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Purity and Mixture in the Category of Refuge in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I analyze the definition and uses of the category “refuge” in Brazil to understand how it operates in legal terms on the one hand and in terms of the practice of everyday life on the other. I consider refuge to be a tense field of definitions that will impact the delimitation of other differences and political categories. In order to reach this goal, I turn to research on migration legislation in Brazil, which I have been developing since 2010, and a set of ethnographic research that is being developed under my coordination in the laboratory of migration studies of the Federal University of São Carlos on the experiences of refuge in Brazil. I intend to advance in an analysis of what I will call a “show of refuge” in Brazil, where the state and the media articulate certain definitions for refuge that tend to obscure the entire field of migration and producing a perverse effect of erasing migrations due to the prominence of the category of refuge.

KEYWORDS

Refuge in Brazil; Brazilian legislation on migration; migration; migration policies

Introduction

The question of social classifications is a vast field in social anthropology, and from at least Mauss and Durkheim in their classic text “Some Primitive Forms of Classification” (Mauss & Durkheim, 2001/1903), what is at stake is the form of a society classifying, separating, and hierarchizing differences. The importance of this question remains relevant, and the exact definition of who may or may not be part of a contemporary state is both a legislative and a moral problem. The state classifications of those eligible and ineligible (citizens, migrants, stateless persons, refugees, tourists, etc.) are machines for producing hierarchies for difference, attributing privileges to some and exclusion to others (Machado, 2012). In this article, I try to think specifically about the definition and uses of the category “refuge” to understand how it operates in legal terms in Brazil on the one hand and in terms of living experience on the other. Thus, I take refuge as a tense field of definitions that will impact the delimitation of other differences, as we shall see.¹ In order to achieve this goal, I deal with a research on migration legislation in Brazil, which I have been developing since 2010, and a set of ethnographic research on the experiences of refuge in Brazil that is being developed in the laboratory of migratory studies of the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar).

The classification categories in migration policies have perverse effects (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018). As De Genova (2002) states, the very definition of an idea of illegality produces realities of exclusion, where certain material practices help to produce a constellation of images and discursive formations that gradually gives substance to the idea of illegality. The discourse of illegality—as well as the discourses linked to the smuggling of migrants and other humanitarian issues—

hides a security interest that ends up producing a subordinate inclusion (De Genova, 2013), where the superexploited condition of the migrant workforce is a key issue. The notions of migratory “spectacle of the crisis” (Tazzioli et al., 2018), or “spectacle of borders” (De Genova, 2013) reflect something of what I want to discuss here: how certain discursive orders are activated with a particular hysteria by states and the media to justify various policies of securitization, exclusion, and stigmatization.² Here I shall come up with a certain idea of a “refuge show”, in which there is also a constellation of discourses and stereotypes that generate a certain kind of reality. We can think of the situation of Syrian, African, Colombian and Venezuelan refugees in Brazil as “spectacles” that, as Tazzioli et al. affirm:

Are not uncommonly produced as cynical spectacles of misery for the further authorization of political manipulations and military interventions, even as they are derisively deployed to obfuscate other parallel human catastrophes altogether. (Tazzioli et al., 2018, 240)

I want to advance an analysis of what I understand to be a “refuge show” in Brazil, where the state and the media articulate certain definitions of refuge that tend to obfuscate the entire field of migration and produce a perverse effect of the erasure of migrations due to the prominence of the category of refuge, with all its implications legally reified, as Malkki (1995) and Chimni (1998) argue. On the other hand, the lives of the refugees themselves (or immigrants who are viewed as refugees or are related to the refuge) indicate other orders of classification that can be analyzed as part of the effect of the refuge show.

Kyriakides et al. (2018) highlight what they call “refugeeness”, an essential condition of precarious existence, built by political reception practices and by representations in the media. Here, the idea of “refuge show” can be seen as a variation of refugeeness, paying attention to a very relevant factor: the experience of refugeeness varies within the same receiving country since both migration policies and media representations vary for each group of refugees. The set of these variations, in the case of Brazil, allows for a political and symbolic use of the refuge category with implications for the “management of otherness” in the country: the predominance of the refuge category makes other migration experiences invisible, even considering how in practice the subjects move between different legal statuses.

