



# Claiming Time: Refugees and Asylum Seekers Dealing with the Production of Different Temporal Regimes by Asylum and Reception Policies

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## Introduction: an Overview on the Relationship Between Time and Power

As editors of this Special Issue, more than a year after the IMISCOE Conference on the relationship between migration and temporality, we have begun to reflect critically on what we may have taken for granted in the initial stage of our work, namely, the role that is generally attributed to time and temporality in the lives of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees.

Whereas initially we felt focused our efforts exclusively on uncovering the forms of subjection and disciplining of time imposed by governmental agencies and institutions when controlling borders and territories, now we are concerned with the forms of denial of time and coevalness that inspire many analyses of contemporary migrations.

In this introduction, therefore, we will scrutinize the expression “claiming time,” using a much richer horizon of meanings to examine our initial attempt to show how migrants strive to claim time within the *dispositif* of control, reception, and discipline.

Our starting point is that when reasoning about the relationship between migration, time, and temporality, it is not sufficient to highlight the strategic role played by time in bordering and de-bordering practices. It is also important to analyze how the act of timing—which means that people are brought in or out of

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synchronicity—acquires a decisive role in the construction of the 'Other' and the practice of "Otherness."

Taking heed of the warning from migration scholars against attributing to migrants the characteristic of being perpetually "out of time" (Çağlar, 2016; Jacobsen et al., 2021; Kirstoglou & Simpson, 2020; Ramsay, 2019), this Special Issue aims to clarify the hegemonic role of time and temporality in the construction of Otherness.

This implies an initial focus on the power exerted by forms of abstraction, acts of temporalisation, and representations of time on individuals' timescapes. Before focusing on the relationship between migrants, time and temporality, we intend to examine *allochronisms* (Fabian, 1983), *chronocracy* (Kirstoglou & Simpson, 2020), the *politics of time* (Jacobsen et al., 2021), *chronotopes* (Bakhtin, 1981; Bear, 2014), and *heterochrony* (Bear, 2014; Foucault, 2006; Palumbo, 2015). In each of these configurations and representations of time, we can see power at work.

According to the perspective we intend to adopt, it is impossible to understand to what extent bordering and de-bordering practices instrumentally employ time until sufficient clarity is shed on the relationship between time and power (Bourdieu, 2000).

Our reasoning echoes the analyses of the anthropologist Fabian (1983) and, in particular, his criticism of the tendency to use the ethnographic present in descriptions and representations concerning "Others": those who inhabit worlds that are different or distant from the author. Leveraging this tendency, the "Other" is captured by the ethnographic "writing machine" (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) and strategically represented as someone who lives in an absolute present, literally detached from any connection with time and history. Through the notion of *allochronism*, Fabian reveals that, in the presence of the "Other," the ethnographic machine can produce the act of temporalisation.

More recently, Kirstoglou and Simpson have made a significant contribution to anthropological studies on time and the so-called "temporal turn" through the use of the term *chronocracy*, which "draws attention to the ways in which governance is shot through with the power to shape the temporalities in which people live out their everyday lives" (2020:3). Similarly to Fabian's approach, they do not describe the terms of the relationship between time and power as being the result of particular production relations, such as those of factory time (Barber & Lem, 2018), but instead refer more generally to the act of temporalisation, which is not a neutral process: "Acts of temporalisation can also be violent enactments of *chronocracy* insofar as various discursive and practical regimes can produce diverse temporalities and different social and symbolic timelines that deny coevalness to certain subjects" (Kirstoglou & Simpson, 2020: 7).

From this perspective, "claiming time" means questioning those analyses, which despite the teachings of Fabian, still resort to the representation of subjects whose life trajectories would be distinguished from others as they are always in the process of synchronizing.

From a conceptual point of view, it is not the idea of synchronization that misleads or scandalizes us but rather how it is deployed in such contexts, particularly in contexts of migration.

