

Liminality and the asylum process in Switzerland

MARINA GOLD

Marina Gold is a social anthropologist working as a researcher for the ERC Advanced Grant 'Egalitarianism: Forms, processes, comparisons' led by Bruce Kapferer at the University of Bergen. She has conducted her doctoral research on Cuba and the concept of revolution. Her post-doctoral research has focused on the European refugee crisis and its impact on human rights and humanitarian ideals. She is also an associated researcher at the Department for Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies (ISEK) at the University of Zurich. Her email is margogold@gmail.com.

Asylum seekers leave their homes in response to a moment of rupture, a crisis (increasingly persistent) that interrupts any semblance of normalcy, 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 seekers¹ are examples of people left in indefinite periods of liminality² for which there is no resolution. The asylum process – the legal and bureaucratic procedures that turn asylum seekers into refugees – is a dialectical 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 limbos. 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 separated 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.³ 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, illegal aliens, *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 to who has the responsibility over and the right to support refugees. The short-term processing centre in Zurich is a non-profit NGO that obtained the management of the project in a state-sponsored open call. It runs with state funding, but it is privately organized and subcontracts out to a security company to guard the centre at night (hired in 2017, when tensions in the centre built up as people perceived the futility of their requests). The intermingling of private, state and non-governmental organizations that manage camp life reflect the complexity of the process of incorporation into the host society. Religious organizations send charity to the privately-managed, state-funded centre; NGOs contribute with support programmes, providing food and entertainment to refugees; and cantonal governments are obliged to receive refugees processed by the processing centre.

For its residents, life at the centre revolves around the bureaucratic process of assessing asylum claims. In the very process of claiming asylum, people must prove their worth, both by subjecting themselves to the hostile interview process as well as to the spartan and austere routine of the asylum centre. At 7:00am, many residents leave for meetings at the immigration office and are taken to their appointments by the centre's transport service. They then have assigned jobs at the centre, such as cleaning, for which they get paid a token amount. If they fail to fulfil their assigned obligations, they miss out on their payment, and following repeated absences, they run the risk of being expelled and jeopardizing their asylum request. However, people at the centre explain that most of the day is spent waiting: for the results of the first interview, for papers to arrive from overseas, for news from relatives.

The configuration of the residents of the short-term processing centre has changed significantly since 2015. Initially people came by boat from Syria and North African countries, crossing the Balkans route and then

entering Switzerland through Italy or Austria on foot, bus or train. As border controls increased, and particularly after the EU-Turkey deal (June 2016) was put in practice, people started arriving from refugee camps in Turkey by aeroplane, and the nationalities varied: Afghans and Syrians remained the most numerous, but African refugees included people from Sierra Leone, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Eritrea and Burkina Faso, to name a few. The numbers of refugees arriving at the centre decreased, revealing the impact of 'offshore'-type policies implemented in Europe.

By 2017, the centre was no longer at full capacity and in October 2018, it had been reduced to almost a third of its size as part of the council land on which it stood was ceded to build a sports stadium, much to the content of the local community. The centre will soon be closed, as a newer, 'more secure' centre is being built in another, less upwardly mobile neighbourhood. This new centre will not be open to the public. The process of the securitization and privatization of the asylum procedure became evident in the period of study. This was supported by the arguments of the far right that equated asylum seekers with potentially 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 sessional 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 symbolically paid 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 Swiss 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.

1. Fassin (2012) makes a point about categorical distinctions between the abstract and ennobling 'refugee' and the concrete figure of the 'asylum seeker', who does not always awaken the same sympathy. I make the distinction reluctantly, acknowledging the political implications in reproducing these conservative categories. However, it is the process of exclusion (and its implications) that concerns me here. When I make the distinction between asylum seeker and refugee, I refer to the way these categories are applied (created and reinforced) through liminality in the process of asylum within Europe.

2. Processes of asylum, and further integration once refugee status is obtained, can take decades. Some people shift from asylum seeker to undocumented migrant and remain in legal and economic limbo indefinitely.

