

PRESERVING MALTESE IDENTITY IN REFUGEE MANAGEMENT

On the Emergence and Absence of a Prison Spatiality

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ABSTRACT: Since 2002, roughly 19,000 refugees have reached Maltese shores. Both European Union law as well as national Maltese policies shape their reception and treatment. In discourse, these refugees are repeatedly represented as a threat to the social order on the island and its unique Maltese identity. Through various practices of separating refugees from non-refugee society, the societal vision of Maltese uniqueness is stabilised as a sociotechnical imaginary. Through these practices a prison spatiality experienced by refugees emerges. The emergence of this spatiality is illustrated by drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork with both refugee and non-refugee institutional actors. Pointing to the relationship between the emergent spatiality and societal self-understandings connecting past, present and future visions of Maltese identity, the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries is applied in conjunction with theories of islandness. It is analysed how practices of physical separation, the impediment of social participation, legal separation and its partial suspension enact Malta as a prison for refugees and thereby stabilise a concrete vision of Maltese identity.

KEYWORDS: Malta, refugees, island, spatiality, EU border regime, identity, sociotechnical imaginaries

Introduction

It is no secret that the countries in southern Europe have not been doing very well economically in recent years: Italians face significant unemployment, Greeks have to deal with the aftermath of the financial crisis, and poverty among young Spanish people is widespread. However, a very different situation can be found in Malta: Due to the island-state's excellent strategic location in the Mediterranean Sea with access to Europe, North Africa and the Middle East (Figure 1), the Maltese state has experienced an enormous economic recovery over the last decade, with an average of 4.3% growth per annum (Malta Independent, 2018; World Bank, 2018). An open market economy, a multilingual

population and a productive workforce further boosted the country's economic growth. With over 6% growth in 2017, Malta was well above the European Union (EU) average of 1.7% in 2017. While much of Southern Europe is struggling with unemployment, 10,000 new jobs are created in Malta every year, but the local, Maltese population can only fill a quarter of all vacancies (Tory-Murphy, 2018). The Maltese authorities and the private sector claim that the recruitment of foreign workers is the only available avenue to address this demand for labour. A representative of a local job initiative recently stated: “[r]eally and truly we do not have any other choice” (quoted in Tory-Murphy, 2018: online).



Figure 1 – Map of Malta's position in the Mediterranean (derived from: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Malta/media/360532/208666>)

One unique aspect of Malta is that almost all people residing in the country are provided with the formal right to work. This includes not only asylum seekers and recognised refugees, but also rejected asylum seekers who can receive a "permit to work"¹ until their

¹ Rejected asylum seekers can receive a so-called "permit to work" if their employer submits an application in their place. This permit differs from a regular work permit in that it is only valid for 3 months (but renewable); permit to work holders may not, however, register with the Education Training Centre, a public employment service, providing service for both employers to recruit employees and jobseekers to apply for the different positions available. Furthermore, the permit to work does not regularise the legal status of respective refugees.

deportation. This development not only contributed to decreasing animosity and dismay directed towards foreigners recently, primarily because of nearly full employment and the acknowledgement that foreign workers are also contributing to tax receipts and to the financing of social service provisions (Grech, 2018). However, practice shows that access to formal work is difficult despite legal possibilities. This leads to precarious lifestyles characterised by "endemic uncertainty" (Bauman, 1999; see also Bijl and Nimführ, 2019). Since 2002, the island-state located between Italy (Europe) and Tunisia and Libya (North Africa), received roughly 19,000 refugees (UNHCR Malta, 2018), with many of them struggling to find regular work. Despite the fact that workers are needed in various economic sectors and a structured and binding way of integrating these refugees into the formal labour market is present in Malta, there has been an increase in atypical, temporary employment, which David Shipler (2008) describes as "working poor syndromes", and ever-increasing gaps in social welfare (Bijl and Nimführ, 2019).

Refugees, who hold a Subsidiary Protection Status granted by other EU countries which offer much fewer job opportunities than Malta, also do not ignore the fact that there is work in the EU's smallest member state. Consequently, an interesting form of migration emerged: Many refugees who have landed in Italy and cannot find employment due to its poor economic situation are lured by good job offers in Malta. Going to Malta for work is possible, because their protection status from Italy entitles them the freedom to travel; working in Malta, however, remains informal with the absence of work permits for this certain group of refugees (BFA, 2015).