It would be worth looking more closely at what Ramsay (2019) has said about precariousness, suggesting that it is not a condition peculiar to refugees but is imposed globally by capitalist modes of production. A deep sense of uncertainty, its prolongation, and the desire to resynchronize with the idea of individual progress are all products of the neoliberal capitalist ideal, and are thus shared by most individuals, not just migrants.

The aim, therefore, should be to examine the strategies, *dispositifs* and processes of disarticulation and fragmentation of time enacted by institutions, as well as the coping tactics that individuals put into action or have at their disposal to resynchronize.

In doing so, we wish to emphasise that it is not a question of reasoning in universalist and abstract terms, nor of levelling out the effects that the *dispositifs* and processes of disarticulation and fragmentation of time concretely generate in individuals' lives. The idea is to stop using the differences and distinctions that shape individuals' everyday lives as a pretext to argue for and forge differences and distinctions of an ontological, ideological and temporal nature between subjects.

Considering the act of synchronization as something that concerns most individuals allows us to escape from the traps of *allochronism* and to avoid the danger of placing certain subjects outside modernity.

Taking his cue from the political events of a Sicilian city grappling with a new and unexpected political scenario, Palumbo shows how the economic crisis has exacerbated multiple and asynchronous temporal rhythms. He claims that: "the coexistence of multiple, often conflicting, experiences of temporality and various institutional structures of time is a characteristic of late modernity" (2015:13). Thus, hiding the coexistence of different temporal rhythms and synchronicity is impossible, unless we want to argue that some individuals live outside modernity.

Palumbo later encourages us to think ethnographically about the co-presence of multiple times and temporal experiences, invoking heterochrony, which refers to the juxtaposition of times that would normally be, or should be, incompatible (Foucault, 2006).

In fact, we are deliberately omitting to specify that this is the definition Foucault refers to regarding the meaning of the term *heterotopias*. However, it is not a real omission, as Foucault himself admits: "Heterotopias are mostly connected to strange divisions of time and they appear related, if you will, to heterochrony" (Foucault, 2006: 20). That which Foucault describes in terms of the juxtaposition of spaces also applies to time:

Whereas the concept of *allochronism* presupposed the existence of two temporalities—one in constant motion, which is ours, and another crystallized and sealed in an eternal present, belonging to others—the concept of heterochrony instead embraces the idea of coexistence, juxtaposition and accumulation.

Just like those of Foucault, the theses of Fabian reintroduce the inseparability of space and time.

By pushing others out of History, *allochronism* proves to be a strategy of localization. Similarly, heterochrony strives to construct a general archive through the modern formula of accumulating temporalities within specific spaces. Although

these strategies differ in their modes of action and objectives, they both imply an interrelation between the properties of space and time.

The connection between space and time has been described in various socio-anthropological investigations (Bear, 2014; Kirstoglou & Simpson, 2020; Munn, 1992), and much emphasis has been placed on the acts of representation and temporal maps through which individuals navigate and orient themselves in time (Gell, 1992). In this analysis, time becomes a tool for understanding power dynamics, asymmetric relations and the forms of agency that individuals employ to orient themselves or, as mentioned above, resynchronise. As Emirbayer and Mische argue: the “agentic dimension of social action can only be captured if it is analytically situated within the flow of time” (1998: 963–4). This is because the structural contexts of action are temporal and consist in overlapping *ways of ordering time* within which social actors move and recompose their temporal orientations to change their relationship to structure (Ibidem). Thus, individuals create representations and time maps by themselves to navigate through conflicting temporalities and to «bring incommensurable rhythms and representations into synchronicity» (Bear, 2014: 18).

Always linked to forms of agency, time representations (*chronotopes*) materialise and make time–space visible through the use of images and narrative structures (Bakhtin, 1981). Although this is the starting point for Bear (2014), she examines the relationship between representation and forms of agency by interweaving the use of temporal maps (Gell, 1992)—“which have only a partial relationship with the passage of real time, yet mediate and shape personal experience” (Bear, 2014: 15)—with Munn’s observations. The latter argues that: “Actors are not only ‘in’ this time (space–time), but they are constructing it and their own time (143: 11ff) in the particular kinds of relations they form between themselves (and their purposes) and the temporal reference points (which are also spatial forms)” (1992:104).

