FORUM

Refugee studies in Austria today From challenges to a research horizon

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Abstract: This article sets out to highlight present-day anthropological contributions to the field of forced migration and to the current debates on this topic in Europe through the experience of developing an international and interdisciplinary network for the study of refugees based in Vienna, Austria. To this end, this article engages with the grounding facts of the present Central European sociohistorical context and global political trends, grapples with shifting and questionable research funding landscapes such as the focus on “integration,” illustrates some of the main current research challenges, and highlights pressing topics. It concludes proposing a research horizon to counter present strong limitations on forced migration research and steer this research toward a more meaningful direction.

Keywords: Central Europe, encounter, forced migration, integration, refugee studies, research horizon

How can anthropology and anthropologists contribute to the current refugee/migration debate, particularly in Europe? How relevant is anthropology to this topic today? This article engages these questions through our experience in setting up and developing the Refugee Outreach & Research Network (ROR-n), an international and interdisciplinary network for the study of forced migration based in Vienna, Austria. Through this experience, in turn, this article engages particular challenges in working on forced migration studies in Central Europe and suggests a comprehensive research horizon to drive the discipline toward a fruitful endeavor.

First, we will introduce ROR-n and give an overview of recent political developments in Austria and Central Europe, debating their implications to refugee-related matters. We will then succinctly outline the contemporary scenario of refugee studies in Austria and the most relevant focus and funding shifts. The question of “integration” emerges here as both fundamental to the field of forced migration in Europe and deeply flawed. Next, we will set out experiences in dealing with research data while prevailing public moods and opinions have largely been swayed toward the political right, and then highlight new research challenges and

blind spots. Finally, we will discuss what shifting political, funding, and research contexts might imply for anthropology's future role in refugee studies. Throughout these sections, we aim to illustrate how anthropologists can contribute to the contemporary public and scholarly refugee/migration debates through their particular expertise in how to approach forced migration, which in turn entails handling sensitive research data, being pushed into a research agenda, among other challenges. With this perspective in mind, we conclude by proposing a research horizon to counter present strong limitations on forced migration research and steer this research toward a more meaningful direction.

The Refugee Outreach and Research Network

The Refugee Outreach and Research Network, is a cross-institutional, social-science-based cooperative research and public outreach initiative based at the Austrian Academy of Sciences (AAS), with partners across various universities and NGOs in Austria, as well as in Northern Italy, Hungary, Southern Germany, Lebanon, and elsewhere. It was founded after the summer of 2015, when the authors of this article, all anthropologists based at the AAS's Institute for Social Anthropology (ISA), called a series of roundtable discussions aiming at setting up a transdisciplinary network for the study of forced migration. Not many researchers were specializing in forced migration in Austria before the summer of 2015, and the few who did rallied mostly from the field of European history and were knowledgeable in one particular group or area, for example, Jewish and Holocaust studies, displacement from the Ex-Yugoslavia, or other salient topics associated with Austrian history. Thus, for those events, we invited academics specializing in migration in general. Besides historians and anthropologists, there were demographers, legal experts, geographers, linguists, and others.

From the outset, ROR-n comprised research institutes and independent expert researchers in refugee studies in particular, and in human (im)mobility at large, aiming at both enduring and ad hoc collaborations for producing and sharing knowledge about processes of human displacement in general and Middle Eastern refugees in particular. Furthermore, ROR-n's efforts have also aimed at including displaced academics in the network and academia, and to inform an interested public in Austria and beyond about processes of forced migration. Within this broad frame, however, ROR-n's efforts have been geared toward utilizing established and new anthropological insights as principles for the inclusion of contributions from other disciplines, and the network's outlook resonated with established trends in anthropology and forced migration studies.

Anthropologists had been especially active in forced migration studies from this field's early days. Based on a research tradition dating back to the 1970s and reaching far beyond the European context (see Chatty 2010; Chatty and Colchester 2002; Colson 2003; Colson et al. 1979; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2014; Harrell-Bond 1986; Malkki 1995; Reynell 1989; Sayigh 1979; Verdirame and Harrell-Bond 2005), anthropologists have developed particular insights on what the conditions of refugeeness entail and on how questions of (im)mobility (Salazar and Smart 2012) affect relations between nation-states, refugees, immigrants, and a variety of other social actors. Anthropology, according to Dawn Chatty, has prioritized and continues to prioritize "the views of the uprooted, the displaced, and the dispossessed." It brings to light the voices and agency of those who are forced to leave or to stay, emphasizes their lived experience over statistical data and scrutinizes as well as documents "what happens to people, their culture, and society when they are wrenched from their territorial moorings, be they refugees and exiles, development induced displaces, or mobile peoples evicted, restricted, and forced to remain in one place" (2014: 74). However, as presented below, current global perspectives on

refugees and funding opportunities geared toward securitization and the subsumption of refugee studies under migration studies, perhaps especially in Europe, might overlook those particular well-established insights in our discipline.

