Asylum seekers leave their homes in response to a moment of rupture, a crisis (increasingly persistent) that interrupts any semblance of normality, instigated by war and conflict, the roots of which involve Europe. Human Rights Watch reports that children in some Syrian towns, for example, have now been out of school for six years because of the war. For many families and young adults, becoming a refugee is the only possibility of regaining a future. When they tell their stories, refugees stress that leaving their homes was the last thing they wanted; they had no choice but to flee their situation of abjection and imminent danger in order to give their children a semblance of possibility. They imagined that leaving their towns clandestinely would be perilous, they foresaw that the trip across the Mediterranean would be dangerous and anticipated that crossing Europe would be difficult, but few were prepared for the hardships involved in the asylum procedure.

I thought, once I got to Switzerland, I would be reunited with my fiancée in Geneva, but this has been the hardest part of the journey. I have to settle in St Gallen instead of Geneva. I don’t know when this process will end, and I have no control over my own future. I feel I have to constantly explain that I am not a thief”, a young Syrian man explained. The European reaction against the movement of refugees in 2015 spurred a brief moment of openness from Germany and then a backlash of reactions: the closing of the Balkan route, the European Union (EU)-Turkey deal and the interception and deportation of boats in the Mediterranean (as the Italian government trains Libyan coastguards to manage the liquid border). This means that becoming a refugee is no longer a tenable solution for people fleeing crisis.

**Liminality**

Barbara Harrell-Bond and Eftihia Voutira (1992) argue that refugees undergo violent ‘rites’ of separation and until they become incorporated into a host state as citizens, they remain in a state of liminality: in a legal, psychological, social and economic state ‘betwixt and between’. However, today, becoming a refugee does not automatically lead to the possibility of being reincorporated into a political community as a citizen. Asylum seekers remain in legal and political limbo for many years, and even those with refugee status cannot become citizens automatically. They remain liminal to the state.

Liminality, as Turner (1969) understood it, is a space of transition in ritual from one status or stage of life to another. The liminal state is one of violence, humiliation and reconfiguration (Turner 1967), but it is still part of a finite process whereby ritual provides the resolution of a moment of crisis within a person’s life. Later, Turner (1974) argued that in modern social contexts this space in the margins of structure (or preparatory to structural formation) escapes ritual moments and becomes more pervasive, capturing people in a prolonged state of ‘in-betweenness’ without necessarily providing closure to the period of crisis. This is relevant for refugees today, exposed to ruptures in their social life and in the configuration of host communities in Europe which are not easily resolved through rituals of incorporation. In current processes of structural reconfiguration, this period of ‘in-betweenness’ is increasingly long, and at times indefinite, for those in the margins of capital – the urban poor, minorities, economic migrants and refugees – creating an ever-widening cross-section of ‘non-citizens within juridical and law enforcement regimes’ (De Genova 2016: 1).

Processes of social formation, particularly within the Global North, are strongly exclusionary, as the rise of fascist populism indicates. The ‘rites of passage’ identified by Harrell-Bond and Voutira in 1992 should be reconsidered as ‘rites of exclusion’, or as Iteanu argues (this issue), as ‘purgatorian rites’. Refugees and asylum seekers are examples of people left in indefinite periods of liminality for which there is no resolution. The asylum process – the legal and bureaucratic procedures that turn asylum seekers into refugees – is dialectical in process in which the national population reinforces its social boundaries and determines its ‘others’.

Within this process, the liminal state of the asylum seeker is not merely a moment of transition from one status to another (from foreigner/outsider to citizen); instead, it acts as a process of flattening or levelling of any differentiating characteristics which could challenge the democratic and secular constitution of local structures (see Gold 2019).

The liminal period in this context, is not a moment within a larger transitional process which has the potential for the reproduction of social structures (as Victor and Edith Turner envisioned), but rather a space/time of annihilation and a negation of sociality, more akin to Garfinkel’s (1956) degradation ceremonies, through an erasure of the competing hierarchies embodied by refugees (religious, cultural, ethnic, racial). In these ‘rituals of degradation’ within the process of asylum, potentially dangerous economic migrants are redefined into different ‘kinds’ of victims, and are more often excluded altogether.

I conducted ethnographic research in a refugee processing centre in Zurich and with refugee management programmes supported by the Swiss federal state and international NGOs (non-governmental organizations) in Zurich and Geneva. In Switzerland, asylum seekers are exposed to multiple management processes constituted by national, transnational and non-governmental bodies which reproduce and maintain a liminal situation of exclusion. Against a backdrop of anti-foreigner politics, refugees become a banner for extreme right-wing populism based on exclusive parameters of belonging. That is, the process of destruction and redefinition to which asylum seekers are exposed through techniques of status degradation embedded within the asylum procedure reinforces hierarchical structures that define the social order with marginalizing effects.

I will firstly provide a brief view of different forms of liminality (spatial and temporal) to which asylum seekers are exposed in a process of degradation and humiliation. I then focus on the bureaucratic procedures in Switzerland that institutionalize liminality into legal and administrative limbo. As a brief conclusion – and an opening of further questions – I consider how ‘refugees’ represent historic and structural tensions relating to the formation of the nation state within Europe, and the inherent conflict of this for Switzerland.

