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Do the Labels Conferred upon People on the Move matter, and, if so, to what extent?

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Various categories and labels have been created to describe those on the move: “refugees”, “migrants”, “immigrants”, “asylum seekers”, “bogus asylum seekers”. The most powerful of all, are those of the: “refugee” and “migrant”. It is commonly believed that the boundaries between the two terms are clear-cut and their meanings are stable. But, do those widely propagated convictions correspond to reality? The aim of this essay is to critically examine not only the content of the abovementioned labels, but also their mode of construction along with the real-life implications that they have for the people to whom they are attributed. It is argued that the current use of those labels influences the lives and determines the potentialities and the fate of the people that they define in a negative way.

Categorizing and labelling are universal practices that exist since time immemorial. They are the primary and conceivably indispensable means by which societies form a sense of self and of others, draw boundaries and create identities. It should be noted that while the processes of categorizing and labelling are intimately associated, they are not

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identified. Categorizing is a practice that precedes labelling. Labels are attributed in a later, yet minute stage and they mirror and express prior orders of categorization.

Labels are familiar and omnipresent such that they “may almost go unnoticed or unquestioned”¹. The reason why the process of labelling is neither questioned nor analyzed is that the labels have normalization and conformity effects, which make them subsequently suggest objectivity and neutrality. The actual picture, though, is much more complex. Labels are not a “value-neutral” tool of the language.

First, let us examine the content of the label “refugee”. It is true that the label “refugee” is directly linked with the definition of the refugee in the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. The 1951 Convention provides that the term “refugee” shall apply to any person who *“owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such event, is unable*

¹ Zetter, Roger, “Labelling Refugees: Forming and Transforming a Bureaucratic Identity”, 4 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 1991, pp.39, 45.

or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it”². The 1951 Convention was crafted in the aftermath of the World War II in order to regulate the mass displacement of people and for this very reason the definition of the refugee was subject to two restrictions: one spatial and one temporal. It was limited to people seeking refuge from events occurring in Europe [or elsewhere (optional provision)] before 1 January 1951. It can, therefore, be observed that the definition of the Convention was strikingly particularistic even as it “paradoxically claimed normativity in its status as international law”³. Despite the fact that the 1967 Protocol lifted those restrictions and expanded the Convention’s field of application to people displaced around the world without a specific time frame, the underlying presumption on how people become refugees remained the same.

It is broadly supported that the abovementioned, legal definition cannot impede the emergence of further interpretations related to the label “refugee”. As Roger Zetter, Emeritus Professor of Refugee Studies at Oxford University has stated, the Convention and the Protocol “establish (only) a de minimis definition”⁴ of the refugee. The word “refugee” has irreducibly multiple meanings. As it has been noted, “the

² Article 1 (A, 2) of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10> (Accessed: 19.11.2019).

³ Ballinger, Pamela, “Entangled or ‘Extruded’ Histories? Displacement, National Refugees, and Repatriation after the Second World War”, 25 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 2012, pp. 366, 369.

⁴ Zetter, Roger, “Refugees and Refugee Studies: A Label and an Agenda”, 1 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 1988, pp.1, 5.

meaning of the word is determined more in regards to related clusters of terms than to a particular referent”⁵. The disparate meanings that the label “refugees” displays depend on the viewpoints of the multiple actors -international community, NGO’s, national governments, media, etc.- engaging with them.

In order to understand the diverse interpretations associated with the label “refugee”, Georgia Cole, Research Fellow at the Margaret Anstee Centre for Global Studies at Newnham College, has proposed the semiotic approach. According to her, semiotics promotes a reading of each “space” that is “sensitive to the simultaneity of meanings that co-exist across and throughout spatial and temporal scales”⁶. More concretely, in her insightful articles: *The role of semiotics in connecting the spaces, words, and embodied experiences of refugee politics* and *Beyond Labelling: Rethinking the Role and Value of the Refugee “Label” through Semiotics*, she claims that the word refugee should be approached as a sign according to the Saussurean and Barthean semiotic theories.