The political context in Austria

To understand forced migration research tendencies in Austria, it is necessary to consider this country's rich history in receiving large numbers of migrants, forced or otherwise. During the past three hundred years, Austria has experienced large influxes of people (Kuzmany and Garstenauer 2017), many of them in recent history. Major influxes were brought up, for example, by the Prague Spring events of 1968 that took more than 162,000 Czech refugees to Austria, and the Bosnian Civil War of the 1990s, when Austria became home to 95,000 Bosnian refugees (Kraler and Stacher 2002). According to Leonardo Schiocchet (2016: 236), even though the 2015 numbers are indeed the highest recorded since World War II, they do not look as unique in historical perspective. What is unique this time is that refugees in 2015/2016 were labeled according to their different religious background. Contrary to the Czechoslovak refugees of the late 1960s and the Bosnian refugees of the mid-1990s, the Middle Eastern refugees of 2015 did not come from previous imperial Habsburg domains. After 2016, and especially after 2017, their reception became increasingly characterized by neo-nationalist, confrontational exclusion.

However, this shift was not a change of register particular to Austria, but it accompanied and reacted to different political discussions in neighboring countries. Together with Greece, Italy, Germany, and Sweden, Austria belongs to those five European Union countries that have accommodated the highest proportions, per capita, of refugees from the Greater Middle East between 2015 and 2018. Uneasiness with Austria's reluctant refugee politics grew within large sectors of mainly urban Austrian popula-

tion, mobilized by images of the harsh situation of thousands of refugees waiting on Budapest's Keleti train station and the rising awareness about the mounting death tolls of refugees in the Mediterranean. But after an initial phase of enthusiastic welcome by large sectors of civil society, growing popular concerns were successfully manipulated and instrumentalized by conservative and neo-nationalist political forces. This phase was thus marked by political skepticism and critique rather than by a friendly attitude toward refugees and diversity.

Latent right-wing populist sentiments were raised by politicians and increasingly by Austrian citizens, especially at the borders, who saw themselves confronted with the arrival of thousands of people within a few weeks and the overwhelming presence of volunteers, security forces, journalists, and spectators. This resulted in a policy of increasingly rigid seclusion and in a reduction of public and media discourses to the topic of the "refugee crisis" while intentionally conflating refugees' requests with labor migration. The capitalist logic behind this was to put domestic labor markets under rapidly increasing pressure until substantial parts of the local work force would demand the strengthening of existing limitations of access to these local labor markets. In Hungary, for example, a rhetoric language regime (Kroskrity 2000) of "crises" was mobilized in 2015 around the topic of foreign groups entering the Schengen Area on Hungarian territory. This rhetoric deployed a binary between citizens and foreigners wherein the latter were framed as a "threat" to the Hungarian population (Kallius et al. 2016: 27). While Austria and then Austrian Chancellor Werner Faymann had openly criticized Hungary for their handling of refugees on the move (Die Presse 2015) already in mid-October, most Austrian politicians had changed their tones from *Willkommenskultur* to the urge to enforce "fortress Europe." This shift was accompanied by the building of several fences in and around Austria and its neighbor countries and the temporary suspension of free movement in the Schengen Area starting from early autumn of 2015. To-

gether with media reporting about the Cologne events on New Year's Eve 2015/2016, these concerns transformed public opinion. Hence, at the beginning of 2016, Austria limited the number of refugee arrivals by drastically restricting the number of admitted asylum applications (80 per day).

The new center-right Vienna government's chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, played a crucial role in closing the so-called Balkan route while still being foreign minister in 2016/2017. Even while subsequently serving as chancellor and EU council chair, he was forging an alliance with neighboring forces in power, such as the new populist and right-wing coalition government in Italy, the Orbán administration in Hungary, and the right-wing Berlin coalition partner from Bavaria. New joint political ventures within Europe were followed by the EU-Turkey summit and the signing of the deal in March 2016 (Župarić-Ilić and Valenta 2019: 379). In turn, the 2017 parliamentary elections in Austria resulted in the recent takeover of the federal government by a conservative *cum* neo-nationalist coalition. New political alliances were now based on the criminalization of refugees and those involved in refugee aid, especially when connected to border crossing, such as maritime search and rescue actions. In Austria, this criminalization resulted in a rapid growth of enforced deportations, especially to Afghanistan, new limits on rights for merely completing any legal procedures, and a whole avalanche of new restrictions for the resident population of migrants and asylum seekers, as well as for those already holding asylum—most of it with a strong emphasis upon individual asylum seekers' personal responsibilities. Those entitled to stay must undergo strictly codified procedures that would “teach” them Austrian “values” and make sure that their “integration” into Austrian society would not be a choice of degree of identification but a duty ensured by several pressure mechanisms. For example, social welfare assistance is dependent on language skills.