**Spatio-temporal liminality in a processing centre in Zurich**

Throughout the stages of asylum, refugees in Switzerland are systematically stripped of any form of status and recognition essential for their reconfiguration as potential citizens: professional training, religious participation and
belonging to an ethnic community are undermined in the interests of integration programmes.

Regardless of the fact that many are from middle-class backgrounds and professionally trained, their degrees are not recognized and they are perceived as a homogeneous mass of asylum seekers. This is further exacerbated by humanitarian views of ‘refugees’ as a universal category (Malkki 1995). They are expected to be submissive and thankful for what they receive (shelter, language courses, logistical support), and they must obey instructions or forfeit their chances of getting asylum. They are ‘being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition’ (Turner 1969: 95), during which, people are sorted, sifted and (often) deported. In this process, temporal and spatial procedures act as sorting mechanisms: families are separated from young men, unaccompanied minors are tarred from adults and those whose claims are determined untenable in the first interview are separated in deportation centres early on.

People can stay a maximum of three months in one of the country’s short-term federal processing centres while their asylum status is determined.6 Processing time for asylum application admission is theoretically 10 working days; however, in practice, the State Secretariat for Migration reported an average processing time of 243.5 days in 2016 (AIDA 2016: 4). If rejected, most leave Switzerland and try their luck somewhere else, or become undocumented migrants, sans papier and other negatively loaded categories – they are turned into incomplete ‘types’ of people who cannot be incorporated. The Swiss government offers to pay for deportation costs and a one-off stipend for voluntarily returns.

The liminal period undergone by asylum seekers in the first instance of their arrival in Switzerland is also a period of negotiation between structures (state, private and civil) as well as between the asylum seekers themselves: from the moment they arrive at the borders, people are treated as potential dangerous individuals (terrorists, economic migrants), justifying the transformation of the asylum procedure into one of national security, thus enabling processes which leave people in a prolonged state of liminality for the protection of the national body.

Engaging someone in paid work involves a tacit recognition that the person has the right to belong to some form of community within the national territory – even a precarious one as a sessioal worker. Therefore, people applying for asylum in Switzerland are not allowed to be employed other than by the centre, as they have not received official authorization to be in Switzerland. However, centre residents are offered the possibility of a few hours of symbiotic work outside the centre in jobs which do not displace Swiss employees but enable asylum seekers to demonstrate their moral integrity through their work ethics. Such jobs include clearing the forests of invasive species (a task that would be done by Swiss citizens doing ‘social service’, an alternative to military service) or working on community farms, where others work voluntarily.

One summer morning in 2018, while weeding a field on a community farm, a Syrian helper making small talk asked a Syrian man where he came from. His answer surprised her: from Italy, by aeroplane. Upon further questioning, he explained, in a reverse chronology, that he had lived in Italy for two years, earning a living to continue moving forward. Before that, he had spent a further two years in Turkey in his own accommodation with friends, after moving out of the refugee camp where he had spent a few months upon arrival, and before that, he had been displaced in Syria, away from his home town for at least a year. Overall, he had been out of his home town in Syria for more than five years. He had first been internally displaced, then a refugee camp resident, then a migrant in Turkey and Italy, and finally an asylum seeker in Switzerland.

Time was not easy to account for, he explained. Many things had happened since he left his home and there was also a lot of uncertainty about his future. It was the uncertain future, and not so much the continuously mobile past, that most upset him. He had expected uncertainty leaving Syria, but he had hoped that by the time he applied for asylum in Europe, he would have a clearer vision of his immediate future: to settle down, get a job, start a family. These seemed unreal illusions to him now, as he had no hope for an imminent resolution of his asylum application. Time is a key category in the processing of people, and the efforts towards expediency contrast with the timeless journeys on which people embark when they leave their homes.
This level of spatio-temporal liminality was prevalent in many asylum seekers’ accounts. Time was also a core determinant of a national vote on applying shorter processing periods to asylum requests – arguably to make the process less ambiguous and speed up decisions. This is important in determining who deserves to be supported and integrated and those who are beyond assistance. 

After long periods of travel, during which people are separated from their homes, sociality and livelihoods, those who make it into Europe endure further uncertainty during the asylum procedure, when they are rigorously assessed to determine whether they are economic migrants or not. Processes of degradation, asylum seekers are subjected to ambiguous, time-consuming and humiliating processes. These are theoretically justified as being aimed at making sure people who really need refugee status are protected from those who are taking advantage of it; that is, they are subjected to these processes “for their own good”. However, these processes also act to reduce the wide variety of asylum seekers into more homogeneous categories of victims. The bureaucratic process of asylum aims to sort people out into moral hierarchies that generate the claim for asylum remains, people have the right for their permit to be renewed. However, if there are reasons to withdraw the refugee status, the right to have their permit issued and prolonged is withdrawn. This places refugees in a vulnerable situation, at risk of being removed from their homes, sociality and livelihoods, once the application for refugee status is approved, the applicant are fined large sums if they refuse to accept their quota of refugees. The process of asylum – that is, the sanctioning of the category of refugee – is not only controlled by the government; at every stage of the procedure, NGOs and corporate and transnational bodies, increasingly beyond the sovereignty of the nation state and involving more corporate and transnational bodies. These bodies, moreover, are informed by different logics. That is, the cantonal authorities’ understanding of who has the right to settle in their cantons will be informed by the political ideologies of the ruling party, while the concerns of NGOs and humanitarian organizations supporting refugees through asylum procedures are informed by international human rights legislation. Not all Swiss parties are supportive of Switzerland’s adherence to international laws that could curtail Swiss sovereignty over its population and territory. 