For the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, each sign was a dual entity comprised of the following components: the “signifier”, the form, and

⁵ Robert F. Barsky, *Undocumented Immigrants in an Era of Arbitrary Law: The Flight and the Plight of People Deemed “Illegal”*, New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 39.

⁶ Cole, Georgia, “Beyond Labelling: Rethinking the Role and Value of the Refugee ‘Label’ through Semiotics”, 31 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 2017, pp., 303, 311.

the “signified”, the meaning. As far as the sign “refugee” is concerned, Georgia Cole claims that the signifier is composed of “an individual who is outside from his/her country of nationality or who, not having a nationality, is outside the country of his/her former habitual residence” and the signified of: “his/her inability or unwillingness to avail himself/herself of the protection of the state in which they faced persecution”⁷. This is the first-order semiological system of the “refugee” sign, where the signified corresponds to the legal definition of the refugee, though it is not the only one.

There is also a second-order, where new meanings are constantly created. It was the French literary theorist and linguist Roland Gérard Barthes who expanded Saussure’s theory of linguistics and referred to the second-order semiological system. In this order, the sign -the associative total of the signifier and the signified- from the first order, becomes itself a mere signifier in the second and another signified is added⁸. Barthes referred to this new signified with the term “concept”, and he described it as a “whole new history which is implanted” into the term⁹. There is not only one concept in the second-order as there can be many more. It is noteworthy that the appearance of second-order signifieds leads to the alienation of the sign from its initial form and

meaning. The shift that takes place in the second-order is justified by the fact that the link between the signifier and the signified of the first-order, and thus the sign itself, is arbitrary¹⁰. It is this very arbitrariness that permits the creation of new meanings.

One of the second-order signifieds of the sign “refugee” is created by the host country’s application of the legal definition of the refugee during the asylum proceedings. It is well-known that although the legal definition of a refugee is provided by the Convention and the Protocol, its interpretation and application is defined at a national level. In this process, the label “refugee” is connected with national interests and acquires new meanings. This parameter is extremely significant given the fact that the European states constantly raise more and more bureaucratic barriers for the people who are seeking refuge. Needless to say, every state interprets this definition differently.

The label “refugee” thus becomes a “creature of the state”¹¹. In this procedure, a significant transformation of its character can be detected. The refugee label does no longer correspond to a right -as the Convention and the Protocol imply- but to a highly privileged status, an “expensive commodity”¹² which few deserve and most allege illegally.

⁷ Cole, Georgia, “Beyond Labelling: Rethinking the Role and Value of the Refugee ‘Label’ through Semiotics”, 31 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 2017, pp. 1, 5.

⁸ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1972, 114.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 119.

¹⁰ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, London: Duckworth, 1983, p. 67.

¹¹ Haddad, Emma, *The Refugee in International Society: Between Sovereigns*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 37.

¹² Zetter, Roger, “More Labels, Fewer Refugees: Remaking the Refugee Label in an Era of Globalization’ ”, 20 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 2007, pp. 172, 188, 189.

It can therefore be assumed that although the label “refugee” may give the pretense of neutrality and objectivity, it yet conceals “the political in the apparently non-political”¹³. The label “refugee” is neither “value-free” nor objective, as the Convention and the Protocol may suggest. Its conferment depends on governmental policies and interests and presupposes evaluative assessments.

Other second-order signifieds of the label “refugee” are also manifested by the media and politicians. A negative media coverage and political rhetoric has been generally observed for all those people on the move. The majority of journalists and politicians represent refugees as “national threats” that cast doubt over the European tradition. It is important to realize that those misrepresentations have first and foremost an ideological character and play a decisive role in the effort of nationalist movements to gain the elections.