To an extent, these Central European transformations are the regional counterpart to global

developments, from Brexit to Trump's rise as US president to Putin's quest for hegemony—developments that have mostly been welcomed by local neo-nationalists in Central Europe. In our opinion, it is quite appropriate to address the current situation as the return of right-wing populism and neo-nationalism (Gingrich and Banks 2006) on a global scale, but with clear conflict potentials and strong regional specificities, some of which include the intentional undermining of standard democratic rights. As Don Kalb, Douglas Holmes, and Andre Gingrich discussed with several younger scholars during two American Anthropological Association panels in late 2017, such a set of consensual opinions makes it even more important to focus on anthropology's specific tasks within these transformed contexts.

Current trends in refugee studies in Austria

It is not surprising that such a substantial change in the overall domestic and regional political constellation also comes along with consequences for the funding of research in refugee topics. As a result, funding through bottom-up applications has become increasingly limited, while funding by top-down, predefined calls is more and more closely dependent on the calling institutions' satisfaction with end results—with an ensuing tendency toward undermining the constitutional right for freedom of research. While public and academic attention in late 2015 was focused mostly on reasons of flight and background information on people arriving to Austria, this attention changed over time. One strand of research of refugees in Austria and Central Europe at large diverted into the securitization of borders, surveillance, and control, while the other converged toward more traditional topics within migration studies, such as “integration” or labor market inclusion (today often claimed as the main part of the integration process by certain political actors).

But what is integration? And can it be an important anthropological category to understand

processes of forced migration in Europe and beyond? Many new projects to research (mostly Middle Eastern) refugees in Europe emerged in the months following the summer of 2015. Projects about Muslims and Arabs in general also gained traction, as they were motivated by an urge to probe into the ability of these communities to adapt to Europe. The centrality of the European context and the anxiety generated by the coming of large numbers of mostly Muslim refugees pushed most of these projects to be, in one way or another, about what state agents, case workers, and academics alike have elusively called “integration.”

The summer of 2015, when refugees, particularly from the Middle East, arrived in Europe, became known as the “summer of migration” and made evident the asymmetric meeting between Europe and the Middle East. A part of the European population, especially Middle Eastern Europeans and part of the European political left, mobilized a sociopolitical vernacular evoking the history of European foreign policy in the Middle East, resignifying European history and Europe–Middle East relations to account for what many deemed a crisis. Various social actors evoked this encounter differently, sympathetically or unsympathetically, making this vernacular strongly polysemic (Schiocchet 2016). Thus, after the summer of 2015, knowledge about forced migrants in Europe became imperative to understanding how these diasporic subjects engage with Europe, how they connect this region to the Middle East, and how this encounter shapes and is shaped by contemporary global sociohistorical processes.

Although Europe has had a small group of competent researchers exploring the topic of integration before (Ager and Strang 2008; Caglar and Glick Schiller 2006; Esser 2001; Halm and Sauer 2006; Heitmeyer et al. 1997; Schiffauer 2011), the numbers of research projects soared after the summer of 2015, most of them being proposed and/or conducted by scholars with little or no experience in the fields of Middle Eastern, Islamic, or refugee studies. Many of these scholars have never set foot in the Middle

East and have little to no prior knowledge about these subjects, their history, their language, or their situation outside Europe. Some of these researchers have been even preeminent in the media, discussing complex matters in a generalized way, such as by saying “Syrian values” or “Islamic principles.” Some have also been preeminently featured in academic institutions’ web pages, reports, and publications. While a few of these studies have their merits, in general they have also contributed to creating distorted views of refugees, Middle Easterners, and the Middle East. As a result, for example, religious practices are said to be more normative than they tend to be, and worldviews have become overly estranged.

Most of these distorted views stem from preconceived notions guiding research questions and interviews, making their way into research practices through the popular focus on “integration.” This focus stems from both the Austrian and Central European research traditions dating back to the 1980s previously mentioned, and from questions raised by the media and governments, motivated either by fear or by a genuine preoccupation with the future of Middle Easterners, Muslims, and refugees, but often alien to these subjects. We will not address here the more radical securitization research on Middle Easterners—refugees or not—such as those informing (or rather being informed) by programs such as those of Frontex (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency), which point to the necessity of investing in securing the European borders overseas, for example, in Turkey and Tunisia. Nevertheless, what we have been addressing here is only something seemingly much more inconsequential: research that seeks to discuss if, for example, Afghan refugees can “integrate” in Germany.