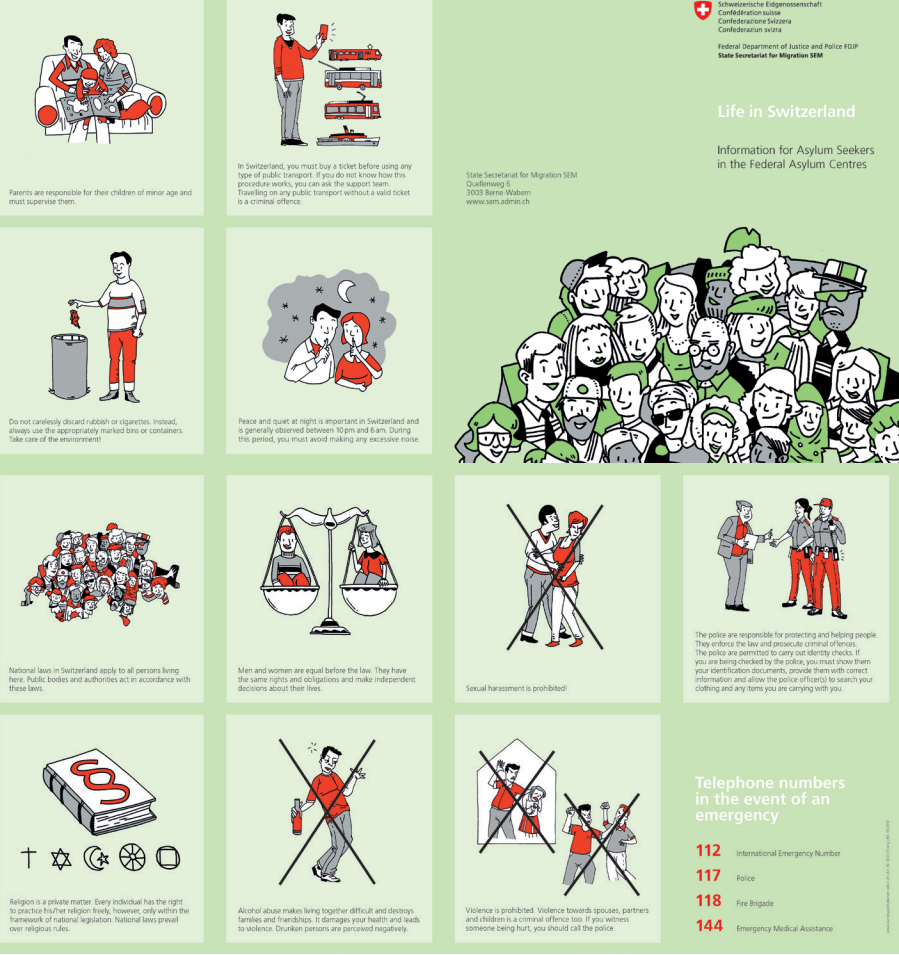
3. If their application moves forward, they are relocated to a cantonal centre.

4. A recent initiative proposed by the Swiss People's Party (SVP) was defeated (the self-determination initiative), which would have granted Switzerland the right to retrospectively review all international treaties that contradicted national laws.

5. In France, conversely, people with legally recognized refugee status can apply to be naturalized as French citizens immediately and obtain travel documents. This leaves refugees and asylum seekers in Switzerland in liminal positions for long periods of time, and in many cases they never achieve full civic status.

6. It was only in 2018 that the short-term processing centre I observed separated families, women and unaccompanied minors from single men.

7. The Swiss process of asylum only contemplates some form of free legal advice at the beginning of the procedure. This gap is mostly covered by non-governmental organizations and charitable organizations.



STATE SECRETARY FOR MIGRATION SEM

Fig. 1. A sign hanging in the short-term processing centre explaining Swiss ideals to refugees.

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 over what is an important determinant in people's lives, but underpinned by a decision to speed up the removal of those who would not receive asylum and would otherwise remain indefinitely in the national territory.

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. Through 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 determine those who deserve to be supported and integrated and those who are beyond assistance.

Bureaucratic reconfigurations

A key concern of the asylum process is to separate 'victims' from 'opportunists' (economic migrants). The concern with the distinction between economic migrant and refugee is not new within academic and political debates (see Hein 1993), but it takes on an added complexity when the economic/political distinction made between migrant/refugee is increasingly untenable and the debate becomes deeply moralized. These categories have been imbued with a strong ethical and moral character, becoming the 'touchstone of global ethics' and the 'symbol of the cost of the international system of nation-states based on a hierarchy of exclusion' (Humphrey 2002: 118). This pertains to the

nature of the current crisis that is generating refugees today: increasing inequalities between the Global North and South and shifts in the nature of labour that displace workers to the margins while moving capital reproduction to the financial centres of the global capitalist system (Dardot & Laval 2009; Hedges & Sacco 2012). Today's refugees cannot be quite as easily absorbed as those who emerged from the upheavals of the two world wars. Therefore, the meaning of 'refugees' in the current context has shifted, as has the role of the liminal period of asylum request.

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 authority, 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.

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.⁴

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.⁵ While the situation that generated 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 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

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

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

Fassin, D. 2012.