Categories

The word “refugee” is one of those that seems to say something very specific, very limited, but it is, in fact, a huge set of different possibilities. The different possibilities, however, are distributed unequally in terms of power and representativeness. We have a scenario where the Brazilian State unilaterally defines what refuge is through legal mechanisms that have their own history and to which many scholars have dedicated themselves to explaining (Jubilut, 2006; Nogueira & Marques, 2008; Moreira & Baeninger, 2010; Moulin, 2012). There is thus a state definition, which is in line with international agreements that seek to standardize national seizures of the category: an international refugee system, with its global rules, is created and states voluntarily take part in signing various treaties. There is thus a history of this process of a global definition of the category “refugee.”

From the state point of view, therefore, there are international regulations and there are national regulations, which it produces itself in order to be inserted in this international scenario (or not). Thus, we have a great universe of processes to constitute state categories of refuge. But that’s just part of the story, the part that various sciences try to understand and explain, such as international relations, international law, political science, etc. (Williams, 2014). There is the other side of the equation, the one that appears when one descends from the categorical levels of legal definitions and discursive practices of state agents and the media to the political and welfare practices of states when analyzing the places where refugees (or asylum seekers) are received and

welcomed. In these places, where the general effects of categories should produce certain kinds of reality and refugeeness (Kyriakides et al., 2018,), we see another universe of uncertainties in the categories.

Experience in dealing directly with asylum seekers or to those who are actually refugees is full of categorical contradictions. People are refugees at one time, but they are not refugees at another; people who are not refugees are treated as if they were, and people with legal refugee status seek to change their situation, or even the opposite. The trajectory of some people pervades the acquisition of different categories: refuge, humanitarian visa, immigrant, permanent residence, etc. Refuge as a lived experience is much more complex than the state category that allows it to exist. In the lives of foreigners who cross these legal categories, the refuge is multifaceted. It has many connotations. It is viewed in positive or negative ways, depending on who the foreigners are, what social classifications they activate (race, gender, class, etc.), what hierarchies of otherness they face, what kind of worker or NGO volunteer they face, where in the country they are trying to settle, etc. Thus, it is possible to speak of multiple “refuges” in the same national scenario.

This article intends to expose some of these complexities that the refuge category can activate. The concern is to think critically about multiple refugeeness and the variation in the category of refuge in practice and try to give some meaning to this variation. The objective is to illuminate the complexity of this category from some specific ethnographic examples, exposing the diversity that the idea of refuge purposely hides. In doing so, I believe I will say something about the experience of diversity in contemporary Brazil.

In this context, the presence of foreigners activates different framing in consonance or dissonance with Brazilian ways of thinking and dealing with otherness: they are a preliminary case that helps us to think about the processes of production of difference in Brazil, at the same time that the variation around the idea of refuge allows us to also think about the complexities of terms and categories that can easily work both to improve the lives of some and to make worse the lives of others. The same categories hide contradictory dimensions that only a more detailed look at life experiences allows us to grasp.

To speak of this multiple refugeeness, I take some ethnographic examples produced within my research group for a specific project constructed to elaborate an anthropology of refuge in Brazil. I will deal with ethnographic descriptions of the experience of the Colombian refuge, of the Syrian refuge, of the Venezuelan refuge, and also of the African refuge—a name that hides the experience of the Congolese, Angolans, Guineans, Senegalese, etc. Each of these nationals, regionals or religious condensations hides something of the complexity that the experience of refuge presents to us.

Refuge and data

The Brazilian experience of receiving refugees is relatively recent. It was only in 1997 that specific legislation on refuge was created (Andrade & Marcolini, 2002). Since then, the influx of refugees has been relatively small. In 2018 there were 11,231 refugees in Brazil: 40% Syrians, 14% Congolese, 4% Colombians, 4% Palestinians, and 4% Pakistanis, followed by several other nationalities in very small numbers (Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública–CONAR). The number of Venezuelan refugees has been gradually increasing. Data for the year 2018 in the same text indicated only 5 Venezuelans with refugee status, although there were 85,435 requests for refuge from Venezuelans up to that time. In June 2019, however, CONARE (National Council for Refugees) granted refuge to 21,432 Venezuelans in an unprecedented decision to grant collective refuge. This unique act already makes Venezuelans, at this moment, the largest contingent of refugees in Brazil.³

In this paper, we will deal with the experience of African refugees/immigrants (mainly from Congo, Senegal, and Angola), Colombians, Venezuelans, and Syrians. African refugees were

surveyed by Alexandre Branco (2018) and Alexandra Almeida (2019), with the former focusing on the places of mental health assistance in São Paulo, and the latter on the experiences of Africans who are gathered by the refuge assistance institutions in Sao Paulo. We are dealing with Congolese, who are fleeing the civil war in Congo, and Senegalese in migration networks who apply for refuge but have little chance of obtaining it, although those displaced by conflicts in the Casamance region still achieve refugee status. We also have Angolans, asylum seekers with little chance of success, except in the case of the lasting conflict in the Cabinda region.

