The bureaucratization of asylum. Drivers, practices and effects

Panel convenors: Marion Fresia (University of Neuchatel), Giulia Scalettaris (University of Lille)

Call for papers

This panel looks at the ways bureaucracy increasingly shapes the global refugee regime and examines the drivers, contexts and consequences of this phenomenon. From “refugee status determination” to “need assessment” procedures; from reception centres to refugee camps; from the negotiations of international refugee law to the implementation of integration, resettlement and repatriation programs, in Western like in postcolonial contexts, the international refugee regime is mainly enacted by state, international or NGO officials who spend most of their time carrying out bureaucratic activities such as classifying and categorizing people, writing reports and generating statistics, making and applying standardized norms and procedures, being accountable, etc. Bureaucracy also constitutes the main interface with the recipient population, and is embodied in specific spaces, encounters and material arrangements such as asylum offices, camps, transit centres, where bureaucratic power is performed and enacted. For its pervasiveness and its significance, we believe that bureaucracy offers a relevant angle to look at the globalizing refugee regime, one that has the additional advantage of allowing a trans-institutional and non-state centred approach.

The literature on the refugee regime has already highlighted that the expansion and professionalization of the refugee regime have gone hand in hand with its bureaucratization (Barnett 2005). Researchers have, for instance, shown the depoliticizing and naturalizing effects of the work of classification and label-making involved in refugee status determination (Zetter 2007; Fresia, Von Kanel, 2016), resettlement programs (Sandvik 2011) and vulnerability assessments, as well the symbolic violence exerted on recipients in terms of dehumanization (Harrel-Bond 1986; Fassin 2010), while many have more specifically focused on the bureaucracy of the camp and its disciplinary effects (Turner 2010; Agier 2014). In the same line, specific case studies on UNHCR's norm-setting activities have highlighted how the often-contested nature of the asylum institution is turned into a consensual and moral narrative over refugee protection through bureaucratic procedures (Fresia 2014; Jacobsen, Sandvik 2016). Several studies also show how bureaucracy structures migrants’ strategies and impacts on their subjectivities (Turner 2010; Monsutti 2012; Donini et al. 2015). One of the critiques recently addressed to the refugee regime is its inability to acknowledge and deal with non-bureaucratic forms of solidarity and governance (Scalettaris 2013; Bakewell 2014). Yet the drivers and the effects of bureaucratization remain unexplored, so as the variety of contexts and dimensions of the international refugee regime that are affected by this process.
We welcome papers that bring together the literature on the refugee regime and the literature on bureaucracy to look with an ethnographical or historical approach at the ways bureaucracy shapes or transforms specific contexts and dimensions of the international refugee regime. Papers will contribute to one or more of the following three lines of inquiry:

1) **The drivers of the bureaucratization of asylum.** To what extent is this phenomenon typical of the refugee regime? Are there some bureaucratic devices, settings or practices, which are specific to the refugee regime? How is bureaucratization related to the internationalization and globalization of the refugee regime? And to neoliberalism (Hibou 2012)? What is the relation between bureaucratization and the restrictive turn of asylum?

2) **Spaces, actors and practices.** Who are the state and non-state actors, including refugee themselves, involved in shaping, negotiating and brokering the bureaucratic practices of the refugee regime? In which spaces and contexts, and through which material arrangements the bureaucratization of refugee protection is most observable? Does bureaucracy entail a specific political or professional culture? Are there different bureaucratic cultures and how do they play together?

3) **The effects of the bureaucratization of asylum.** What are the effects of bureaucratization in terms of global governance, migration regimes, political subjectivities? What does bureaucracy to the refugee regime? And conversely what does asylum to bureaucracy, that is how does bureaucracy play with the moral and humanitarian nature of the concerned institutions?

Please send your paper abstracts to Marion Fresia (marion.fresia@unine.ch) and Giulia Scalettaris (giulia.scalettaris@gmail.com) by the 10 November 2017.

References


HIBOU Béatrice (2012), La bureaucratisation du monde à l'ère néolibérale. La Découverte, Paris.


