or at least a more careful use – of this concept. Concluding this thesis, I want to discuss how my attempt to explore 'political agency beyond resistance' resonates with recent ethnographies which have examined the 'negative affects' and 'constrained agency' of marginalized subjects in contexts of neoliberal restructuring (Povinelli, 2006; 2011; Nouvet, 2014), thus considering possible venues for further research.

In her book *Time Travels*, feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz (2005) has defined agency as "the capacity to make the future diverge from the patterns and causes of the present" (Grosz, 2005, p. 72; see also Nouvet, 2014). Grosz's (2005) definition provides a good

example of how agency is typically conceived in affect theory and cultural studies, where the capacity to act politically is associated with "positive affects" (Nouvet, 2014, p. 96) such as hope, patience, joy, or certain kinds of anger, and with the ability to imagine, anticipate, and give form to' the future' (Ahmed, 2010).

Exploring the experiences of detachment, frustration, and 'disaffection' of refugees who find employment within the aid industry, this thesis has proposed a different take on the question on agency. Excluded from the privileges reserved to international practitioners, such as access to international mobility, the refugees interviewed for Chapter V did not exhibit any openly 'oppositional stance' towards the aid industry. They did not attempt to 'resist' its arbitrary hierarchies, nor did they reclaim their right to material assistance where micro-finance or vocational workshops failed to provide them with a job and an income. To the contrary, they strategically minimized contacts with aid agencies.

As confirmed by the experience of Leyla and her Somali friends who refused registration with UNHCR to avoid 'endless waiting', examined in Chapter VI, these attitudes are wide-spread among refugees in Cairo. The experience of being exposed to the inconsistencies and inefficacy of humanitarian agencies does not only result in contestation and protests. To the contrary, it often engenders what appear as inactivity, withdrawal, or cynical resignation. For the refugees included in research for this thesis, the political salience of these experiences lies in the fact that, 'giving up' on humanitarian agencies, they are able to reorient their energies towards activities and relations within their families and larger communities, exploring alternative ways of sharing material resources, forging social connections, and inhabiting the city.

This is not to say that 'resistance' is completely absent from the experience of refugees in Cairo, nor that it should be dismissed altogether as an analytical category. As I have argued in Chapter VI, even 'extreme' forms of resistance – such as confronting or avoiding security forces – can be part of the ordinary emergencies that mark everyday life in urban Egypt. Staging a mass protest like the Mustapha Mahmoud protest camp

also obviously involves resistance on many levels, from the deliberate decision to publicly confront UNHCR and radically question its policies, to the physical capacity to endure living conditions in the encampment.

Yet, even when refugees do protest, the dynamics of their mobilization are never entirely captured by prevalent uses of the concept of resistance. In Cairo, as in many other cities where segregation and privatization are pervasive, occupying public space is never only a deliberate political stance (Bayat, 2011; Ehrenreich, 2011). It is often also a spontaneous, embodied act dictated by the necessity to find safe shelter, make a living, socialize, and experience dwelling and belonging beyond the narrow spaces allowed by informal housing. In the case of the many refugees who camped in front of the UNHCR building between 2005 and 2012 – and of those who, as I write, are still camping – their presence is undoubtedly meant to expose and contest the office's segregated geographies and operational impasse. At the same time, however, camps and sit-ins also work to build infrastructures that allow people to sustain each other, materially and socially.

As the global maps of urban neoliberal restructuring and humanitarian governance expand, finding new ways to conceptualise these phenomena becomes vital. Within anthropology, some important recent contributions have re-oriented debates on agency accounting for affective and embodied experiences which are removed from those of 'resisting subjects' (Povinelli, 2006, 2011, Muehlenbach and Shoshan, 2012; Nouvet, 2014, Millar, 2014; see also Vrasti, 2013). The work of Elizabeth Povinelli (2009, 2011) in particular has been very influential in questioning hasty assumptions about the capacity of the oppressed to oppose and overcome structural violence in neoliberal conditions. Through profoundly reflexive ethnographic practice, Povinelli (2006) has examined the political salience of the material body and its experiences of suffering and impairment, and explored how neoliberal structural violence redefines intimacy and sociality among marginalised groups. As Nouvet (2014) has argued, Povinelli's work shows how, today, a conceptualization of agency which is grounded

in ethnographic inquiry cannot exclude that social and political change might emerge from conditions and spaces where people are reduced to inert, painful passivity.

Although geographers have been reluctant in engaging with these questions, the discipline's theoretical tools have much to offer to research in this area. As this thesis has hoped to show, an approach attuned to the material and spatialized contingency of agency is essential to explore social change in contexts where individuals and communities are "pushed to their limits" by forced migration and neoliberal restructuring, accounting for relations and potentialities that emerge in spaces of apparent depoliticization.

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