Humanitarian reason: A moral history of the present. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Federal Assembly of the Swiss Confederation 1998. Asylum Act. 142.31.pdf retrieved from <https://www.admin.ch/>.

Feldman, I. & M. Ticktin (eds) 2010. *In the name of humanity: The government of threat and care.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Garfinkel, H. 1956. Conditions of successful degradation ceremonies.

American Journal of Sociology 61(5): 420-424.

Goffman, E. 1967. *Interaction ritual: Essays in face-to-face behavior.* New York: Routledge.

Gold, M. 2019. The Swiss paradox: Egalitarianism and hierarchy in a model democracy. *Social Analysis* 63(1): 22-43.

Harrell-Bond, B.E. & E. Voutira 1992. Anthropology and the study of refugees. *Anthropology Today* 8(4): 6-10.

Hedges, C. & J. Sacco 2012. *Days of destruction, days of revolt.* New York: Nation Books.

Hein, J. 1993. Refugees, immigrants, and the state. *Annual Review of Sociology* 19: 43-59.

Humphrey, M. 2002. Humanitarianism, terrorism and the transnational border. *Social Analysis* 46(1): 118-124.

Maley, W. 2016. *What is a refugee?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Malkki, L. 1995. Refugees and exile: From 'refugee studies' to the national order of things. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 495-523.

Michel, N.V. 2015. Sheepology: The postcolonial politics of raceless racism in Switzerland. *Postcolonial Studies* 18(4): 410-426.

Turner, V. 1967. *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

— 1969. *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure.* Chicago: Aldine Publications.

— 1974. Liminal to liminoid, in play, flow, and ritual: An essay in comparative symbology. *Rice University Studies* 60(3): 53-92.

of the asylum seeker (a potentially dangerous economic migrant) and the reconfiguration into a refugee (a humble and morally deserving victim) – are played out in multiple 'degradation ceremonies' (Garfinkel 1956) throughout the asylum and integration process. These include the lack of recognition of people's class and level of education, grouping together of asylum seekers indistinctly into processing centres⁶ and pressure placed on children to integrate and reject their parents' religion and beliefs, for example.

Temporary refugee status, which contemplates a return home when the crisis in the home country is averted, generates even more ambiguity. Those who have been denied their refugee status but appeal this decision are thus allowed to remain in Switzerland when their return is inadmissible, unreasonable or impossible. They receive temporary protection until their appeal is resolved.

These structural obstacles (similar across Europe) are aggravated by complex bureaucratic procedures that require expert knowledge⁷ (lawyers, consultants, auditors), making the process of asylum request unintelligible and carefully policed by state and corporate actors. By standardizing procedures in an effort to produce accountability and transparency, the bureaucratic machinery (increasingly modelled on corporate management) transforms people into codes and enables a more distanced and calculated exclusion.

The structural violence of regional and national legal procedures is echoed in local reactions against the settlement of refugees and in the increase of anti-immigration political positions. Some communes pay the fines in order to avoid taking in their quotas, or recommend that residents desist from renting out properties to refugees with temporary permits because it would imply that the local government would need to pay social benefits to support them and it could lead to 'the municipality's financial ruin' (*Aargauer Zeitung* 2016).

In the process of becoming a refugee, people are initially segregated from the social whole in detention centres, they are stripped of their sense of self and levelled into homogenizing categories, such as 'asylum seeker', that reduce their individuality and create a group of meek and humble victims. These then become exposed to the jurisdiction of the local community of the canton as temporary residents (on probation). However, they remain foreigners, unable to vote (a key element of Swiss sociality), and therefore liminal to the national community. Thus, the process of becoming a refugee does not necessarily lead to the resolution of the crisis that prompted people to leave their homes in the first place, as liminal periods are sometimes too long to enable processes of reintegration.

Conclusion

The three-part process of social and structural transformation developed by Turner from van Gennep in *The ritual process* (1969) applied to 'internal' processes of social reproduction. However, the asylum procedure is a process of incorporating external others into national structures, and it is not only mediated by the national social body, but also responds to transnational political and ideological logics which are not always compatible.

Furthermore, the crisis that has spurred the movement of refugees is not resolved through the process of recognizing and incorporating refugees under European national (and transnational) orders. The bureaucratic reconfiguration of asylum seekers into refugees/economic migrants occurs outside governmental logics as well as within federal and local immigration processes. The very category of 'refugee', as it is applied currently in Europe, emerges from the formation of the nation state and the process of decolonization in post-war Europe (Maley 2016).



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 humanitarian 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. ●