

# Nonrecording the “European refugee crisis” in Greece

## Navigating through irregular bureaucracy

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*Abstract:* This article explores nonrecording on the borders of Europe during the “European refugee crisis” in 2015. It examines the ambiguous practices of border control and the diverse actors involved. Taking the island of Lesbos as its starting point, the article interrogates how state functionaries manage an “irregular” bureaucracy. Irregular bureaucracy is approached as an essential element of statecraft, rather than an indication of state failure. Nonrecording is thus a crucial site of contestation between the state, nonstate agents, and the government, as well as between Greece and “Europe.” Nevertheless, despite the prevalence of irregularity, the imagery associated with ideal bureaucracy—a system of absolute knowledge, control, and governance of populations—is powerful; and yet, the actors are fully aware that it is a fantasy.

*Keywords:* borders, bureaucracy, “European refugee crisis,” Greece, the state

It is eight o'clock in the morning and I am sitting inside the coast guard's battered container unit in the port terminal of Mytilene, the capital of Lesbos. In a small desk facing the window, two coast guards are propped in front of respective computer screens. A couple of their colleagues write down today's date and a number on little white note papers, and stamp them with the local port authority logo. They are all wearing civilian clothes. It is the middle of August 2015 and although it is still early, the outdoor temperature shows that this will be another hot day. Inside the container, however, the air conditioner sends cold waves to our backs. The door remains closed, and the only contact between the officers and the crowd gathering outside is through the window.

“Kunie! Kenite [*sic*]!” the coast guard shouts to a confused face. “Kunie [*sic*] sou leo! Dhe milas aravika? Tote ti soi Syrios ise?” “Kunie [*sic*]! Don't you speak Arabic? Aren't you supposed to be Syrian?” he asks in Greek. “Family name!” The coast guard carries on several times in English and receives no answer whatsoever. The officer gets more and more irritated and desperate. He shouts and curses in Greek, possibly addressing his colleagues and myself, considering the fact that his interlocutor does not speak the language but definitely notices the violence of the guard's words. Finally, somebody from the crowd translates the word into Arabic, and then the coast guard gets the answer he was looking for. “Hussain,” he types with Latin characters in an excel file. In this tense atmosphere of incen-



sant yelling and verbal violence, the officer requests the rest of the information needed in electronic form: surname, first name, father’s and mother’s surname, year of birth, gender, nationality, and passport number. These are the essential personal data constituting a person’s existence in the state’s eyes. Only some people of Syrian origin hold their passports and hand them over to the coast guards, who immediately feel relieved that they will not have to enter into this vicious circle of miscommunication. However, most of the approximately two thousand people that the two shifts of coast guards will deal with today do not have passports and do not speak English.<sup>1</sup>

Along with other Mediterranean areas,<sup>2</sup> Lesbos has been one of the borderlands<sup>3</sup> of Europe for many years. During what has come to be known as the “European refugee crisis” in 2015,<sup>4</sup> the island was the main gateway to Europe for people traveling from the Middle East (primarily from Syria) and Africa. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there were 500,018 arrivals on this island of 85,000 inhabitants in 2015.<sup>5</sup> Every day, thousands of people crossed the Aegean Sea in unseaworthy rubber dinghies. The fortunate ones reached the shores of Lesbos, which turned into the “frontline of the refugee crisis” (Papataxiarchis 2016) and a solidarity terrain (Rozakou 2016). Upon arrival, border crossers went through several bureaucratic procedures before they were officially allowed to travel out of the island.

This article explores bureaucratic practices on the border in the summer and fall of 2015, and focuses on street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980), mainly police officers and coast guards. These “bureaucrats with weapons”—to borrow David Graeber’s term (2012: 117)—were assigned to the task of registration and the overall management of those crossing the border, a choice that echoes the policing and repressive character of European Union (EU) migration policies (Fassin 2011). Police officers and coast guards, alongside other state functionaries (public prosecutor, mayor, prefect, etc.), EU officers, and

nonstate agents (intergovernmental [IGOs] and nongovernmental organizations [NGOs], local collectives, independent Greek and foreign volunteers, locals, etc.) formed a diverse group of actors who acquired shifting roles. These actors often formed a “continuum” grounded on a common logic (Kalir and Wissink 2015), and at other times they competed and collided with one another. Furthermore, as “bricoleurs [who worked] both within and upon ‘the system’” (Herzfeld 1992: 56), they took part in makeshift practices of incomplete recording.