Iana Vasconcelos (2018) works with the refuge and immigration of Venezuelans to Roraima and Manaus, while Gabriel Lopez (2015) has conducted research among refugees and Colombian immigrants in Tabatinga, Manaus and São Paulo. Venezuela is currently one of the largest sources of population displacement in the world, with more than 4,000,000 displaced people (Díaz-Sánchez et al., 2020), of which about 173,000 are in Brazil, mainly in the state of Roraima (FGV DAPP, 2020). Colombians were welcomed as refugees mainly until 2016, the year that marks the peace agreement in the Colombian civil war (324 people by 2018 according to Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública–CONARE, 2019).

Juliana Carneiro (2019), Marchini (2019) and Gabrielle Cunha (2019) are developing research on Syrian refugees: the first among Syrian Muslims in São Caetano (State of São Paulo), the second among Syrians working in the Arab food market in the city of São Paulo, and the last among Syrian Christians in the interior of the state of São Paulo, in the city of Itapira. According to CONARE data for 2018, 3362 Syrian refugees lived in the country and represented 36% of refugees in Brazil at that time (Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública–CONARE, 2019).

We will demonstrate how immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers move between different state categories for defining displacement in Brazil. The Brazilian government recognizes the right to apply for asylum, which makes many foreigners apply for asylum as soon as they arrive in Brazil. This allows them to stay in the country (with documents and work permits) until CONARE's final decision. In the meantime, many know that they will not be granted refugee status and look for alternatives to legally remain in the country: if they get a work contract, they can give up the application for refuge and apply for a work visa, for example. They can have children in Brazil, which allows them to apply for permanent residence, guaranteed by law. They can also access other statutes. In the case of nationals from countries bordering Brazil, there is the Mercosur agreement, which guarantees the right to temporary residence in Brazil for two years (renewable). This treaty has been extended to all border countries, and today it reaches, for example, Colombia and Venezuela. They can also apply for a humanitarian visa, a category created by the Brazilian government especially for Haitians, which was later also extended to Syrians.

Thus, given the profusion of categories, the reverse is also true: foreigners who entered Brazil with other statutes (such as nationals from border countries or with a humanitarian visa) can apply for refuge later. Thus, for example, Syrians who came under the protection of the humanitarian visa can apply for refuge and change their status. The same has happened with Venezuelans. Venezuelans may be in Brazil as migrants supported by the extended treatment of Mercosur, as asylum seekers or as refugees. Many seek to change their status to that of refugee because there are some advantages to this situation: for Venezuelans in Roraima (on the border with Venezuela), there is the possibility of entering the "interiorization" program, which takes them to other cities in Brazil, with some logistical support. For Syrians (and other nationalities), the main advantage is access to a free regime for the recognition of diplomas, which is guaranteed only for refugees.

Variations

The first fluctuation that complicates the understanding of refuge in Brazil is the fact that there is a common confusion between asylum seekers and refugees. Between the application and the

granting or not of refuge, years go by; this is a period in which the foreigner is legally authorized to stay and work in the country. This already produces a mismatch between a much larger volume of requests than concessions. But one way or another, the word refuge is circulating among these two groups of people, confusing everything from public service workers, for example, to even potential employers, who very often refuse to consider “refugees” for job openings.

On the other hand, during the waiting period for the decision of CONARE, an asylum seeker may have his/her legal status changed; he/she may have children in Brazil, who immediately obtain Brazilian citizenship, and, as the father or mother of a citizen, he/she may apply for the right to permanent residence in Brazil and, after one year, naturalization. Eventually a salaried job allows the application for a temporary residence permit, which after four years allows naturalization.