It was within this context, facing these new manifestations of the 2015 refugee situation as it emerged, that ISA took the initiative to establish ROR-n. Since 2015, ROR-n itself has gone through several main phases. During the first phase, initial calls for joining ROR-n were widely supported. When the tides of public opin-

ion (including what questions academics should answer) subsequently changed, however, the number of actual and active participants shrank considerably, and since 2016, this largely turned into a second phase of difficult uphill struggle. It implied the forging of coalitions among small numbers of engaged researchers across Austria and beyond its borders, scholars who either already had a commitment in refugee studies or who were eager to specialize. During this second phase, it was certainly very helpful, despite insufficient financial support, to have the formal organizational backing of such a widely respected institution as the AAS.¹

Sustained local and transnational ROR-n events—including public outreach and research activities by ISA-based anthropologists helped to consolidate and reenergize ROR-n for the third and ongoing phase since the conservative and right-wing takeover of the federal government in early fall of 2017. So, ROR-n clearly was unable to have any significant impact on the general changes of public opinion in Central Europe during 2016/2017, let alone preventing them. But ROR-n certainly contributed to the consolidation and reinforcement of the ranks and files of social science research in refugee studies under the conditions of emerging right-wing hegemonic takeover processes. In this limited but fairly successful endeavor, it became crucial to insist on the necessity of independence for our research.

Handling data and results

The sensitivity of refugeeness in the current political context in Central Europe pushed ROR-n's members to constantly reflect on how to deal with research data. Methodologically speaking, we pursued this especially in three ways. First, we insisted on independence concerning the question of who controlled public dissemination of research results, in terms of the researchers themselves or the funding institution. As Ulf Hannerz and Andre Gingrich (2017: 12–13) have pointed out, Austria shares many of the

advantages and disadvantages of being a “small country,” including dense and short networks of people who all seem to know each other—features of which can be seen in what follows. During the first and the second phases, ROR-n signed a contract for a research financed by the previous center-left coalition government. Some intermediate results of that research were leaked to the ministry that had commissioned and funded it, headed at the time by Sebastian Kurz, who was busily preparing his own electoral campaign and government takeover. His office tried to publicize a version of these partial and intermediate results without any prior consultation.

Simultaneously, a ministry subdivision launched substantial efforts toward rewriting and reinterpreting the final report while it was in the making. For example, the research report emphasized that two-thirds of refugees and asylum seekers appreciated the rule of law and the protection of asylum rights in Austria. By contrast, the ministry's office alternatively proposed a politically charged version of the same chunk of data by highlighting the allegedly shocking information that one in three asylum seekers was skeptical or cautious about the Austrian legal system. In the end, the AAS's highest representatives had to intervene in order to stop the ministry's attempt at using research results for its own political agenda while these research results had not even gone through adequate peer review, let alone receiving approval for any form of publication. ROR-n therefore successfully dealt with such blatant attempts at ideological instrumentalization and managed to publish that final report according to academic standards.

Second, we reflected on data handling concerning cross-disciplinary cooperation with increasing significance. Forging these forms of cooperation with other social scientists was extremely important for advancing ROR-n—from jointly drafting to submitting project grant applications through defining and carrying out phases of intermediate summaries, to those of final synthesis. Engaging in questions of forced migration from multiple disciplines requires a

common denominator. There must be some ethical understandings of responsibilities and limits. Matthew Gibney (2014: 48) explains that already defining forced migration requires “careful consideration,” since it involves normative issues as much as an evaluation of “moral judgements about the legitimacy of the movement in question.” Hence, working with vulnerable groups requires carefully considering what “do no harm” means in the respective context and the living conditions of those being researched. A multidisciplinary network allows for exploring more than one viewpoint and helps identify ethical issues to be discussed.

Within these frames of cooperation, however, it became equally crucial to maintain and enhance independent anthropological inquiries. Our colleagues in sociology, demography, or geography usually work through interpreters while they tend to pursue a much more explicit emphasis on quantifiable methods of inquiry. The effect of both is that this would easily downgrade anthropologists’ roles to those of assistant and auxiliary researchers, if pursued at the same time and location with the same subjects, with little opportunity for anthropology’s main method: participant observation. Taking advantage of anthropology’s full potential therefore required separate inquiries in order to carry out participant observation in procedural asylum contexts, as well as through our conversations in native languages such as Arabic, Farsi/Dari, Pashtu, and Kurdish. In the end, the results delivered by anthropologists were decisive—results that focus on agents’ perspectives and on the precision of situated contexts or emic categories, as well as social and cultural dynamics among agents. Examples of these insights will follow in the next sections.