I here address what one police officer named “irregular” bureaucracies: nonrecording practices and modes of dealing with irregular migration in improvised ways. In a setting of “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 1997), police officers confided in me as a fellow Greek what they denied to their European colleagues. I was informed that they worked “irregularly,” that they were asked to do this and that they had been practically “abandoned” by the state to perform their duties in an “irregular” way. In the case I study, the functionaries of the state not only found the practices of the state (which they embodied) illegible (cf. Das 2004: 234) but also totally “irregular.” Police officers criticized what they considered to be the government’s strategy of nonrecording and its general pro-immigration agenda. From their viewpoint, nonrecording was considered a deliberate strategy of the state. However, instead of producing border crossers as vulnerable subjects (cf. Kalir, Lan, and Vrăbiescu, this issue), nonrecording in the summer and autumn of 2015 enabled their movement.

The *harti* (“paper” in Greek), which was the document border crossers received upon registration, had become known to everyone—border crossers, the authorities, and organizations alike. It was an administrative expulsion order dictating that they should leave the country voluntarily within a period of six months (Syrians, Somalis, and other people classified as nondeportable) or one month (all other nationalities). As I observed, documents produced during registration lacked some essential information, such as a photo of the holder, and fingerprinting was

often omitted or selectively executed. At the same time, *harta* (pl.) were full of errors and inconsistencies; names were misspelled, families were filed under different surnames, years of birth were inaccurate, and even nationalities were mixed up. The sarcastic comment the coast guard made in the opening vignette—“Aren’t you supposed to be Syrian?”—questions not only the nationality of the registered population, but the recording procedure itself. All information entered into the computer was based on the declaration of the border crossers.

The notion of “irregular” bureaucracies does not imply that I adopt an approach grounded on the “failure of the state” (see Kalir and Van Schendel, this issue). What I claim is that the state is actually present and produced through even the most paradoxical bureaucratic processes. Contrary to ideal-type normative accounts of bureaucracy, I conceptualize this irregularity not as an indication of the state’s inability to impose order, but as an essential element of statecraft. Bureaucratic procedures at the border are at the core of producing the “state effect,” in Timothy Mitchell’s terms ([1991] 2006): the “state” as a verified, solid entity and as an ideological instrument. At the same time, the ethnography of bureaucracy at the border underlines the dubious, chaotic, and constantly shifting techniques that aim to control and regulate the population. How is registration realized, and what kind of hybrid documents are produced? What kind of tensions does nonrecording reveal? Finally, how does the interplay between the top level of the state, street-level state functionaries, and non-state actors transpire?

The article draws upon fieldwork on the island of Lesbos during the summer and autumn of 2015 and on repeated visits since then. A great part of my research concerned attending to bureaucratic processes that took place inside registration and reception locations: Kara Tepe camp (designated for Syrians), the Moria center (where all other nationalities were registered), the port terminal (where the initial registration took place for everyone), and the police department (where documents were issued). Since

2014, I have been studying the implementation of deportation policies and the overall management of irregular migration in Greece. In Athens, my fieldwork focused on state and nonstate agents, and took place in preremoval and open reception centers, demonstrations, and solidarity initiatives. I have conducted interviews with police officers, NGO and IGO personnel, and volunteers.

In the next section, I present the theoretical debates on the state as an entity that seeks to render its subjects legible. I argue, in line with Barak Kalir and Willem van Schendel (this issue), that nonrecording practices are anything but unusual. In the following two parts, the ethnography illustrates the uneasy relationships between the police officers, the state, and “Europe.” A critical moment in early autumn 2015 reveals the interplay between state and nonstate actors. It also reflects the significance of *any* form of registration, even a counterfeit one. The article ends with a discussion on the broader theme of irregularity as an element of state and suprastate policies in light of recent evolvments in the border of Lesbos.