Thus, the same trajectory may involve entering Brazil via an asylum application, then applying to stay through a work contract or applying for naturalization if a child is born to them in Brazil, or refusing refugee status and relying on other forms of legalization, such as humanitarian visas (which apply to Haitians and Syrians), and naturalization or residence agreements. People fluctuate by categories, which explains part of the confusion surrounding the definition of who is or is not a refugee: one can be a refugee and soon after an individual is no longer one, the person can never have been a refugee but have lived for years with the documents of an asylum seeker. One can move from refugee status to that of being naturalized. These fluctuations, these slips of people between categories, are a fact of migratory dynamics, in Brazil or elsewhere. It's not a problem; it's a fact. What interests me here is that this sliding of people into the legal categories takes place in a legal setting that may have no relation to the real-life scenario of people, where another order of classifications is triggered to frame foreigners in certain forms of thinking and organization of care experience, among many others.

According to data from the Ministry of Justice, only half of the refugees in Brazil in 2018 lived as refugees in the national territory. According to the website of the Brazilian Ministry of Justice:

Data for March 2018 indicate that 5,314 refugees are actively registered in Brazil, which means that there are 5,314 refugees living in Brazil under this condition. Historically, however, Brazil has already recognized more than 10,000 refugees, according to the table available (...) on this site. Since life is dynamic and many situations occur after the recognition of refugee status, it is possible to say that many of them naturalized as Brazilians, others are no longer refugees and opted for residence under the Immigration Law (Law No. 13,445/17), returned to their country of origin, terminated refugee status, died, among other situations. Thus, currently there are about 5000 refugees with active registration in Brazil. (Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública 2018, my translation)

That is, the fluctuation of foreigners among categories of state definition reaches 50% of the refugees historically recognized in Brazil; this is a very expressive number and most likely reveals how difficult it is to live as a refugee in Brazil, something that the data that I will discuss below allows us to state with certainty.

We have here a category of refuge that incites a proliferation of other categories: a) asylum seeker; b) holder of a humanitarian visa; c) extension of the Mercosur residence agreement; d) residence permit (work permit); e) naturalization. The temporary status of the asylum seeker (a) is in itself a status different from that of refuge: it is similar to the (d) residence permit (in fact, the law says that the asylum seeker is granted a temporary residence permit). But the proliferation does not stop there: given the entry of Haitians into the country since 2010 (the year of the great earthquake in Haiti), and the large volume of asylum seekers, there has been widespread denial (except in very specific cases)⁴. The solution was the creation of a specific humanitarian visa for Haitians (b)⁵ (Trabalón, 2018). From the refusal of CONARE, another category is created, that of the holder of the humanitarian visa only for the Haitians until 2013, when the same possibility was extended to the Syrians.⁶ Thus, the refuge generates asylum seekers (a), who generate Haitian asylum seekers, for whom the humanitarian visa (b) is created and then also extended to

the Syrians. But we have not yet ended the proliferation, and we have another category derived from the category of refuge: a temporary residence visa for Mercosur citizens (c), extended to all citizens of border countries.⁷

Thus, the experiences of three distinct nationalities (Haitians, Syrians, and Venezuelans) produced an expansion of the refuge category, unfolded in others. But there are still other slips, such as those related to the change of status, either through naturalization (e) or through the option of residence permits through employment contracts (d). Thus, while the displaced cross the categories in their experience of life, the state also produces crossings: it creates other ways of dealing with the different nationalities, producing a real labyrinth that mixes its own categories. But this is one side of the equation, the state side, running after the uncontrollable reality and producing new norms and rules to continue to maintain the category of “refuge” purified. But this purification hides an incessant process of multiple refugeeness derived from the very notion of refuge—for each purification there is a process of mixing that is hidden, as Latour (1994) would say.

Another issue, moreover, is the process in places of assistance to refugees, immigrants, asylum seekers, holders of humanitarian visas, holders of temporary residence permits, holders of the right to temporary residence because they are Mercosur citizens or because they are residents of Brazilian border countries. To this profusion of categories, to this labyrinth, correspond other definitions and categories of NGO workers, state bureaucracies, and the foreigners themselves who can belong to any of these categories or several of them over time.

On the other hand, when refuge appears extensively in the media, it also brings a message of purification, not of the refuge itself but of the national “generosity” that is proven in the trajectory of refugees in Brazil. Cardoso (2012), for example, points out in his research on the refugee in the Brazilian media how, along with the usual notions of “invasion” tied to refugees, there always appears a set of positive images and discourses about Brazil and its essential ability to “welcome.” Teixeira and Zackseski (2017) note the same tendency to highlight Brazil as a land of incomparable hospitality, and the same appears in reports about Syrian refugees in Brazil, according to Alves et al. (2017). This makes it possible to state that there is a “refuge show” woven into this media-driven nationalism and “humanitarian” government practices, while refugees are seen as a threat around what Cogo calls “panic semantics” (Cogo, 2001). Or, still, they are seen as eternal debtors to a state that sees itself as magnanimous in “giving opportunities” to the refugees, eternal subaltern borrowers (Hamid, 2012; Navia, 2014).