Third, we reconsidered processes of data acquisition due to a growing sensitivity to particular understandings of ethical complexities and responsibilities of working with refugees. The new discourse within Austria turned refugeeness itself into a sensitive topic and the category into one of high political alertness, but it also rose awareness among scholars that the

acknowledgment of one’s right to a refugee status under legal ambivalence of judges in Austria became increasingly a question of acknowledgment and “political subjectification.” Coined by Didier Fassin, the term describes “the production of subjects and subjectivities that hold political significance within the framework of social interaction” (2005: 533), and can be understood in this context as being steadfast about the acknowledgment of possible reasons to seek asylum and avoid deportation. Hence, it speaks against the politics of reducing a person’s biography to a legal categorization. In reaction to pressures by the government, xenophobic experiences, and other frustrations, accessing the field and establishing rapport became a challenge of its own. While the often-used snowball technique for finding respondents had worked well in other contexts, many refugees in present-day Austria consciously avoided being grouped with other refugees, at least in offline contexts.

Approaching people through governmental organizations or charity initiatives was often not a viable way to ensure mutual trust or the willingness to participate in research either, depending on the forced migrant’s experiences with authorities, control by institutions that work close to the government, and/or growing fear and uncertainty. While many of our refugee interlocutors avoided people of the same linguistic group offline, they behaved differently online: norms and motives of sociality often allowed exchange that forewent sensitive political grounds and the consequences of supposed political misalignment. Political debates about desirability and acceptability of foreigners in Austria were equally mirrored in new or long-established migrant communities in Austria, who attached different values to different interethnic relations and acted accordingly. Different online forums harbor community exchange, discussions on Austrian politics, questions of identity, child rearing and moral codes of conduct, the passing on of one’s legacy, promotion of events and places of importance to the various actors, and more. For this reason, among others, we learned that in refugee studies, at least in Central Eu-

rope today, it is unwise to exclude participant observation on the internet, and social media in particular, which in turn requires specific sets of ethical guidelines.

New challenges and blind spots

Let us now turn to some of the sensitive issues and open research puzzles that are likely to remain on the agenda of future activities in these fields of research. ROR-n observes ethical guidelines that have been developed by following the example of the Oxford Refugee Studies Centre. Still, guidelines always require creative assessments for specific situations, as we have suggested research online. The growing relevance of ethnographic grey areas around ethical and legal borderlines also includes questions of “implicit ethnography” and limits for regular fieldwork under changing legal regimes. For example, one ROR-n anthropologist was approached by a private company recruiting staff for “anchor camps” at the German-Austrian border, effectively a new type of deportation center. Seeking to learn more about the job and the institution, this anthropologist agreed to a phone interview that revealed information, which would not have become easily accessible otherwise, about inmates’ actual numbers being planned above legalized numbers, about a strict “zero contact” policy for staff members regarding NGO and media representatives, and about the absence of any professional interpreters. As problematic as such rare occasions for implicit investigations may be, we do regard them as ethically legitimate forms of inquiry, as long as they do not become the main path of ethnographic investigation but are merely additional venues for facilitating and accelerating ethnographic inquiry.

So, while the tasks of public outreach are growing for anthropological refugee studies, the relevance of certain nonpublic, “gray” elements also may increase. Gray areas are also involved, here and elsewhere, whenever anthropologists gain insights that may be harmful for their in-

terview partners. This is when the general ethical guideline “do no harm” comes into effect, of course. In this view, responsible and conscientious research among refugees in the current field setting requires an additional set of skills to all other “traditional” research skills. The ability to work with trauma and traumatic experience before, during, and after the flight becomes more and more pressing. Research, and interviewing in particular, can create trigger situations. Therefore, responsible and informed competencies of dealing with cases of dissociation² and other similar phenomena, as well as their cultural expressions, become an ethical requirement. In addition, since many of these research situations are beyond classical anthropological training and need professional attention, a broad network and collaboration with practitioners in various fields is advisable. Under conditions where nonprofit organizations depend on the benevolence of state funding, it becomes important to understand the enmeshment of actors in civil society and politics and form necessary alliances.