If the label “refugee” seems obscure and perplex, the label “migrant” is much more. This is partly due to the fact that international law does not provide a legal definition of the term. The lack of a universally accepted definition of the term “migrant”, renders it more difficult to be clarified. Given that, it will also be useful to make an attempt to approach the term “migrant” through semiotics. The first-order semiological system of the

sign “migrant” consists of the signifier: “a person who is outside his/her country of origin or habitual residence” and the signified: “and who has voluntarily left it in order to reside somewhere else due to economic reasons”. The meaning or the signified of the first-order semiological system corresponds to the conventional definition of the “migrant” that has been adopted by the international community. In the second-order semiological system, a multiplicity of meanings associated with the term “migrant” is observed. Its use by national governments and media outlets generates associations with dependency, illegitimacy and often even delinquency. It has been generally linked with the idea of an “opportunistic decision” that engenders little, if any empathy regarding the individuals’ rights¹⁴.

Those two labels lie at the heart of the discourses of displacement. Host countries hasten to place people that have crossed their borders in one of those categories even before the asylum proceedings, without minding whether their decision is accurate or not. Raia Apostolova, Ph.D. Candidate in Sociology and Social Anthropology at the Central European University, has referred to the attachment of the receiving states to those labels with the term: “categorical fetishism”¹⁵. It can be

¹³ Wood, Geof, “The Politics of Development Policy Labelling”, 16 *Development and Change* 1985, pp. 347, 348.

¹⁴ Sajjad, Tazreena, “What’s in a name? ‘Refugees’, ‘migrants’ and the politics of labelling”, 40 *Journal of Race and Class* 2018, pp. 40, 46.

¹⁵ Apostolova, Raia, “Of Refugees and Migrants: Stigma, Politics, and Boundary Work at the Borders of Europe”, *American Sociological Association Newsletter*,

2015. Available at: <https://asaculturesection.org/2015/09/14/of-refugees-and-migrants-stigma-politics-and-boundary-work-at-the-borders-of-europe/> (Accessed 24.11.2019).

observed that although the granting of legal status should precede labelling, it is often the contrary that actually happens.

It is of critical importance at this point to mention that the categories and the labels associated with them do not simply represent and reflect the world but concurrently create and reduce it. As Roger Zetter has stated: “labels do not only describe the world but also construct it in convenient images”¹⁶. There is a considerable disjunction between labels and the lived experiences of those on the move. The very process of constructing categories and assigning labels presupposes by definition the over-simplification and homogenization of the experiences of the people they seek to describe. Bhupinder Chimni, Professor of International Law at Jawaharlal Nehru University has noted that “life and epistemology do not imitate legal categories. Instead legal categories most often seek to “discipline” life and knowledge to realize dominant interests in society”¹⁷. Taking this into consideration, categories and labels are incapable of adequately explaining the complex real-life situations of those on the move. The classification in one of those categories ‘delinks’ people from their ‘stories’ and transforms them into standardized ‘cases’¹⁸. The backstories of those on the move are complicated. People on the move cannot, thus, be

¹⁶ Zetter, Roger, “More Labels, ‘Fewer Refugees: Remaking the Refugee Label in an Era of Globalization’”, 20 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 2007, pp., 172, 173.

¹⁷ Chimni, Bhupinder S., “ ‘The Birth of a Discipline’: From Refugee to Forced Migration Studies”, 22 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 2009, pp. 11, 12.

¹⁸ Stepputat, Finn- Ninna Nyberg Sørensen, “Sociology and Forced Migration” in: *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies* (Elena Fiddian-

appropriately depicted by the labels that are constructed about them. Neither can their experiences always be so easily fallen under one or the other category.

Governments, media and the vast majority of researchers speak of refugees and migrants as there is a clear-cut boundary between the two labels. However, often the stories of those on the move cannot be classified with certainty in one of those categories. Empirical reality indicates complex continua that make the distinction between refugees and migrants difficult to uphold. The distinction between migrants and refugees can sometimes be blurred because the division between economic and political measures in an applicant’s country of origin or former habitual residence is not always evident. Economic measures are frequently the façade, behind which there are deeper political, religious, racial intentions directed against a specific group. It is, thus, accepted that if the described economic measures damage the economic existence of that group -e.g. withdrawal of trading rights from or discrimination or excessive taxation of specific ethnicities or particular group- the applicant may according to the circumstances become a refugee¹⁹.