Refugees in Malta are primarily understood as unwanted strangers on the shore who potentially threaten a unique Maltese culture and identity (Bradford and Clark, 2014). Being embedded within the EU's migration management, however, means that Maltese authorities are obliged to a certain degree to participate in this system. Against the backdrop of extensive, long-term ethnographic fieldwork (2013-2018) in the context of refugee management, we analyse how technologies of surveilling, monitoring and separating refugees produce and stabilise a prison spatiality in Malta. Drawing on the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff and Kim, 2009; Jasanoff, 2015a; 2015b), we claim, helps to ethnographically situate the emergence of this spatiality in terms of its historical, cultural and political embeddedness while neglecting any form of determinism and causal explanation. The concept of sociotechnical imaginaries helps to point to the relation between this emergent spatiality and (normative) societal self-understandings, between material-semiotic practices and desired social order connecting the past, present and future: How is this spatial production institutionalised and legitimised by and feed back into the preservation of a collectively imagined unique Maltese identity?

The article is structured as follows: In a first step, we commence with briefly introducing the empirical case and the methods used. This is, second, followed by the discussion of the analytical perspective, comprising a discussion of the concept of the sociotechnical imaginary in terms of its specific value for analysing refugee management in Malta, as well as engaging with island theories to highlight how island spatialities emerge. In a third step, the article continues with the empirical analysis divided into four parts, allowing for deeper insights into how the vision of a unique Maltese identity is stabilised by rendering refugees as 'threats' to social order and by enacting and suspending the island as prison.

Empirical Case and Methods: Refugee Management and Ethnographic Fieldwork

The empirical content of this article is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted by Laura Otto and Sarah Nimführ between 2013 and 2018 in Malta in the context of forced migration. What interested us as cultural anthropologists was how processes of *borderisation* were negotiated in situ (see also Friese, 2012), and how refugees navigated the structures they unavoidably encountered. With Malta being embedded within the EU border regime since 2004, boat migration is managed under both existing technologies and policies developed at the EU-level, such as EURODAC (European Dactyloscopy) and the Dublin Regulation, as well as through local regulations, like mandatory detention, which is described by Coddington et al (2012: 28) as a “deterrent strategy”. EURODAC is the EU’s database for identifying asylum seekers and persons who cross borders without the required documents. This system aims at enabling authorities to determine whether asylum seekers have already applied for protection in or transited through another EU member state. First ratified in 2003, this system is closely related to the Dublin Regulation, an EU law that determines the member state responsible for examining asylum applications. Usually, the responsible member state will be the state through which the asylum applicant first entered the EU, and where the person’s fingerprints were taken and saved in the EURODAC system.

Having one’s fingerprints saved in Malta thus means that leaving the island-state becomes especially difficult for refugees. The Maltese government constantly called on other member states to help with ‘burden sharing’ and argued for a revision of the Dublin Regulation, as they – allegedly – did not possess the resources or space to deal with the number of arrivals (Sansone, 2011). The notion of limited space and the recurring argument that ‘Malta is too small’ were used as both a legitimisation for detention of every unregulated refugee (Nimführ, 2016: 254), and as a demonstration of reinforcing the notion of ‘orderly migration’, when, in fact, forced migration itself is often a chaotic, unpredictable endeavour (Mountz and Briskman, 2012: 23). In detention centres, refugees were held until they were given a certain status, which took the authorities up to several months. After their release, refugees were allowed to move to an open centre. As researchers, we encountered a situation in which the Maltese authorities repeatedly emphasised their overburdening, in which refugees were detained, and in which technologies and regulations not only impacted the refugees’ future prospects, but also resulted in a situation for Maltese society in which they had to learn that the newcomers were legally entitled and obliged to stay. This is also significant as out of all Western Mediterranean countries in which refugees seek protection, Malta is the only country which was itself once colonised and ruled by various foreign powers. Consequently, Malta is itself postcolonial and is now dealing with refugees who leave a postcolonial African continent (Baldacchino, 2009; 2010). This said, two important factors stand out here: first of all, there is no such thing as a uniform postcolonial condition, and countries dealt differently with the period that followed foreign rule. Second, it can, however, not be denied that Malta’s own history of having been colonised is significant, as “places never really shake off their past” (Royle, 2010: 203). According to Jane M. Jacobs (1996, cited in Royle, 2010: 204), a place’s materiality, its imaginative spatiality, and its cultural politics of territory are fundamental parts of both colonial and postcolonial formations in the present, with contemporary refugee movement, as we argue, breaking with the common assumption that refugees mainly seek asylum in the countries which formerly colonised their countries of origin (see also Santana and Godenau, 2013), thereby connecting states which share a colonised history and a postcolonial present. This, however, does not mean, that there is unconditional