Another sensitive issue is language and cultural competence. While mastering the local language is a prerequisite in most ethnographic studies, and the acquisition of jargon a common learning process along fieldwork, for refugees in Austria certain words regarding their life in the country were appropriated from German legal jargon. One such example is the term *al-biṣāid* (*Bescheid*) when referring to a positive decision on an asylum application. Literarily translated, it means a legal decision of any kind. Since the letter that refugees receive from the Austrian federal office for immigration and asylum when granted asylum is headed (like most official notices) “Bescheid,” an appropriation is used by Arabic speakers in Austria as a synonym for a legal refugee status. Hence, researchers not only must handle the local language and jargon but also must be familiar with practices, terminologies, and language appropriations typical to the regions they are analyzing.

Handling and interpreting laws, norms, and practices relating to personal statuses, which

are under the control of religious authorities in many Middle Eastern countries, is also sensitive. Since they might differ from Austrian state law, they create legal constraints for forced migrants, such as in matters of legal marriage age, cousin marriage, polygamy, funerary practices, or inheritance rules, along with uncertainty. Such practices do not fit neatly into Austrian law and create administrative problems for civil servants that could be mitigated with interventions including anthropologists, for example, through extrajudicial resolutions. In sum, these gray areas and blind spots require diligent and responsible handling. It also falls into the ethics of responsible research to enlarge one's skill set according to the specific developments of the field under the current political conditions and the social realities that these create.

Future role of anthropology/ anthropologists

The shifting political context and the current developments and challenges described so far require a thorough reflection of anthropology's future role in refugee studies in Central Europe and beyond. Part of this reflection includes the exploration of topics with multiple socio-cultural dimensions, the responsible choice of research topics and the close consideration of ethical guidelines. Within the Austrian context, certain phenomena must be addressed carefully to not harm those involved. The issue of religious conversions is a case in point. In 2015, declared conversions to Christianity by refugees were still fairly frequent among asylum seekers claiming a Muslim background, until Austrian and other EU authorities ruled that the threat of persecution upon return did not represent a legally valid reason for granting asylum in these cases. The subtext was that these were not credible but fake conversions. A minor number of cases may well have represented faked instances. For example, in some Shiite orientations, the principle of acceptable concealing would make this ethically permissible. A few other cases are

known of Middle Eastern Christian refugees with appropriate first names, allowing them to claim a Muslim background from which they would now convert into Christianity.

Still, most cases were fairly authentic, such as the example of a 65-year-old ex-Communist and atheist from Baghdad who felt blessed by the welcoming support of the local Maronite community in Vienna to an extent that persuaded him into conversion, now also enjoying some additional protection from the powerful Catholic Church in Austria, which is the local Maronite community's main mentor. Issues of finding a community of belonging and (re)establishing social networks do not always have to coincide with expressions of belonging in settings before arriving in Austria. These shifts in self-understandings, pragmatics, and sentiments are topics that must be considered under due attention to the "lifeworlds" (Jackson 2012: 7) of the respective actors. Several other sociocultural dimensions of the Central European refugee situation remain burning issues of social welfare as much as for research, even though the number of newly incoming asylum seekers at Austrian borders has decreased considerably. These burning issues include, for instance, the disproportionately high numbers of fairly isolated young men (reportedly one of the underlying sets behind many Islamic State recruitments in Europe) or substantial figures of unaccompanied minors—another legal and ethical gray area for research in the absence of parental consent.

Another matter that will continue to require close attention by research as much as by health institutions concerns the diagnosis and treatment of certain hereditary diseases, occurring with significant frequency among parts of the refugee populations. Certain congenital metabolic diseases and hereditary blood disorders are in fact much more common wherever "close marriages" occur more regularly. They require special care by host institutions that are rarely well prepared for this. The intersection between health and (forced) migration is hence a topic that once again invites transdisciplinarity and

touches on several other topics such as public health, medical research, and care. With changing demographics, this nexus might become a pressing topic.

As yet another example for current and future focal fields of research, we would like to address the growing divorce rates among asylum-holding or asylum-seeking families in the 2015–2018 refugee populations in Austria. There are currently no statistics or detailed studies, but these divorce rates seem to be higher than among previous groups of Middle Eastern refugees, and they occur faster after arrival. Related ethnographic cases indicate the disruptive and traumatizing conditions before and during displacement, as well as the precariousness and uncertainty after arriving in Austria as one major set of underlying factors. A case in point is the story of a Damascus couple, married for 28 years, whose son had been drafted by the Syrian government's army. He was repeatedly reported to have died. Even though this was not true, his parents have not heard any news of him for some time. Since their arrival in Vienna, the mother is seeking a divorce, claiming her husband is not doing enough for their son. The desperate husband regrets that in Vienna, wider Damascus family circles who would have helped mediate such family tensions are not available.