### Dubious bureaucracy

According to Michel Foucault (2007), governmentality emerges in eighteenth-century Europe as a mode of ruling based on population knowledge and control. Knowledge becomes both the goal and justification of a government that no longer focuses merely on discipline, but expands into the care and management of its population. Scientific knowledge of populations developed in modern times when birth, death, family planning, and public health became objects of study. In the “era of governmentality,” a set of techniques and strategies is elaborated on in order to render a society governable; population knowledge must be accurately collected and carefully recorded. In this line of theoretical conceptualization, registration (Caplan and Torpey 2001), identification (Caplan and Torpey 2001; Lyon 2005), and documentation practices

(Riles 2006; Yngvesson and Coutin 2006) are considered regulatory and classificatory technologies. Numbers, documents, fingerprints, and photographs, among other modes, are essential technologies of state power. They are part of the administrative techniques that render a society “legible” to the state (Scott 1998). This pursuit of objective truth is embedded in the prominence of bodily, biological features such as fingerprints (Cole 2001). Enumeration is also at the heart of an objectified science of society that emerges in modern times with the development of statistics and the effort to control and manage populations through figures and “objective” data (Hacking 1982; Urla 1993).

As far as human movement and borders are concerned, administrative techniques and registration are bound up with attempts to control people’s mobility, as the history of the passport highlights (Torpey 2000). A complex administrative apparatus, both at the borders and in the interior, is directly oriented toward the control of immigration. This bureaucracy is a fundamental part of the European border regime. The EU project (as a unified entity) has led to a significant modification at borders and border control under a sovereign state. Internal borders (of the EU countries that have signed the Schengen treaty) dissolve in an area of free movement, whereas what arises is the growing policing of the union’s external borders (Andersson 2014; Bigo and Guild 2005; Fassin 2011; Feldman 2012; Huysmans 2006; Wilson 2012) and “buffer zones” in its outer peripheries (Del Sarto 2010). Population governance and knowledge stopped being the mere focus of state control long ago and have expanded to a supranational level of (digital) surveillance (Broeders 2011). The emergence of a meticulous system of fingerprinting accumulation and storing in the EU database Eurodac is grounded on the significance of this physical component as the main element of identification.

Nevertheless, all these technologies of power are less coercive and systematic than a normative perspective of solid and rational rule would suggest. Foucault’s influence “has encouraged

many scholars to overstate the bureaucratic enthusiasm for information gathering and it has discouraged research into *the limits of bureaucratic knowledge*” (Sztejer and Breckenridge 2012: 7; emphasis added). Recent ethnographies challenge the assumption that documentation serves the ever-present sight of the sovereign. They bring the dubious and unpredictable outcome of such techniques and nonrecording practices (see other articles in this issue) to the fore. Instead of producing legible subjects, documents may make people illegible to themselves (Cabot 2012) or even to bureaucrats (Hoag 2010). At the same time, documents are not simply the products and instruments of bureaucratic procedures, but “are constitutive of bureaucratic rules, ideologies, knowledge, practices, subjectivities, objects, outcomes, and even the organizations themselves” (Hull 2012: 253). As Heath Cabot illustrates in her ethnography of the Greek asylum system, the unpredictability of associated bureaucracy reflects the entwinement of legality and illegality. Documents thus acquire unexpected meanings, and the deportation order, for example, is interpreted as a temporary permission to stay in the country (2014: 45–48).

Bureaucratic procedures often differ from official policies. The ways a bureaucracy operates are embedded within broader cultural patterns of conduct and sociality. Cultures that are well known for their generous practices of hospitality are also distinguished by harsh bureaucratic indifference and hostility, reflecting the cultural construction of identities and social boundaries (Herzfeld 1992: 40). In other cases, bureaucratic encounters between state functionaries and border crossers unexpectedly turn into interactions between subjects who are not merely defined in terms of state belonging, but as people in search of a “normal life” (Dzenovska 2014).

In line with other ethnographies of the state, I argue that irregularity, like illegibility (Das 2004) and illegality (Heyman and Smart 1999; Jusio-nyte 2015; Van Schendel and Abraham 2005), is in fact a formative element of the state “as a theoretical and political object” (Das and Poole 2004: 6). In many cases, bureaucracy produces

mess instead of order (Kalir 2014). This interplay between state and irregularity challenges the normative distinction between state and lawlessness, and also reveals their coconstitutive character. Drawing upon border procedures, I claim that “the magic of the state” (Das 2004) is totally compatible with the ambiguity and even irregularity of state bureaucratic modalities. At the same time, absolute control through a rational bureaucracy appears as an aspiration of power and a key element of the fantasy about the state as a regulating entity. As a result, despite the fact that irregular bureaucracy is the norm, all agents involved—state functionaries, border crossers, civil society actors—remain loyal to the image of an ideal-type bureaucracy.