solidarity among Maltese citizens and the refugees they receive: We rather understand the discourse rendering refugees as the Other, as well as the detention centres set up for refugees, as reinforcing postcolonial relations of power. As argued above, these practices are thus part of the relation between the emergent 'prison' spatiality and (normative) societal self-understandings, between material-semiotic practices and desired social order connecting the past, present and future.

While these described dynamics took place at a meta-level, the questions we faced as cultural anthropologists were how to situate them ethnographically and how to find access in the first place. To enable contact, Otto and Nimführ volunteered in different organisations during their research. While Otto volunteered in a state-run home for young refugees classified as unaccompanied minors for a period of six months in 2013, Nimführ was involved in an international humanitarian aid organisation for several months between 2015 and 2016. This work allowed for insights into the current political agendas of Maltese migration policies and their (non-)implementation. Further, being involved as volunteers allowed for getting in touch with other institutionalised actors, such as governmental ministries' staff, police officers, or leading staff of the Local Migrant Administration Office (LMAO), responsible for managing and housing refugees. Referring to the ethnographic border regime analysis, a multi-method approach (Hess and Tsianos, 2010), we did not only consider non-refugee perspectives, but also interviewed and held informal talks with refugees. During our research, we conducted formal interviews with 39 institutionalised actors and had informal conversations with more than 120 persons comprising institutional staff who worked for ministries, as social workers in camps, or as security guards; we established contact with over eighty refugees holding different status of protection (see section on Spatial Separation). The main contact we had with refugees was spending time with them by cooking together, going on excursions and accompanying them to the authorities when needed. This deep hanging out (Rodgers, 2004; see also Chase and Otto, 2019) allowed us to observe insights into their everyday lives and to accompany them during the various stages of arriving and settling in Malta. Seven refugees were also interviewed and the conversations were recorded. We also talked to persons who identify as Maltese, who were born in Malta and live on the island. During her research stay, Nimführ was accommodated in private apartments of Maltese families. This enabled her to gain insights into their views on various topics, including migration. Otto also established contact with Maltese citizens through local friends. Following actors and processes over the course of many years (Abu Lughod, 1991; Marcus 1998) allowed for "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of the ethnographic data. We decided not to designate the actors cited in this article as research subjects, but rather as *research partners* to highlight their active participation in the production of ethnographic knowledge (De La Cadena, 2015).

Sociotechnical Imaginaries: Preserving the Vision of a unique Maltese identity

With their influential concept of sociotechnical imaginaries, Jasanoff and Kim strive "to investigate how, through the imaginative work of varied social actors, science and technology become enmeshed in performing and producing diverse visions of the collective good, at expanding scales of governance from communities to nation-states to the planet" (Jasanoff, 2015a: 11). Sociotechnical imaginaries are thus defined:

as collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life

and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology (ibid: 4).