Going beyond the theories that have informed her reasoning, Bear describes this process of mediating and shaping personal experiences of time as “work in/of time”:

Thus, investigating time implies, on the one hand, examining how “spatiotemporal asymmetries between timescapes force people to live in the timelines of others, or worse, to inhabit various appendices of time, locked in structures of waiting for, and in postponed presents” (Kirstoglou & Simpson, 2020: 24), and, on the other hand, exploring how individuals navigate timescapes and produce time-maps and representations of time according to their social, economic, political and cultural contexts.

In short, it is about understanding the relationship between the *politics* and the *poetics* of time. In a recently published volume, Janeja and Bandak (2018) discuss this in relation to the notion of waiting: a concept widely explored in analyses of migration and time (Hage, 2009a; Khosravi, 2014; Karlsen, 2021). The two authors provide an interpretation of waiting as a field of force in which institutional strategies that determine the condition of waiting converge (*politics*), along with the forms of agency devised by individuals to experience the waiting moment in a creative, rather than solely passive, manner (*poetics*). Just as individuals employ coping mechanisms during the waiting period—in the form of poetics, imaginaries, and

creative practices—we can also observe the imagination at work (Appadurai, 1996) in the way social actors navigate the politics of time.

Imagining another time, living in the memory of past times and composing a bricolage of one's own time and memories (Jackson, 2008) are equally plausible and valid forms of agency, especially when individuals are forced to stay inside a reception centre or a refugee camp for an uncertain and seemingly “endless” period.

If we distinguish between “waiting for” and “waiting to” (Appadurai, 2013; Janeja & Bandak, 2018; Karlsen, 2021), we see that movement as an apparent counterpart to waiting reveals the extreme flexibility of time, granting individuals the capacity to become authors of their own time and imbuing its suspension with alternative meanings (Brun, 2015; Gasparini, 1995; Rotter, 2016; Sampson et al., 2016).

Following Andersson: “There is, then, a doubleness to waiting. On the one hand, it constitutes an imposed state of ‘stuckedness’ (Hage, 2009b) engendered by pre-emptive controls, in which time may appear as ‘sticky’ or ‘suspended’ (Griffiths, 2014). On the other hand, it is a biding of time: a tactic, in Michel de Certeau’s (1984) sense, or a technique” (2014: 802). Thus, in the time of waiting, individuals can find a space—an empty space—that will give them the means to, and finally allow them to, act (Crapanzano, 1985).

For each of the contributions in this Special Issue, it is essential to provide the readers with a vision of time unfolding through the succession of “spaces” and “intervals” (Lévesque, 2013), in which the capacity to aspire, produce, create and fabricate tends to become a shared tactic among individuals. And, as Sayad (1999) has taught us, of these individuals it is migrants who best demonstrate and reflect the distortions and contradictions of a society that sees in the strategic use of time an opportunity to slow down, block, stop, and annihilate those who decide to cross the boundaries of space and time.

Although not entirely exhaustive, this premise should prepare the reader for the contributions collected in this volume and, more broadly, for an analysis of the relationship between migrations, time, and temporality. From Munn (1992) onwards, there was an attempt to ensure that analyses of time were not confined to specific circumstances or particular events, as these might not be sufficiently capable of explaining the relationship between time and power, time and strategies of temporalisation, and time and space.

This is still relevant in this phase of renewed interest in the study of time and its connection to migration. Within the so-called *temporal turn*, a lot of attention has been paid to migrants and the obstacles that interfere with their biographical and geographical trajectories or that prevent them from completing their migration projects. However, as we have explained above, analyses of migrations must be careful not to focus on the existential and material uncertainties of migrants without first clarifying that these uncertainties are a distinctive feature of late modernity. To do so would risk reigniting the never entirely dormant idea that migrants are always outside of time. Thus, our task in this volume is “to understand agency and time from the perspective of others, not ourselves” (Bear, 2014: 24).