### **Apologetic bureaucrats**

“Everything is irregular here. They [border crossers] are irregular; we are also irregular.”

—Police officer, Moria center,  
25 August 2015

In a world of ideal order, the people outside the container in the opening vignette were supposed to stand in two lines facing the narrow openings in the windows. Yet, as more people arrived, the two lines dissolved into a disordered crowd. The yelling coming from inside the claustrophobic container was incessant, and when the crowd became unmanageable, the coast guards threatened to stop the procedure. The border crossers who completed this part of the registration process left the window with a small piece of white paper in their hands. Officers initiated this little rectangular note in an effort to put “order” into a chaotic, confusing, and constantly shifting procedure. The paper represented and materialized the first step in a bureaucratic process that marked the crossing of the border. The port authority stamp served as a transformative symbol of state authority, turning this mundane object into a bureaucratic document. Although its meaning was incomprehensible to its owner,

the rectangular note connected this person to a “case.” From that point on, until registration was completed, border crossers were formally detained for “irregular entrance” into the country. People who declared to be Syrians were separated from other nationalities; whereas the former were directed to the Kara Tepe camp (run by no authority since mid-July),<sup>6</sup> the rest were taken to the Moria camp to complete their registration. Syrians did not go through any further registration procedures. Instead, after a few days, they were allowed to travel and to present themselves to the Athens police directorate in order to finalize their registration.

In the summer of 2015, the registration center near the village of Moria (Moria center/camp) had become overcrowded and lacked basic provisions. Services were scarce and poor, and there was no special care for vulnerable people. Registration took several days and sometimes even longer. The center was run by the police. Housed in a former military base and surrounded by olive groves, the Moria camp had been inaugurated two years earlier. There was no bed linen on the torn mattresses, and the toilets were dirty and overflowing with sewage and garbage. The barred windows of the containers remained closed, and two rows of barbed wire encircled the enclosure. Detainees were obliged to stay inside until their registration was completed. With a capacity of 750 people, the Moria camp was full for most of the summer, whereas outside there were more than 3,500 people who camped, for several days at times, before finally entering the premises. Apart from three meals provided by catering companies that remained unpaid for more than eight months, and medical and humanitarian assistance by a few NGOs and IGOs, no other services were delivered. The commander had arranged for vendors to visit the camp and sell water, personal hygiene items, cigarettes, and groceries.

With no help from interpreters, approximately eight officers per shift carried out all the procedures. They were in charge of registration, surveillance, and the general management of the Moria center. Apart from these Greek officers,

the camp personnel included a crew of Frontex (European border and coast guard agency) guest officers and interpreters who worked with Greek colleagues on the “screening” (nationality establishment) and “debriefing” of border crossers. This was the first stage in the registration process. It was not always executed, however, especially since the department only worked on an eight-hour and five-day basis. In fact, under pressure of huge numbers, this stage was often omitted altogether. Throughout the summer of 2015, journalists from all over the world, EU politicians, Frontex bureaucrats, IGO and NGO employees, and human rights activists visited Moria camp. Drawing upon the established rhetoric of the “Greek crisis” and the “defiant” Greek state, European officials demanded wiser and more effective use of EU funds. In their eyes, Greece had failed to conform to the “prevailing ethos to recording” (see Kalir and Van Schendel, this issue). The country had once again proven itself “insufficient” to guard “Europe’s” borders and to meet the humanitarian requirements of a European state.

One day in August 2015, a group of Frontex administrative staff visited the camp. They had come to observe the registration process and to confirm that it did not abide by EU rules on border security. Of course, Frontex officials were already aware of the situation, since there was a permanent Frontex force in the camp. However, this visit served as an inspection and an official assessment of the situation. The officers of Moria camp stood by as Frontex bureaucrats watched the process of fingerprinting in the narrow, prefabricated office. The interaction between the two groups indicated tension. Police officers were wearing dusty uniforms, faded from extensive use and a brutal sun. Most of them originated from various villages on the island and were transferred to the Moria center from Athens, the country’s capital, when the need for personnel arose. These officers considered their transfer both a blessing and a misfortune since they had never imagined the hardships they would face. The Frontex bureaucrats visiting the premises wore civilian clothes and,

tellingly enough, one of them held a fashionable, cloth briefcase embroidered with flags from various EU countries that signified both the supranational role of the agency, as well as the holder’s position in a cluster of educated, elite bureaucrats.