With this definition, Jasanoff and Kim propose to understand how science and technology are implicated in the production of social order and are simultaneously shaped by 'collectively imagined forms of social life and social order' (Jasanoff and Kim, 2009, 20). This conceptualisation of imagination stands in contrast to the rather idealistic understanding of the performance of collectives – such as nation-states (Anderson, 2016) – in political and cultural theory (Appadurai, 1996) by emphasising the constitutive role of materiality in these performances and more explicitly focusing on practices rather than symbols. Although Jasanoff and Kim do not restrict their concept to nation-states, countries' socio-technical imaginaries remain the dominant frame of analysis (cf. Jasanoff and Kim, 2013; Kim, 2018). Whereas the concept invites us to study what kinds of desirable futures are implied by the design and extension of science and technology, it also allows for an analysis of "the belief systems out of which... materialities (of science and technology) emerge and which give them value and meaning" (Jasanoff, 2015a: 22) and "how imagination, objects, and social norms – including accepted modes of public reasoning and new technological regimes – become fused in practice" (Jasanoff, 2015b: 322). Hence, analysing scientific or technological governing practices render visible collectively shared normative understandings of how social life ought to be organised, and how sociotechnical practices and objects de/stabilise social order. Moreover, sociotechnical governing practices might be read as attempts to manage "shared fears of harms" (Jasanoff, 2015a: 5). Thus, "(a)n imaginary is... a continually rearticulated awareness of order in social life... and a resulting commitment to that order's coherence and continuity" (ibid: 26).

The management of refugees trying to enter the EU in Malta suits the analysis of how technologies and knowledges serve to stabilise the vision of a unique Maltese identity that is predominantly non-chaotic, Catholic and *white* particularly well. This imagination is shared by a majority of the non-refugee population and supported by the state officials' commitment to its citizens. The imagination of a unique Maltese identity has preceded the arrival of boat refugees from North Africa and is deeply rooted in Maltese (immigration) history, but it is maintained and stabilised by sociotechnical governing practices effecting the (partial) separation of refugees and non-refugees. Refugees are physically as well as legally separated from Maltese citizens by walls in detention camps, quasi-absent infrastructure (in spatially segregated living areas), non-implemented integration policies as well as unequal rights regarding freedom of movement, labour and access to social services. These practices are legitimised by rendering refugees as potentially "dangerous", for example by producing chaos, by threatening religious homogeneity, or by questioning the distribution of equal rights. This also becomes evident in media representations which tend to collectivise refugees as dangerous when non-Maltese individuals commit crimes. Moreover, Malta was framed as a transitory country along refugees' routes into (mainland) EU. Hence, a prison spatiality emerged affecting those refugees who (had to) reside in Malta due to their status.

Enacting the Prison Spatiality

To further engage with different forms of enacting island spatialities, we follow other Island Studies scholars. It has already been discussed that islandness can be very well captured by ethnographic fieldwork (Vannini and Taggart, 2012). Moreover, in these accounts islands are conceptualised as more than merely geographic locations. Island spatialities are socially produced and thus emergent (Broodbank, 2000; King, 2009; Orsini, 2015). Following the

Marxian philosopher Henri Lefebvre, Godfrey Baldacchino (2012: 56) understands islands as “a complex social and ideological construction, based on values and the social production of meanings, which affects spatial practices and perceptions.” Baldacchino also contends that “[i]slandness is an intervening variable that does not determine, but contours and conditions physical and social events in distinct, and distinctly relevant, ways” (2004: 278). Put differently: Islands are not ontological givens, but they are (socially) produced and generative of social relations and perceptions. In this sense, the question of island studies is one of ontological politics (Mol, 1999). Whereas Baldacchino focuses on social values, meaning and ideology constituting the interrelation of space and society, studying the role of material objects and technologies in the production of social order in their own right is not in his prime analytical focus. Going even further, our analytical focus on sociotechnical imaginaries points to the historical and political embeddedness of these technical arrangements, linking them to the normative, historically rooted societal self-understanding of Maltese identity (and its desired preservation) in a non-reductionist way: neither is this infrastructure completely determined by the idea of Maltese identity nor do they shape Maltese identity in a linear way, but infrastructure and the preservation of Maltese identity are co-productive. The notion of sociotechnical imaginaries explicitly enables the researcher to take individual subjectivities and spatial aspects into account. It is therefore also possible to analyse these sociotechnical imaginaries through the practices and narratives of the affected refugees, asking how:

their sense of self... get[s] bound up with the hard stuff of past achievements, whether the material infrastructures of roads, power plants, and the security state or the normative infrastructures of constitutional principles, juridical practices, and public reason (Jasanoff, 2015a: 22).