Qasmiyeh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long, Nando Sigona, eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 86, 89.

¹⁹ *Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, 12. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/4d93528a9.pdf> (Accessed: 19.11.2019).

Despite the fact that the labels “refugees” and “migrants” are unofficially attributed to those on the move without much reflection by the time they enter the borders of another from their own country of origin or habitual residence, it is during the asylum proceedings that their status is determined. After a “successful” interview, the applicant is officially granted the label “refugee”. Whereas in the meantime, there is a tendency to label all the people who have not qualified for refugee status as “migrants”.

The choice of labelling -or equally not labelling- someone as a “refugee” is not neutral and objective but a profoundly political one²⁰. It’s known that the majority of the displaced persons’ applications for asylum are rejected. The exclusion of most non-European displaced people from states’ interpretations of the Convention should not, although, be taken as an empirical reality. It is true that refugee claims are examined individually but a whole cluster of predetermined criteria and goals²¹ play a crucial role in defining people and giving them the refugee status. The European states have developed concrete policies to prevent asylum seekers from acquiring the refugee status. Scott Watson, Professor of Political Science at the University of Victoria has provided some

²⁰ Crawley, Heaven - Skleparis, Dimitris, “Refugees, migrants, neither, both: categorical fetishism and the politics of bounding in Europe’s ‘migration crisis’”, 44 *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 2018, pp. 48, 52.

²¹ It is argued that the asylum procedure in the receiving countries is more targeted in reaching rates of rejection set by governmental politics than trying to cautiously and thoroughly examine the personal experiences of each applicant. Michel Agier, *Managing the Undesirables: refugee camps and humanitarian government*, Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press, 2011, p. 24.

examples of those policies: “carrier sanctions, international safe havens, visa requirements, safe third country agreements, offshore processing, “non-arrival” zones, mandatory detention, temporary protection and the withdrawal of socio-economic benefits”²². It should be noted that those exclusionary policies are part of a broader governmental reluctance to grant refuge to people who might qualify. James Hathaway, Professor of Refugee and Asylum Law at University of Michigan and Thomas Gammeltoft, Head of Research at the Danish Institute for Human Rights, have referred to this restrictive stance that western governments have adopted towards asylum as “politics of non-entrée”²³. Meanwhile, the interviews by border agents are characterized by a climate of suspicion towards asylum seekers. Melanie Griffiths has referred to this attitude that officials hold during the asylum proceedings as “culture of disbelief”²⁴. The whole procedure is characterized by an obsession with identifying “genuine” refugees and with suppressing the so-called illegal migration.

All those factors end up producing what Jérôme Valluy, a political scientist who served as a judge on the Commission de Recours des

²² Watson, Scott D. , *The Securitization of Humanitarian Migration: Digging Moats and Sinking Boats*, London-New York: Routledge, 2009, 1.

²³ Hathaway, James C. - Gammeltoft-Hansen, Thomas , “Non-Refoulement in a World of Cooperative Deterrence”, 53 *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law* 2015. pp. 235, 241.

²⁴ Griffiths, Melanie, “‘Vile liars and truth distorters’. Truth, trust and the asylum system”, 28 *Anthropology Today* 2012, p. 8.

Réfugiés (CRR) has called: “reversal of the right of asylum”²⁵. Governments appropriate the label “refugee” and radically transform it. In this process, its primary goal, i.e. the organization of the reception of people fleeing from their countries, is forgotten. Governments use the label in a narrower way and assign to it a different purpose: they employ the label as a means to de-legitimize whosoever does not meet the restrictive criteria that they have set in order to meet the rejection rates²⁶. Asylum seekers are well-informed about those restrictions and the only thing that they can do is to adapt their responses to fit into the criteria that they believe would qualify them in acquiring the refugee status²⁷. The label “refugee” may be for the receiving states a vehicle for promoting their interests but for those “fleeing persecution, however, the label may be the difference between life and death”²⁸.