Local officers felt reprimanded by the Frontex visitors, who asked questions and filmed the fingerprinting processes with their cell phones, disapproving of the way the Greek state was policing European borders. There was an apparent discrepancy between the two groups, as there was between local police officers and Frontex guest officers who customarily worked in the camp. Whereas Greek officers had to face the same hardships and wage declines as all employees in the public sector in austerity-ridden Greece, their Frontex colleagues received high wages and were provided with luxuries such as car and hotel rentals and a daily allowance. “Frontex officers only work from nine to five,” Greek officers commented, adding, “Everybody works as much as they can [Frontex officers, NGO and IGO personnel in the camp]. We are the only ones who work beyond our capacity.”

At the time, the camp’s commander used to meet with more than three different groups of visitors daily. He showed them around wearily and unenthusiastically, and gave them an account of the situation. I attended several such interviews and meetings and, sitting aside, I observed the commander describe everything in detail. Instead of embellishing the situation, he was blatant and honest. Once, an Amnesty International researcher came to record the conditions. The commander stated to her that he was fully aware of the fact that he did not do his job properly. Both he and his crew were doing their best, he explained, but the situation itself was beyond their power and control. He noted: “One police officer is in charge of 140 people.” This analogy referred only to the people who were detained inside the center and not to the ones who were waiting outside. While the Amnesty International researcher was typing her notes, the commander watched her carefully and tried to attract her attention. “This center does not even exist,” he said. The woman even-

tually raised her eyes and looked at him. The commander referred to the legal gap I had heard about before: “This center was meant to be a prerulement center.” Nevertheless, it never operated as such. According to the officer, this legal gap excluded the center from all accessible EU subsidies and caused a series of problems. The commander’s comments were a criticism of the state’s policies, which rendered both him and his center “irregular,” exposing them to a lack of financial resources. As a state functionary, the commander did not only evoke an “ethical alibi” in order to blame a reified state and avoid personal responsibility (Herzfeld 1992: 149). He openly accused the state of promoting irregularity and abandoning its own representatives.

### Border crossers disappear

Irregular bureaucracies are not merely the inevitable outcome of the “refugee crisis”; these practices are more than ruptures in a presumed normality. They are embedded in a long-lasting “politics of invisibility” (Rozakou 2012), a situation that has been depicted as “bureaucratic limbo” regarding border transgressors in Lesbos a few years earlier (Trubeta 2015) or “legal limbo” for asylum seekers in Greece (Cabot 2012). However, under the circumstances in this study, the politics of invisibility were crucially resignified, indicating a turning point.

Nonrecording in this case reflects the “benevolent face of the state” (see Kalir and Van Schendel, this issue) that is paradoxically intertwined with a politics of abandonment. Border crossers were in a precarious situation; they lived in open spaces and in camps that were often run under no authority; they waited for bureaucratic procedures that were incomplete and irregular, yet essential for their mobility. A few days after crossing the Greek-Turkish border, people were able to carry on their journey toward Central and Northern Europe through the Balkans. Rather than implementing a direct and official open immigration policy, the state carried on with the politics of invisibility and, at

the time, indirectly enabled movement and allowed border crossers to continue on their journey (on the “sanctioning state,” see Gandhi, this issue). In April 2015, during a meeting between the then alternate minister of immigration, Tasia Christodouloupolou, and the Central Union of Municipalities, the mayor of Athens, Giorgos Kaminis, attacked the minister for lacking a concrete immigration policy. The mayor asked the minister, “Where do they [border crossers] go?” and received the answer, “They go to Europe.” The mayor then insisted, “How do they go there?” and the minister replied, “I do not know. They just disappear,” which caused an uproar from the audience.

Earlier in that year, the elections on 25 January 2015 had brought the left-wing Syriza party to power for the first time in Greek political history. The party, who had a distinctively pro-immigrant agenda, formed a government with a small right-wing party. The new government initiated a shift in migration policies. It announced the closure of prerulement centers (for people facing administrative deportation), and although this never fully materialized, detention was to be adopted only as a last resort, and the maximum detention period was changed to six months. This marked a clear rupture from long-term detention as a means of punishment carried out by the previous government (Angeli et al. 2014; Cheliotis 2013). The new government adopted legalistic rhetoric that claimed adherence both to EU legislation and international conventions on human rights, and asked for the reformation of the Dublin Regulation.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, it repeatedly pointed out that Greece is a transit country and pleaded for both an effective and a collective EU response.