Lives

The life experience of refugees and immigrants is crossed by categories, as we have said. But life also produces other categories and I will now rapidly describe scenarios from various ethnographies examined at the laboratory of migration studies that I coordinate. The effort here is, of course, a very strong condensation of some outstanding dimensions from each fieldwork.⁸ Alexandre Branco and Alexandra Almeida work on experiences of refuge in São Paulo. Almeida organizes her fieldwork from shelters coordinated by actors in the great network of institutions that provide assistance to refugees, with resources coming from UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), the Brazilian government, the city of São Paulo, and other sources. Almeida shows us how the organization of refugee reception itself is coordinated with certain apprehensions on the part of these institutions because they gather certain groups in their shelters: in this case, black African women refugees. The point is that the definition of refuge here is tantamount to a social definition of race: African black women are seen and treated as refugees, even though most are asylum seekers or immigrants. But this does not matter to the institutions, which articulate another structure of differences under the label of “refuge”: black African women, who are placed in the same shelters with rooms dividing preferentially according to linguistic proximity.

The institutions thus create a network of black African women who relate to each other solely and exclusively because they have been placed in the same situations. This generates a process of approximation in the life experience of these women: they end up living in the same neighborhoods when they are forced to leave the institutions, work in the same types of jobs, seek shelter in that same network of institutions, and end up attending the same churches. We could say that the state creates social groups from the categories of institutions that receive resources to deal with refugees; these categories are racial and push women into a racialized blackness experience in Brazil, with all the burdens it has, such as discrimination, racism, labor market difficulties, and poor housing conditions. We have a black and female refugeeness. Here, the refuge category gains a connotation of exclusion for these women. It is not surprising that all the women followed by Almeida, left Brazil during or shortly after the fieldwork in search of better options in other countries, preferably in Europe. Thus, the classification processes of these institutions resulted in a process of exclusion (Almeida, 2019). Thus, for these African women, the category of refuge means, in the practice of daily life, a racialized and hostile experience in the social fabric of the city of São Paulo.

Working more or less in the same scenario, Alexandre Branco focused specifically on the institutions that provided mental health services for refugees (Branco 2018). When he moved around the institutions, he noticed something relevant: there was not much demand for mental health services, and aid for refugees/immigrants was requested from these institutions with respect to other sensitive areas: Portuguese classes, job searches, guidelines for Brazilian public services, etc. In this context, the services ended up receiving refugees, asylum seekers and non-refugees, mainly Haitians (with humanitarian visas). Thus, with UNHCR funding for refugees' mental health care at NGOs, therapeutic groups were organized that relied on foreigners in various legal situations. At times, when financial institutions monitored the application of resources, for the sessions that were to be visited by auditors, it was necessary and separate the "real refugees" from the others and run independent sessions. The result was a very small number of people in attendance.

The official state categories, which organize the distribution of resources, were different from those of the agents who should use the money for the refugees. In the places of assistance, mainly Haitians, but also other nationalities, were all placed in the same category of foreigners to be attended to but not without another hierarchical level that Almeida also noticed: the racial cut that creates a distinction between black refuge and white refuge (Black and white refugeeness). This distinction is made by the refugees themselves who perceive very clearly the difference in experiences and possibility of integration into Brazilian society, depending on the classification of race articulated in the services and Brazilian society in general. Black foreigners are pushed into social situations of exclusion in a way that is not as intense with "white" refugees. We are dealing here with native categories, and Syrian refugees/immigrants are seen as white within the framework of Brazilian racial definitions, based on the history of Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese immigration to Brazil in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

What we see, then, is a variation in the refuge category which, among the workers of the supporting institutions (private or state-owned) means something else: not exactly whether the official refugee status (or asylum seeker status) is guaranteed but the sharing of certain hierarchical racial characteristics. There is a black refugeeness, where Haitians are inserted, as well as all African nationalities. To all these, certain actions lead to an experience that Branco calls "exclusionary inclusion" (they are included precisely by exclusion). And there is a white refugeeness, aimed primarily at the Syrians, who would have better opportunities to restructure their lives in Brazil. This division is seen and criticized by black refugees but is not recognized by institutions that operate as if it were not a product of their own actions. Here we see other slips between the formal rules of the government and the practice of assisting refugees: the daily lives of state or state-financed bureaucracies subvert the official category of refuge into two others: white refuge and black refuge.