If the asylum application is approved, the applicant receives a temporary residence permit, which after 10 years can be turned into a permanent residence permit, pending consideration of particular cases in the canton of residence (Federal Assembly of the Swiss Confederation 1998). Therefore, even in the best-case scenario, when a person is granted asylum, they still remain in a condition of marginality in relation to the national body. They receive the same B-permit granted to European migrants, the extension of which depends on the person’s ability to get work and accommodation. The situation that generated the claim for asylum remains, people have the right to have the permit issued and prolonged is withdrawn. This places refugees in a vulnerable situation, at risk of being removed from the national territory altogether. Each canton has particular regulations around refugee integration programmes. This is often described by refugees as one of the most difficult stages and represents unexpected hardship, as they have to deal with their hosts in everyday face-to-face situations (Goffman 1967) and live up to their obligations as submissive and humble guests in accordance with the expectations of victimhood. They find it especially hard to get employment, rent an apartment and find a social support network. These dynamics of the reconfiguration of personhood – the destruction of the category of refugee – is not only controlled by the government; at every stage of the procedure, NGOs and corporate and transnational bodies, increasingly beyond the sovereignty of the nation state and involving more corporate and transnational bodies. These bodies, moreover, are informed by different logics. That is, the cantonal authorities’ understanding of who has the right to settle in their cantons will be informed by the political ideologies of the ruling party, while the concerns of NGOs and humanitarian organizations supporting refugees through asylum procedures are informed by international human rights legislation. Not all Swiss parties are supportive of Switzerland’s adherence to international laws that could curtail Swiss sovereignty over its population and territory. 

The period of liminality within which people are sorted and shaped into victims involves a complex array of structural partners, increasingly beyond the sovereignty of the nation state and involving more corporate and transnational bodies. These bodies, moreover, are informed by different logics. That is, the cantonal authorities’ understanding of who has the right to settle in their cantons will be informed by the political ideologies of the ruling party, while the concerns of NGOs and humanitarian organizations supporting refugees through asylum procedures are informed by international human rights legislation. Not all Swiss parties are supportive of Switzerland’s adherence to international laws that could curtail Swiss sovereignty over its population and territory. 

The process of application for refugee status in Switzerland starts at a federal level at one of the processing centres, at the airports or on international soil – in Turkey, for example. This is a potential cause of tension, as the final decision is made by the cantonal authorities, which has jurisdiction over asylum procedures within its territory. Once the application progresses further, applicants are transferred to asylum processing centres under cantonal jurisdiction; the cantons receive state funds for processing the applications, but bear the costs of deporting people in denied cases or integrating accepted refugees or people granted a temporary residence status. Cantons are fined large sums if they refuse to accept their quota of refugees. The process of asylum – that is, the sanctioning of the category of refugee – is not only controlled by the government; at every stage of the procedure, NGOs and corporate groups cooperate and compete for jurisdiction (and funds) for the management of refugee-related programmes. 

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Fig. 2. Return assistance for those who fail asylum applications.

Fig. 3. Residents in the short-term processing centre passing time and contacting relatives.


Defining a refugee is particularly problematic in Switzerland, where the process of ‘foreignization’ has been recurrently crucial in defining Swiss nationalism (Michel 2015). Turner’s work is important for understanding the nature of the crisis experienced by people in liminal moments. In the case of asylum seekers, understanding the multiple liminal processes that shape their transformation into refugees is not only important in order to unmask the bureaucratic procedures that aim to remake people, but it also highlights how populist, anti-foreigner interests harness the figure of the refugee in the redefinition of national boundaries.

By contrast, the type of sociality articulated by humanitarians and developmental organizations extends beyond the nation state and is fuelled by a belief in a shared humanity that has been marginalized by the state (Feldman & Ticktin 2010). At the core of the refugee crisis is a redefinition of the nature of the social, coping with changing social and political structures. Refugees, in their liminality, become buffers for a range of hierarchical categorizations: European worker/non-European economic migrants, EU/non-EU citizens, Christian/Muslim, etc. The host society acts upon asylum seekers in their space/time of limbo by determining the parameters of their acceptance into the social body. Through processes of humiliation and a flattening of differences among refugees and other liminal figures, such as migrants and foreigners more generally, national populations attempt to reclaim the sovereignty of the nation state, often resulting in an invigorated populist politics and essentialized views of community that trace its boundaries by people rather than territory.