Other ethnographic cases suggest different causal factors, possibly of higher relevance with young married adults among these refugees. Here the proportion of pragmatically situated, and even “fake” marriages during the displacement processes seems to be somewhat higher, for reasons of temporary comfort and support, at times to be dissolved swiftly. Other clusters of cases indicate such marriages sooner or later turned out to be against women's consent—which then would have led to their explicit wish for divorce as soon as asylum seemed to be in reach. These instances should not be taken lightly. After all, their occurrence would not be surprising among young and middle-aged couples with a somewhat stronger-than-average connection to traditional Sunni family values from a Syrian context, as a fairly strong segment

of the local refugee population from 2015 to 2017. In fact, this third cluster of possible sets of reasons underlying such high divorce rates could also highlight a hidden, liberating dimension in asylum rights.

Topics like these cannot fully be explained through statistics. They need a thorough understanding of contexts before the flight, during the flight, and in the current living situations in Austria. Talking about sensitive topics and unpleasant private experiences can be accommodated only in qualitative, adequate, and trust-secured manners. While macro-analysis and big data are usually of minor interest in anthropology, it is the deep and detailed analysis of reasons, backgrounds, and meaning-making that anthropologists master best. In highly sensitive political contexts and continuously emerging and changing conditions that constantly produce new vulnerabilities and social minefields, such insights can be of high value for understanding refugeeness—but only if ethical obligations to protect respondents from unintentional harm are considered. Furthermore, such topics and many others do not neatly fit the dominant integration perspective, and call for a comprehensive and more “emic” research program.

Anthropologists, striving to master the language of their interlocutors, literally and symbolically, are in even greater demand during times of legal, social, and political uncertainty, when the proper extensive background knowledge and transcultural understanding can help avoid misconceptions. Nevertheless, even anthropologists must explore a more nuanced and comprehensive inclusive research program than that of the integration perspective, which seems so dominant in Europe today.

Conclusion

Anthropologists' experience in ROR-n across all its moments of encouragement and failure, of setbacks and advances, has helped in consolidating and elaborating independent research

during phases of changing public opinion. This was achieved primarily by insisting on anthropological expertise and by high investments in public outreach, backed by invaluable institutional support. In turn, this also has substantiated our preference for seeing refugee studies as an interdisciplinary subfield that is closely interacting and intersecting but not identical with migration and mobility studies. Some major conceptual and epistemological premises and orientations may, in fact, necessarily remain identical or close to convergence; others will not. In addition, the ethnography is of fundamental significance. When it comes to small, personal networks of lifeworlds, differences become quite relevant as to whether you have any chance of obtaining asylum and whether violent persecution, or the threat thereof, has traumatized you and your family members, which brings us to our main conclusion and proposed research horizon.

Integration is indeed an important topic, but research on the integration of Arabs in Europe, for example, must necessarily question what integration is, who is mobilizing this idea, and how this mobilization is affecting the structure of the situation analyzed, rather than providing a judgment about whether Iraqis, for example, can become dutiful Hungarians. Hence, integration measures and political and media discourses on integration are not isolated features; it is the social phenomena they produce and within which they emerge that are of interest. Integration is thus not any analytical category in its own right but a notion primarily defined by power relations and contexts of purpose. Furthermore, research must be carried out by specialists in regional and language expertise *and* in refugee matters, rather than merely in Europe and migration. Moreover, the question of Middle Eastern refugees in Europe should not be framed as a religious question, especially if involving the necessity to “tame” Islam and Muslims so they can adapt or, as they say, “integrate” into Europe, but also not if establishing an *a priori* incommensurable religious divide that must be bridged.

As for the researcher, competence in Middle Eastern cultures, societies, politics, and languages besides knowledge of the field of forced migration is essential. Arabs, Iranians, or Afghans in Europe, including refugees, often lived complex lives before coming to Europe, which nonexperts frequently completely efface or reduce to stereotypes, losing from sight essential data on the Middle Eastern–European encounter. In this process, Middle Eastern voices are muted, as the possibilities for understanding and efficacious policy are greatly hindered. Finally, fieldwork with refugees and vulnerable persons requires sensibility, responsibility, and a very clear set of rules to avoid causing physical or psychological harm. Still, plenty of research institutes in Europe have no experience in researching refugees and/or the Middle East, researching Middle Eastern refugees on this continent (including research on unaccompanied minors), or even sending untrained undergraduate students to learn research methods by surveying or carrying out participant observation among this vulnerable group.