Work on Syrian refugees points to other categorical labyrinths. The first obvious question concerns the difference between them and black refugees/immigrants, in which they have some advantage from the outset. Almeida reports, for example, that a care institution refused to promote a collection of goods for African refugees in critical condition but soon after promoted the same kind of action for a Syrian family. On the other hand, the historic presence of Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian migration to Brazil has also constituted a series of possible points of support for these refugees that makes life easier in Brazil, as opposed to what the majority of black refugees/migrants experience.

In the case of Syrian Muslim refugees, a religious structure set up in Brazil since the last century works to raise assistance in the initial moments and also to give some sense of community to newcomers. In the region of São Caetano City, where Juliana Carneiro (2019) does her fieldwork, this happens with the presence of a Muslim community that frequents the main mosque. Thus, in addition to the initial assistance of the state and private bureaucracy, there is a support network that stems from the continual presence of these populations in Brazil. As Lize N. Marchini (2019) demonstrates, there is also a more easily accessible labor market around Arab food, already part of the Brazilian culinary experience. There is a tendency among Syrian refugees to get jobs in this specific labor market.

At the same time, there are differences between Syrians, depending on the faith they profess. To be Muslim in Brazil is to live with suspicion from various orders, as we see in the media portrayal of the refugee. As Cardoso (2012) and Scremin et al. (2017) point out, there is always an association in the Brazilian media between Muslim refugees and terrorism, a process related to global terrorism events and also to the coverage of the world's major news agencies. In the Brazilian context, the Muslim religion tends to produce suspicion, and in daily life the Syrian Muslim refugees feel some of the distrust and fear on the part of Brazilians. The category of refugee, when associated with the Muslim religion, triggers a series of ideas and classifications surrounding fear, mistrust, and suspicion. In the everyday life experiences, then, refuge for Syrians may be a more promising alternative than for the black refugees, as it can be a way to generate fear and suspicion, making difficult the possibility of a better life in Brazil.

But things may be very different depending on religion, and Syrian Christian refugees (seen as whites) may be an even more privileged form of "white" refugeeness. The initial work of Gabrielle Cunha (2019), whose research focus is on the experiences of Syrian Christian refugee families in the interior of the State of São Paulo, has already announced the almost dissolution of the category "refuge" in everyday experience. Here we have a family migration; these new refugees arriving have family ties in the city, relatives who receive them and end up facilitating in some way the lives of these people. In this scenario, the category "refuge" is not activated, given the rooting of families who receive them in these cities, where they are merchants, politicians, teachers, etc. Those who arrive are just additional members of those families who have articulated a relationship with Syria since the beginning of the twentieth century. Thus, the same population, the Syrians, can be seen from a favorable perspective when compared to black Africans. They may find a more favorable place in the labor market but may also face suspicion and fear rooted in the stereotypes of terrorists imposed on Arab populations in general. But they may also, in the face of an experience mediated by family networks, hardly be seen as refugees in certain contexts, but rather as "family."

Things get even more complex when we look at the two groups of South American nationals, usually related to refuge in Brazil. The case of Colombians and Venezuelans is exemplary in terms of the effects of the labyrinth of the categories: they are on opposite sides. A significant number of Colombians actually have refugee status (about 4% of the total number of refugees historically in Brazil, giving a total of about 330 people). In the case of Venezuelans, until 2018 there were very few refugees recognized by CONARE, a scenario that changed in 2019 as we saw above. Meanwhile, both populations, when cited or seen by the media, are classified as

“refugees.”⁹ For both populations, there is also the right to apply for permanent residence in Brazil, based on the Mercosur agreement extended to all bordering countries.

But the experience of Colombian refugees, as analyzed by Lopez (2015), indicates that the category of refuge, when linked to the Colombians themselves, is a relevant problem in life experience: a connection between refuge and drug trafficking is articulated, which produces immediate suspicion and fear among Brazilians. This suspicion is related to how the Colombian conflict and drug trafficking have been portrayed in the Brazilian media over the years, which always connected the conflict to trafficking and to the Colombians themselves, as if any Colombian were a potential trafficker. Given the deep ignorance surrounding the Brazilian understanding of the category of refuge, in the case of Colombians, prejudice prevails, and the category becomes evidence that proves the distrust. That is, in this case, it is the Brazilians who articulate a reinterpretation of the category in light of their own prejudices. This produces a very difficult situation for Colombians, which has resulted in some of those with whom Lopez spoke have preferred to abandon refugee status and seek immigrant status (to obtain a residence permit), to eliminate this stigma associated with the refugee category in the case of Colombians.