Those labels mainly attributed -either directly or indirectly- to people on the move after the asylum procedure have a direct impact on the kind of legal and social obligations host countries and societies have towards them²⁹. Additionally, by defining who is considered “worthy” of protection under the western asylum system and who should be excluded from it, they actively determine the social realities of the

people on the move. Refugees are treated as people deserving protection in their host countries while the migrants are treated as undesirables. The situation is even worse for those that are characterized as “illegal migrants” as they live under the constant threat of deportation. This prioritization of refugees over migrants may be summarized in the phrases: “refugees welcome” and “migrants unwelcome”.

From the aforementioned brief juxtaposition of the most obvious repercussions associated with the conferment of each label, it can be deduced that the label “refugee” is highly anticipated by people seeking asylum because it guarantees them their residency in the receiving state and assures them that they won’t return to their countries of origin or former habitual residence (principle of non-refoulement). Nevertheless, once the label “refugee” is attributed to displaced people, they understand that even this label may have a negative impact on their lives. Many of the people, to whom the label “refugee” has been attributed, have testified that they felt burdened by it. In describing this ambivalent attitude that displaced people have towards the label, Lucy Hovil, Senior Research Associate for the International Refugee Rights

²⁵ Valluy, Jérôme, “Du retournement de l’asile (1948-2008) à la xénophobie de gouvernement: construction d’un objet d’étude”, 69 *Cultures & Conflits* 2008, pp. 81, 86.

²⁶ Balibar, Étienne, *Pour un droit international de l’hospitalité*. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/08/16/etienne-balibar-pour-un-droit-international-de-l-hospitalite_5342881_3232.html (Accessed: 21.11.2019).

²⁷ Janmyr, Maja - Mourad, Lama “Modes of Ordering: Labelling, Classification and Categorization in Lebanon’s Refugee Response”, 31 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 2018, pp. 544, 550.

²⁸ Zetter, Roger, “More Labels, ‘Fewer Refugees: Remaking the Refugee Label in an Era of Globalization’”, 20 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 2007, pp. 172, 185.

²⁹ Sigona, Nando, “The contested politics of naming in Europe’s ‘refugee crisis’”, 41 *Ethnic and Racial Studies Review* 2018, pp. 456, 456.

Initiative, has referred that “refugees want to shed the label “refugee” yet they often desperately need it at the same time”³⁰. Thus, an investigation of the way the refugee label affects the social reality of the people to whom it is attributed, is deemed to be decisive.

First of all, the label “refugee” -as each and every label of displaced persons- separates in the receiving country those to whom it has been bestowed and subsequently contributes to their marginalization. Refugees are treated as people who lacked legitimacy to belong within the national narratives of inclusion. Whereas at the same time, they are not totally excluded from the host country’s society. It can, therefore,

³⁰ Hovil, Lucy, *Refugees, Conflict and the Search for Belonging*, New York: Springer International, 2016, p. 156.

³¹ Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 72.

³² Owens, Patricia, “Reclaiming ‘Bare Life’?: Against Agamben on Refugees”, 23 *International Relations* 2009, pp. 567, 567.

³³ Michel Foucault uses the term “biopolitics” to describe the modern political system which directly interferes into the biological life and subjugates it. More precisely, Foucault coined the term “biopolitics” in the first volume of his study: “History of Sexuality”. In this volume, he refers that the chain of events that took place during the 18th and 19th centuries resulted in the introduction of the biological existence of people into the political and legal spheres of the modern nation-state. As he states: “For millennia man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living being with the additional capacity for political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics calls his existence as a living being into question”. Foucault calls this characteristic of modern times type of politics, “biopolitics”. It is in his lectures series: “The Birth of Biopolitics” at the Collège de France where he connects biopolitics with the political rationality of the liberal and neoliberal forms of government. Foucault, Michel, *The History of*

be inferred that the label “refugee” places people in a peripheral position inside the receiving country. They are in an awkward situation: legally inside a safe country but not entitled to many things. They are in a state of “inclusive exclusion”. The eminent Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has claimed that the condition of the refugee coincides with that of the homo sacer, an enigmatic figure in Ancient Roman Law whom anyone could kill with impunity, i.e. without committing a murder in the legal sense³¹. Refugees as their counterpart homo sacer Agamben claims, that they are the “ultimate biopolitical subjects”³². It should be mentioned that he borrows the word “biopolitics” from Michel Foucault³³ but gives to it another connotation³⁴. “Biopolitical subjects”,