Thus, we propose to counter the limitations of the integration perspective and the pitfalls of unprofessional research in our field by shifting our perspective to avoid predetermining the results of our research by framing the interaction between forced migrants and Europe through the lenses of the nation-state, governance, policy, or even aid or solidarity. We would like to suggest it is possible to coalesce many other central research questions, which we will soon present, and avoid most, if not all, pitfalls of the research on integration, into only one research perspective we simply call, to avoid unnecessarily coining a new term, “the encounter” perspective.

The encounter, in our example, between Middle Eastern (refugees or not) and the European contexts, neither effaces the subjects’ history or the symbolic and empirical life connections between Europe and the Middle East, nor ultimately narrows research questions and results to answer if or how Middle Easterners can participate in European society, live under the rule

of law in this region, or ultimately even become culturally Europeans. Instead, it aims to create a broad understanding of representations, social interactions, social organization, and worldviews as they actually are, prior to preconceived notions that generate blind spots concerning the structure of the encounter. To use a medical metaphor, this perspective would be equivalent to producing a general diagnosis before defining the terms of an intervention. It has great potential to contribute to Middle East diaspora studies (as opposed to community studies, for example), the anthropology of (im)mobility, and the nexus between migration and forced migration studies, as it generates a nuanced and comprehensive panorama of the social situation that can also be used to discuss broad sociological and anthropological questions about the nature of social interactions, identity, belonging, organization, and other social scientific topics.

Besides asking ourselves what integration is by placing the term itself in perspective, we should also keep in mind that there are other structural questions, at least equally pressing, we should be discussing. In other words, it is, for example, necessary to study the effects of the humanitarian intervention on Middle Eastern refugees, but it is also necessary to understand this very meeting beyond the frame of the humanitarian discourse to draw a more inclusive picture of the social situation analyzed, and even to be able to anthropologically comprehend the humanitarian intervention itself. We believe this is not new to most anthropologists, even though many of us have actually continuously addressed “integration” without even putting this concept into perspective. So, instead of determining if Iranians can become British, if Iraqis are too extremist or religious fundamentalist for France, or if Afghans can live under the rule of law in Austria, the encounter perspective focuses on, for instance:

- (a) forced migrant communities in a given European setting mobilizing conceptions, values, and social practices to engage with the context and how this con-

text, in turn, relates to this engagement; and, concomitantly, how this particular sociohistorical context has influenced and shaped the lives of forced migrants living there *or not*;

- (b) aiming to create a broad understanding of representations, social interactions, social organization, and worldviews as they actually are, as opposed to how they ideally would be; this, in turn, should lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the way forced migrant communities have been engaging and influencing social and political transformations in Europe and beyond;
- (c) how the experience of dislocation, caused by forced displacement so prominent in the refugees’ general experiences, should lead us to contrast geographical mobility with the experience of immobility, and how this contrast may also be useful to explore other experiences of migration beyond that of flight and refuge—that is, anthropologists have long noticed the distinction between migration and forced migration is often largely arbitrary, as migrants also often feel forced to move, if not for fear of persecution and death then for social obligations, personal constraints and structural violence, and/or poverty (see, e.g., Kohlbacher and Schiocchet 2017);
- (d) the contemporary contextual situation of different regions and populations producing sizable numbers of forced migrants, and how communities there (linguistic, ethnic, religious, national, etc.) have been formed, transformed, and maintained as an effect of war, violence, and/or displacement;
- (e) analyzing the flux of worldviews, social practices, and peoples negotiated by transnational forced migrant networks encompassing Europe while determining their relative scope, place, and representativeness within the European, original, and global scenarios—that is,

to understand how Europe is embedded in such flux dynamics; in doing so, research focusing on this topic would consider social belonging processes and forms of social organization equally in Europe and abroad.

This list is by no means exhaustive, but it illustrates key possibilities beyond the straitjacket of the integration perspective. Our intention here is to invite those interested in committing to this research perspective to a much broader and more meaningful debate about the complexity of the present chapter of encounters between forced migrants and Europe, and similar such encounters beyond the limits of this continent. This list also shows that anthropologists are well advised to move even more closely into engaging with the challenges of real life without subordinating everything to contested theoretical priorities, let alone to ideological premises. Most of us, especially those of us sharing relevant family backgrounds ourselves, know from the outset that stories of refugees and of migrants are interrelated but not identical.

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Notes

1. In Andre Gingrich's experience, this also has to do with efforts toward clearing the AAS's name from the Nazi past while recognizing that most Nobel laureates in the natural and life sciences from Austria once were Jewish refugees from the Nazis.
2. A process according to which a subject relives a traumatic experience and has difficulty finding their way back into the present moment.

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