The case of the Venezuelans moves in the opposite direction: these migrants, for the most part, are blatantly treated as if they were all refugees. But it seems that, in relation to these immigrants, the category of refuge is much more adequately and indiscriminately used. Here, the use of the sliding category acquires obvious political connotations, as indicative of Venezuela’s political bankruptcy, something propagated and desired by political agents in Brazil, especially those who ascended to power in 2019¹⁰. Together with the security forces and the militarization of assistance to the Venezuelan “refugees” in Roraima, (Machado & Vasconcelos, 2018; Vasconcelos, 2018) there is a tendency in the media to always refer Venezuelans to the category of refuge. The sense, of course, is different from that of the Colombians: here refuge is a political term to evidence a bankruptcy of a model (in the case, of a leftist government). Thus, every time that Venezuelans are tied to the category of refuge, we have an implicit political manifestation that condenses a whole discourse against the Maduro government, against the political tendencies linked by the media to this government. In this way it can be seen that the category in the use of everyday life extrapolates the actual situation of the migrants and looks at another constellation of meanings, properly political. The Venezuelan refugeeness, thus, are crossed and defined by questions that do not refer exactly to them but to the semantic disputes by political positions in a South American scene.

Final considerations

These categorical variations, this maze of categories, serves to separate or join with the same terms, depending on political interests. A purified category of refugee allows the fluidity between refuge and migration to be hidden, thereby making one legitimate and the other not. Thus, it is possible for the state to appear as just, humane, and benevolent in granting refuge to a minority of people. It is possible that the media use the refuge to speak precisely of this national offering of a “welcome.” At the same time, it is necessary to separate, and the semiotic effort of purification is a state action par excellence, even if purification results in a powerful instrument of categorical variation: an instrument of separation. Thus, the category “refuge” is an instrument of cutting and separation. This purity refers to the trait of justice and benevolence that both the state and the media emphasize when referring to the refuge: the “pure” discourse is always about the state itself and never about the foreigners. And the power of this category, precisely because it values the action of the state and a certain essential conception of Brazilianness (reception), assaults the sphere of representation of the foreigner, whether or not he/she is a refugee. The category allows, when talking about foreigners, them to be completely ignored because of the implicit self-praise it provides.

Other national contexts also present what we can call categorical variations on several levels. Spencer and Delvino (2019) indicate, for example, how variations in categories are handled by city halls to extend services to immigrants in an undocumented situation in the UK, in which municipalities are able to interpret national immigration control rules more freely. These disagreements between different bureaucracies within the state as a whole (Hepburn & Zapata-Barrero, 2014) also produce different interpretations of the categories. Spencer (2018), for example, highlights how the definition of issues related to immigration control policies and access to services is relevant: the different forms of framing imply different ways of understanding migratory regimes. Chauvin and Garcés-Masareñas (2012, 2014) argue that contradictory symbolic classifications regulate the relationship between state bureaucracies and migrants (mainly reflecting on the Spanish case). What we saw in this text is the flexibility with which immigrants and refugees move between the categories of “legality” and how this transit is also an effect of the management of migration in Brazil: this transit ends up allowing free use of the categories by the state, highlighting those that are most interesting politically to governments. The impact of this is that the majority of the immigrant population in Brazil is rendered invisible in speeches and public policies aimed almost exclusively at refugees.

But in everyday life, refugees in Brazil can be welcome, depending on the population concerned. Immigrants may gain the status of “refugees” as a form of political legitimacy (Venezuelans), while others must be carefully separated (Haitian), and remain removed from the category. Syrians can be seen as refugees even when they have humanitarian visas, for example. We have seen throughout the text the production of multiple refugeeness. But the instrument of cutting and separation is itself a labyrinth, and as we approach the life experience of immigrants, we find institutions weaving their own models for who is or is not a refugee. At the same time, the labyrinthine category can also impose ideas of separation from danger or threats. A Colombian refugee is synonymous with a dangerous trafficker, for example, in their daily experience in Brazil. In this case, the sliding effects of the category operate in the real world to produce exclusion and fear. However, the labyrinth coexists with native classifications in care services, categories that are free to be stretched in different directions provided that the large purified category allows the discretionary action of cuts and separations.