In public discourse, another drastic shift was taking place, this time with governmental officials immediately replacing the pejorative term *lathrometanastis* (illegal immigrant) with *prosfyghas* (refugee), thus stressing the forced element in these people’s movement. Syriza government members drew not only on the Syrian displacement (and the call for prima facie recognition of the refugee status for Syrians), but

also on the positive meaning of refugeeness in Greece (Rozakou 2012). They denounced the widespread production of human mobility in illegality terms (De Genova 2002) and reinitiated a moral discourse. However, low-ranking police officers and coast guards did not adopt the official vocabulary of the new government yet maintained the illegalization of border crossers. *Lathro* (“illegal”), the abbreviation of the word *lathrometanastis* (“illegal immigrant”), was widely used. The social formation of the police force is interrelated with Greek political history, especially the emphasis on the political surveillance of the population that predominated during the post-civil war period. Despite the reformation of the police force after the 1980s, the Greek police force maintains this emphasis on social and political control (Vidali 2007), which is now largely extended to illegalized migrants.

Officers blamed the government for stopping pushbacks and putting a halt on long-term detention. According to them, these changes led to the major increase in arrivals. Until January 2015, the Moria center served as a registration and classification point for vulnerable groups (mostly unaccompanied minors), deportable and nondeportable subjects. After registration, minors were transferred to reception centers, deportable people to preremoval centers, and the nondeportable were released with an expulsion order. However, after January 2015, all border crossers were immediately released after registration; only detected minors were sent to open shelters. Officers disapproved of what they viewed as the government’s unspoken “open border” policy, and they longed for the period when migration policies were restrictive and punitive. They felt trapped in a peculiar situation where they “served” the border crossers and worked overtime to make procedures faster. Police officers spoke out, and a desperate warning of stopping procedures was often shouted: “If you don’t come out for a photo now, you are going to remain here”; “If you don’t line up, I will stop distributing papers.” From the state functionaries’ point of view, the facilitation of movement was full of ambiguity. Instead of agents of

law enforcement and border policing, they had turned into the paradoxical observers of the collapse of the border and the ones who enabled irregular mobility. Instead of safeguards of the law, they were breaking the law. What’s more, according to them, it was the state itself that had asked them to do so.

### Nonrecording as an unimaginable option

In late August 2015 there was a backlog of 20,000 unrecorded border crossers on Lesbos. People camped in parks, playgrounds, the port, sidewalks, and on the streets. There were demonstrations where border crossers called out, “Athina!” (Athens!), pleading to be allowed to get off the island. On several occasions, young men attempted to break into ferryboats. Border crossers lit fires near the camps and on the outskirts of Mytilene. Their frustration often targeted NGO and IGO personnel. Moreover, whereas in the first weeks of summer 2015 everybody—police officers and border crossers alike—accused the state, by midsummer it was the UNHCR that had acquired a status parallel to that of the sovereign state. And, like the state, the UNHCR was also absent. “Where is the UNHCR?” was the recurrent rhetorical question uttered in registration camps and on the shores and streets of Lesbos. Port and riot police units violently suppressed the revolts. On 7 September 2015, after several days of intense negotiations, in a meeting between the immigration minister and local authorities, NGOs, and IGOs, the Italian UNHCR representative called for “exceptional measures.” She suggested border crossers be allowed to travel without registration. “We are going to have riots with dead people on our streets,” she declared dramatically in English.

It was clear to government representatives that the UNHCR’s suggestion was inconceivable. A few days later, it was officially decided that border crossers would be registered first and then allowed to travel out of Lesbos. The high-ranking police officer who traveled from Athens in order



to coordinate the operation asked for the assistance of civil society organizations. “I need you all with me in this,” she stressed, adding that she would not eat or sleep until every border crosser on the island was registered. The personal tone in her statement was crucial. The state had finally appeared in the scene; it had acquired a face and a voice, albeit hoarse from endless tense coordination meetings. And most importantly, the state was embodied in the first female major general in the history of the Greek police force.