Sexuality, vol.1: The Will to Knowledge, London: Penguin, 1978, p. 143, Foucault, Michel, *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79* (Michel Senellart, ed.), Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, Rommetveit, Kjetil, “Bioethics, Biopower and the Post-Genomic Challenge” in: *Ethics, Law and Society*, vol. IV (Jennifer Gunning, Søren Holm, Ian Conway, eds.), Surrey, Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2009, p. 165, Blencowe, Claire, *Biopolitical Experience: Foucault, Power and Positive Critique*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 86.

³⁴ In opposition to Foucault, for whom biopolitics represent a relatively recent historical phenomenon, Agamben claims that this type of politics which is characterized by the inclusion of biological life (zoë) into political life, traces its roots back into antiquity. According to Agamben, sovereign power has always subjugated zoë, but it is only recently that the modern state made it evident, rendering zoë and bios, the human and the citizen into a zone of “irreducible indistinction”. The major activity of the sovereign power is the construction of a “biopolitical subject”, a subject that Agamben refers to as “bare life”. Bare life is not identified with zoë. Zoë is life which does not have any relation to law, whereas bare life is life that is excluded from law: “not an original state, but the condition of having been stripped of every legal quality”. Agamben (1998) op.

subjects that Agamben refers to as “bare life” are people who are outside the normal legal framework and can be regulated and governed in a permanent “state of exception”. The exceptional condition in which refugees find themselves is confirmed by the legal definition of the refugee in the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol. It is widely supported that the first assumption of this definition and of the way it is interpreted by the states is that the citizen is the normal political subject, whereas the refugee the exception.

It is important to note that the exceptional nature of refugees -the same may also be said for migrants and stateless people- in contemporary politics, as Agamben has stated, calls into question “the national narratives of inclusion and thereby makes it possible to clear the way for a long-overdue renewal of categories in the service of a politics in which bare life is no longer separated and excepted, either in the state order or in the figure of human rights”³⁵. The very existence of displaced people reveals the limits of any assumed consecutiveness between human and citizen in the system of nation-states and in the associated notion of human rights³⁶. As it has been stated, there is a “morally

cit. p. 9, DeCaroli, Steven, "Sacred" in: *The Agamben Dictionary* (Alex Murray, Jessica Whyte, eds.), Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011, pp.169, 170.

³⁵ Agamben (1998) op. cit. p.134.

³⁶ Owens, Patricia, “Reclaiming ‘Bare Life’?: Against Agamben on Refugees”, 23 *International Relations* 2009, pp. 567, 578.

³⁷ Smyczyńska, Katarzyna, “‘We refugees’: (Un)othering in visual narratives on displacement”, 17 *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, 2018, pp. 217, 219.

unacceptable, although institutionally sanctioned gap between citizenship and humanity”³⁷.

Once an individual is labelled “refugee”, a certain way of life is also designated for him/her. Labels do not only have a descriptive and identificatory character, they also condition the way of living and regulate the behavior of whom upon they are being conferred. Refugees cannot exercise the full spectrum of rights that the citizens of the country enjoy. They mainly enjoy the rights that the Convention and the Protocol grants to them. Besides the fact that the Convention and the Protocol are thought to provide only the minimum standard of treatment permitting states to adopt friendlier policies towards refugees³⁸, it is observed that the governments are unwilling to expand the scope of rights.

Furthermore, the refugee label confers to them stigma and stereotypes. Attached to the label “refugee” are “images of dependency, helplessness and misery”³⁹. Those social images bear implications on the mode of their treatment in the countries where they reside. Most importantly, they prevent their integration. Little has changed since Hannah Arendt wrote the monumental article: “*We refugees*”, where

³⁸ Introductory Note by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, pp. 3, 5. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10> (Accessed: 19.11.2019).