At the same time, the state produces a pure category with international and national policy implications, while in practice it can discriminate against some populations as refugees (even if they are not legally refugees) and simultaneously produce a complex variation from the unbridled proliferation of categories derived from the purity of a central category. The labyrinth gives an account of hiding and cutting, of making invisible, of bringing up in a subalternized way, and also of staggering definitions. In our case, the category of immigrant loses value, gains distrust, and is scrambled in the labyrinth of refuge with other ideas, characteristics of a conservative anti-difference policy: fear, threat, pollution, and invasion—ideas tied to the categorical labyrinth but not to the pure category of refuge. Thus, the refuge category gains centrality in the discourse on displacements, as a privileged place, even if the excess of purification means a universe of only 5,000 people out of a total of 449,174 immigrants who have entered the country since 2010 (Oliveira, 2018, 66).

The effect of this purified state category is thus to cut and discriminate, to use other categories proliferated from that center, which revolves around international discourses, regulated by very relevant and “humanitarian” institutions. We thus have an adherence to the humanitarian discourse (Hyndman, 2000; Barnett, 2010; Fassin, 2011), while the practice is to place the greatest number of immigrants in an imprecise categorical place, which allows displacements according to the momentary political interests: hide, show, fear, avoid. All this comes from the spheres of enunciation of the state, with its legal effects and productions of realities (people who can enter, who can organize more or less easily their lives, etc.).

In the realm of everyday life, the categories are outside the control of both the bureaucracy and international bodies, as well as of the actors themselves in this complex network (volunteers,

ONG members, members of religious institutions, members of public services, security services, and the various immigrants/refugee/asylum seekers/humanitarian visa holders, etc.). With respect to the everyday life experiences, categories move in another direction, which is the direction of intersection with Brazilian forms of social classification and their own hierarchies that constitute another way of staggering differences, of making people visible or invisible.

The examples, derived from the ethnographic cases used here, demonstrate the variation in the category of refuge in daily life: the category of criminalization, political interest, suspicion about religiosity, production of exclusion of refugees and black immigrants, a positive category in some cases and negative in others. This evidence shows us how alongside the purification of the state category—which results in a “legitimate and humanitarian” discourse on this displacement—there is a categorical labyrinth full of slips and contradictory senses, manipulated freely in their daily life contexts. The practical effect of this labyrinth is that the term “refuge” assumes a hegemonic character to treat all foreigners in the country, while other terms, such as “immigrants”, for example, lose prominence and, along with this loss, there is a consequent invisibilization of migrant (non-refugee) collectives.

This is the “refuge show” and its result is the multiplication of the refugeeness. What is at stake in this process of deciding how foreigners are framed is what kind of framing predominates over these people. We saw that the predominant state perception is of refuge as a purified category, with its humanitarian (and politically acceptable) connotations, while the extension of this category to other foreigners, which are a large majority, results in the deletion of non-refugee experiences, a political invisibility. The loss of the categorical hegemony, so to speak, of the term “immigrant” is the sign of the prevalence of a security perspective on migration in Brazil, a perspective that we have seen growing in recent years.

Notes

1. For a discussion of the definition of refuge vis à vis other categories, such as “humanity”, see Limbu (2009); for a discussion of refuge categories and policies, see Bakewell (2008).
2. For a discussion of the media and refuge, see Holmes and Castañeda (2016) and Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017).
3. Cf. <https://noticias.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/rfi/2019/12/06/brasil-regulariza-situacao-de-mais-de-21-mil-refugiados-venezuelanos.htm>. Accessed February 5, 2020.
4. The refusal was established by Normative Resolution 18 of CONARE.
5. Resolution 97/2012 of CNIg (National Counsel of Immigration).
6. Normative Resolution CONARE n° 17/2013.
7. Resolution 126/2017 of CNIg.
8. At this moment of writing, all the works are still in production. I cite here reports, qualifications, and unpublished texts, specified in the bibliography. A book with the texts of these authors was published recently in Portuguese (Machado, 2020).
9. Consider that between 2011 and 2017 the CNIg granted 57,230 residence permits to Venezuelans (Tonhati et al., 2018, 46). Data from the same report also indicate that since 2010, 28,991 Colombians have settled in the country (Oliveira, 2018, 63).
10. For a discussion of the growing politicization of the “refuge” category, see Zetter (2007).

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