Syrian refugees were informed that they would be registered in a stadium. In fact, the ones who were rapidly registered there were the ones who had declared themselves Syrian and who spoke Arabic. Border crossers volunteered and helped to coordinate the crowd, and several NGOs provided water, snacks, and medical services. Fingerprinting was halted, *hartia* were handwritten in preprinted forms, and everybody was given referral documents instead of expulsion orders. All other nationalities were registered at the Moria center, either under the same procedure (without photos or fingerprints), or their fingerprints were taken using an ink-and-paper method. In less than two days, more than 15,000 border crossers finally received their *harti*. Sixty officers were transferred from all over the country to assist in the registration.

Local officers who had not been invited to the coordination meeting felt marginalized and undermined by their female superior. Although they were state functionaries, they appeared to have less value in their superior’s eyes than nonstate actors. Furthermore, officers critiqued this “pseudorecording” and, in proving its non-validity, pointed out that the final document lacked a signature from the officer in command. Apparently, no officer wanted to claim responsibility for this procedure. The police officers who were transferred to the island in order to carry out the fast-track registration performed their duties angrily, feeling that they took part in a counterfeit procedure. But their colleagues who mostly originated from the island and had

already been stationed in the registration center for several weeks had a different viewpoint. Their priority was to secure public order and evade the risk of thousands of people stranded on the island. Furthermore, they expressed their frustration toward “Europe”; “Europe” in this setting referred to the Central and Northern European countries.

Upon visiting the Moria center, a Norwegian journalist commented: “Make sure you do a good job. All this [pointing at the camp with his hand] works with *our* money.” He received an answer from a police officer: “If you take them to Norway with you, then we will give *you* the money.” Money and the country’s financial dependency was a crucial element in these demands. Officers contested the dominant scapegoating of Greece and the damaging approach toward Greek society. “They [Northern and Central European countries] blame us for not implementing the memoranda; they accuse us for failing to safeguard Europe’s borders. Greece, Italy, and Spain are the countries carrying the burden of immigration for all of Europe.” In the European hierarchical scheme, the North was once again attacking the South for its inadequacy and insufficiencies.

Sotiris, a 40-year-old low-ranking officer, also referred to the “Europeans” who “struggle to keep border crossers away from their countries. They only care about the possibility of losing their social benefits and their welfare state collapsing.” Sotiris had been working in immigration detention facilities on the island for several years. Coming from a local rural family, joining the police force gave him the security of a job in the public sector, at least before the rupture brought about by the “Greek crisis.” Nowadays, a “secure job” is an illusion, even for public servants.

In 2010, Greece had faced a severe debt crisis and had resorted to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the EU for financial support. In subsequent years, harsh austerity measures were implemented in Greek society, according to a series of memoranda between Greece and its creditors. The Greek people largely see austerity

as imposed by “Europe” (especially Germany), global financial powers, and local governmental bureaucrats (Theodossopoulos 2014). The intervention of “foreign powers” in Greek national politics is not new. The radical transformations in austerity-ridden Greece are linked to established ideas about historical power inequalities and the country’s symbolic and material dependency on “Europe” (Herzfeld 1989). During the refugee crisis of 2015, the “doorstep of Europe” (Cabot 2014) risked becoming “i apothiki tis Evropis” (Europe’s warehouse). The metaphor of the “warehouse” was dominant in diverse discourses; it was uttered by both pro- and anti-immigrant groups. In the latter case, the metaphor dehumanized border crossers and produced them in merchandise terms. In pro-immigrant discourses, however, the metaphor of a “warehouse of souls” served to reclaim border crossers’ human status and to criticize European policies.

### Irregular states

State functionaries who took part in irregular border bureaucracies in 2015 built on the fantasy of an ideal bureaucratic world of absolute knowledge and control. Failing to execute this fantasy, they also felt that the state had failed them. From border policing, their work had transformed into serving border crossers. Irregular bureaucracies and nonrecording were a cause of tension and a site of negotiations and collaborations between state, suprastate, and nonstate actors, as well as a field of contestation between Greece and “Europe.”