## Contents of the Special Issue

The Authors of this Special Issue highlight the relationship between time and power through analyses ranging from the politics of borders, through the emergency produced inside and outside the reception system, to the time regime imposed on resettled refugees.

The contribution of Sebastian Benedikt explores informal camps for refugees and asylum seekers, portraying it as a complex space oscillating between coercion and subversion. Drawing on data and ethnographic materials collected between 2018 and 2023 in Italy, the Author meticulously dissects the dual nature of informality. Specifically, Benedikt illustrates how informality serves as a strategic tool for authorities and institutions to disrupt the mobility, temporal dynamics, and multifaceted identities of migrants. Simultaneously, it emerges as a tactical resource employed by migrants to elude control, deportation, and detention, enabling them to pursue their migration projects. Contesting the temporal structures of control, the politics of violence and abandonment, migrants assertively “claim time.” In doing so, they articulate that time can be reconfigured in alignment with their diverse and subjective temporal experiences.

Altin and Degli Uberti’s paper investigates the impact of diverse mobility and reception regimes on temporal experience and actions of asylum seekers along the so-called “Balkan route” and Ukrainian refugees escaping conflict. Adopting a historical perspective, the authors explore how the humanitarian regime shapes individuals’ lives in regions where memories of wars, civil conflicts, and refoulement experiences remain vivid. In this endeavour, Altin and Degli Uberti dismantle the historical layers of hospitality in the border areas of northeastern Italy, presenting a nuanced portrayal of temporal relations. This portrayal intertwines institutional acts of temporalization and bordering with subjective temporal experiences and practices of debordering.

Viola Castellano delves into a battleground played along the temporal dimension, focussing on the trajectories embarked upon by young Gambian male migrants in their post-asylum phase. In this exploration, Castellano lucidly delineates the impact wrought by the administrative and juridical systems on the lives of migrants, particularly in shaping their existential precariousness. Concurrently, she scrutinizes temporal dispossession as an ongoing process woven into the experiences of Gambians on the move—before, during, and after their arrival in Europe. This analysis reveals that, amid this process of dispossession, individuals can actively engage in a struggle, shaping new existential journeys.

Silvia Pitzalis’ prolonged fieldwork offers a rich analysis of the meaning of “structural time of emergency.” Paying attention to the practices put in place by social workers in the Italian reception system for asylum seekers and refugees, Pitzalis thoroughly investigates how the “tyranny of emergency” affects both the present and future of migrants and the daily working lives of reception social workers. Even in her contribution, however, the violence exercised by institutions seems to be mitigated by individuals through strategies situated in the flow of time.

Through the presentation of a life story, Stefania Spada's contribution delves into the proliferation of measures and strategies adopted by institutions in recognising and granting international protection. By looking at the "temporal architecture" (Sharma, 2014) implemented by Italy and the European Union, the case study proposed by Spada returns to a complex temporal landscape in which we can see different acts of institutional temporalisation at play. According to the Author, the characteristics of governmental time—acted out in terms of time allowed, spent, and available—govern contemporary migration flows and push migrants to endure these policies while still leaving margins for individual action.

Forde, McGovern, and Moran introduce the concept of "imagined temporality" to investigate the different temporal subjectivities, cultures of time, "myths," and realities narrated by resettlement workers who were part of the resettlement of vulnerable Syrian people in the UK. Although little emphasis has been placed on the experiences and narratives of resettled workers in this period of social, economic, and political change due to the UK's exit from the EU, the authors' work provides an in-depth description of these workers' perceptions and concerns. The concept of "imagined temporality" serves to understand both the hopes of resettlement workers and their struggles to cope with the divisive post-Brexit scenario and how they counter the temporal regime imposed on migrant living conditions.

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