³⁹ Harrell-Bond, Barbara E. - Voutira, Eftihia, “Anthropology and the Study of Refugees”, 8 *Anthropology Today* 1992, pp. 4, 7.

she described both the practical and the existential consequences that the label refugee holds. She highlighted the fact that people didn't like to be called refugees. The reason behind their desire to evade the label "refugee" is that they thought that it impeded their assimilation in the host countries. In this article, Arendt claimed that the European states treated -and have not ceased to treat- refugees not as "prospective citizens" but as present "enemy aliens"⁴⁰. Given that this approach towards refugees has not changed, it is no surprise that even nowadays some of the people who might qualify as refugees find it undesirable to be registered and thus categorized and officially labelled as "refugees". They believe that by avoiding the label, they are also avoiding the impacts that the label bears. Their reluctance in being identified is for them a strategic choice. It follows that the stigma of being labelled refugee often outweighs the actual profits. It is necessary at this point to mention that the rejection of the label "refugee" from their part does not entail that they are not refugees.

As it is evident from the preceding empirical facts, the way refugees perceive the label attributed to them often contrasts sharply with the perceptions of those bestowing the label. For the latter the label refugee "evokes notions of altruism and charity"⁴¹ whereas for the former is often an unbearable burden.

⁴⁰ Arendt, Hannah, "We Refugees" in: *The Jewish Writings. Hannah Arendt* (Jerome Kohn, Ron H. Feldman, eds.), New York: Schocken Books, 2007, pp. 264, 266.

It should be admitted that despite their shortcomings, categorizations and labels of those on the move cannot and should not be completely ignored. By ascribing identities, categories' labels determine whether people live or not and under what conditions. Indeed, in the absence of a label a group may appear as non-existent. The elimination of the labels could, thus, be potentially fatal to those for whom it is the sole root to accessing certain rights.

Nonetheless, it is crucial for the researchers to adopt a critical stance towards categorizations and labels conferred upon people on the move and be aware of their constructedness. The *raison d' être* for the creation of the labels of displaced persons was the facilitation and the amelioration of their lives. As it has been proven, nowadays their existential condition has been underestimated and they are currently linked with ideological intentions. They are not, thus, a "trustworthy" medium for the study of the flows. Any discussion about people on the move that is attached to the labels "refugees" and "migrants" lurks the danger of disregarding the individual behind the label and excluding certain experiences from history. As it has been argued, the over-reliance on labels puts fundamental constraints on the issues to be addressed and leaves a large number of people invisible: outside researchers' knowledge and excluded from consideration and

⁴¹ Mayer-Rieckh, Elisabeth, "'Beyond Concrete and Steel': Power Relations, and Gender: The Case of Vietnamese Women in the Detention Centers in Hong Kong", *Institute of Social Sciences*, The Hague, 1993, p. 13.

planning⁴². Discourses of displacement should be guided by empirically grounded assessments of the individual “stories” of those on the move. The researchers of the flows should, thus, remain on “continual guard not to mistake the object of their analysis (-people on the move-) with their unit of analysis (-labels of displaced persons)”⁴³. Through this way, the paradox of the current discourses of displacement –which by being tenaciously and uncritically attached to the labels, have no place for the concrete individuals who are on the move- will be overcome.

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⁴²Bakewell, Oliver, “Research Beyond the Categories: The Importance of Policy Irrelevant Research into Forced Migration”, 21 *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2008, pp. 432, 450, Polzer, Tara, “Invisible Integration: How Bureaucratic, Academic and Social Categories Obscure Integrated Refugees”, 21 *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2008, pp. 476, 477.

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⁴³ Ballinger, Pamela, “Entangled or ‘Extruded’ Histories? Displacement, National Refugees, and Repatriation after the Second World War”, 25 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 2012, pp. 366, 379.

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