The situation has changed drastically since the autumn of 2015 (after the closure of the “Balkan corridor”) and, especially, after March 2016 and the EU-Turkey statement that is widely known as the “Deal” (European Council 2016). Turkey became recognized as a safe third country, and all border crossers who entered the EU were to be readmitted to Turkey even if they applied for asylum in Greece. The Greek government itself was an avid supporter of the

“Deal” and stressed its necessity as a deterrence measure. The UNHCR, on the other hand, expressed its concerns over the violation of the principle of nonrefoulement,<sup>9</sup> and civil society organizations overtly condemned the “Deal” for violating international refugee law and for being, literally, illegal.<sup>10</sup> Referring to a state or a suprastate entity (the EU) as illegal is not a novelty. In fact, the Greek state has been widely accused in the past of applying illegal pushbacks that put at risk border crossers’ lives (Amnesty International 2014). At the same time, in spite of claims of bringing order to chaos, the actual workings of bureaucracy in the post-“Deal” era cause frustration and disarray (Kalir and Rozakou 2016). As Heyman and Smart stress, “intense, idealized legality and routine formality are as much contingent stances as routine informality and outright illegality” (1999: 13). Contrary to normative conceptualizations of the state, states are far from the guarantors and promoters of idealized regularity, but projects in the making that are actualized through irregularity and disorder. At the same time, irregular bureaucracies and counterfeit recording are ways of producing the state effect.

Even though records were imaginative and often incomplete in 2015, it is undeniable that producing bureaucratic documents is an essential and valuable aspect of Greek state and EU sovereignty. The pressure of the UNHCR in September 2015 to let border crossers leave the island without *any form* of registration was unimaginable. The imagery associated with an ideal bureaucracy—a system of absolute knowledge, control, and governance of populations—is powerful; and yet, the actors are fully aware that it is a fantasy. Even if, according to state functionaries, this was a counterfeit registration procedure, it was still an essential modality of statecraft. What is equally intriguing is that, even though in the eyes of street-level bureaucrats this process was highly “irregular”—and in the eyes of the border crossers, often incomprehensible—both groups of actors demonstrated a remarkable commitment to it. Border crossers waited patiently and state functionaries sat for

long hours under the hot sun in order to perform their part in border bureaucratic practices. Nonrecording or incomplete recording was part of a bureaucracy that seemed to be crucially dependent on the production of documents (Hull 2012). The *harti* was the ultimate outcome of these procedures, and despite the fact that state functionaries questioned the document's validity, it was still an essential element in the constitution of the state. It would appear that the fantasy of bureaucratic control has a compelling power over everyone.

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### Notes

1. This part is based on field notes and written in ethnographic present tense. All names used in this article are pseudonyms in order to protect the anonymity of my interlocutors.
2. See, among others, Albahari (2015), about Italy; Andersson (2014), on Spain; and Cabot (2014), about Greece.
3. Lesvos as a borderland in the setting of migration has occupied several researchers in the past (see, e.g., Alberti 2010; Green 2012; Lauth Bacas 2013; Trubeta 2015).
4. The language of the "refugee crisis" that has dominated public discourse since 2015 is highly problematic. Like all crisisology (language of the crisis), the concept encapsulates a rupture and a break with normalcy and, at the same time, produces specific modalities of responses. Its "bewitching quality" (Cabot 2015) is both politically dangerous and epistemologically limiting.
5. See [www.data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=355](http://www.data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=355) (accessed 6 January 2017).
6. The municipality of Lesvos allotted a plot in the area of Kara Tepe to the coast guard in May 2015 in order to host Syrian border crossers. After several revolts and amid overcrowding, the coast guard withdrew from Kara Tepe camp in July 2015 claiming lack of jurisdiction on the mainland. Kara Tepe camp ran under no authority until the fall of 2015.
7. Although the Moria center was created in 2013, it was officially established much later as a pre-removal center in January 2015 (Joint Ministerial Decision of 21 January 2015, Government Gazette no. 118).
8. Adopted in 2003 (amended in 2008 and 2013), the Dublin Regulation stipulates that asylum applications must be submitted in the first EU country asylum seekers arrive. The regulation led to a backlog of people who were "trapped" in Greece or were deported there from other EU countries. Nevertheless, in the last years, returns to Greece have been suspended on the basis of problems in the Greek asylum system.
9. See <http://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2016/3/56e533e9/unhcr-eu-turkey-deal-asylum-safe-guards-must-prevail-implementation.html> (accessed 6 January 2017).
10. See, e.g., the statement by Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news>

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