One can add that it is not only their sense of self, but also their sense of place (Massey, 1994) that is being affected as space and social order are conceptualised as co-productive (Jasanoff, 2004). Hence, the notion of sociotechnical imaginaries enables us to understand how in Malta the spatiality of a prison emerges – a spatiality that is not reducible to walls and fences like in detention, but that emerges from physical and legal separations of refugees and non-refugees – and how this spatiality excludes those refugees who are not in need of rights claims in the island state.

The Vision of a Unique Maltese Identity

With regard to migration and its migration history, Malta was and still is represented as “threatened by migrants” (Pisani, 2013: 78). This perception has developed along Malta’s long and diverse history of migration, which often led to foreign rule. Due to continuous attacks in the Middle Ages and early modern times, foreign rulers invested in the construction of a fortress, which continues to be a distinctive landmark until today. The particular historical and military importance and the island’s long and varied migration history still lead to the symbolisation of Malta as a “fortress” (King, 2009: 65) and a “sentinel island” (Lemaire, 2014: 145). A picture of Malta being threatened by refugees has been widely produced in both public discourses and political debates. The Maltese government framed boat migration repeatedly as dangerous, threatening and overtaxing, thereby legitimising practices aimed at the control of refugees (Calleja, 2009). Thus, securitisation and a ‘need’ to protect the island and its identity against unwanted invaders have constantly been emphasised (Gerard and Pickering, 2014; Pisani, 2013: 78). A recent survey underscores the extent to which Maltese respondents viewed the topic of immigration negatively: 79% of survey respondents believed that immigrants worsen the

crime problem in the country; 63 % identified immigration as a problem; less than one-third of respondents viewed immigration as culturally enriching; and Maltese society is among the least willing of all EU societies to interact with immigrants (Debono, 2018).

According to sociologist Anthony M. Abela, the Maltese population has maintained “a very strong traditional national identity” (2005: 24), driven by the islanders’ attachment to the Catholic Church and right-wing party politics. They perceive their national identity to be challenged by “an unprecedented flow of foreign [mainly Muslim] cultures” (ibid: 25). Even if access to the EU stipulated a process of “Europeanisation” (ibid; Pisani, 2013), redefining the national identity as “more open to the outside world” (Abela, 2005: 25), the ‘Troika’ – the Catholic Church and the two main political parties (Baldacchino, 2002: 199) – act as “the primary anchor of identity” and “become the quintessential expression of national identity and national interest” (Falzon and Micallef, 2008: 399).

Representing refugees as “dangerous” is not limited to political debates and media discourse, but can also be found in everyday conversations, which a brief ethnographic example shall highlight. It was a warm late-summer day in Malta in October 2018, and Luke, Nicolas and Albert, all retired and in their mid-sixties, spent the morning together in the small city of Birgu. They enjoyed beers and shared a few Maltese cheese snacks – almost like every day, except Sundays. Immigration is often among the topics they discuss and listening to them revealed that they understood refugees and migrants primarily as dangerous. But why and in what sense? In contrast to voices stating that refugees would be criminals and would rape women, their communicated fears were different. They repeatedly emphasised that they were afraid of refugees ending up homeless, which would cause chaos. Furthermore, they were worried that Islam would become the dominant religion in Malta, and they accentuated that they did not want black people to one day say they were Maltese: “Because we are white, and not coloured”, was Luke’s position (Documented conversation 10/2018). The social anthropologist Maria Pisani interprets statements like Luke’s as a new narration of Malta that distances itself from *one* of its colonised histories: “Malteseness” is represented in essential terms as Maltese-Christian and European-White (2018, 157). Thus, processes of othering usually affect the refugee-seeking individual from Africa in Malta (Baldacchino 2009: 161). The *second* more recently experienced form of colonisation acted out by the British, however, did not evoke such negative feelings among our research partners. Islands, as Royle and Baldacchino point out (2010: 140), have always been especially affected by foreign and colonial rule in that they suffered thoroughly and have often been the last to obtain independence, with Malta having become independent in 1964. *How* independence came about in Malta, however, is interesting when we look at *who* is now “othered” in Maltese discourse. That these dynamics predominantly affect the refugee-seeking individual is, according to Baldacchino, also related to the historical circumstance that Malta was rather rejected by the British and thus decolonised whilst not necessarily having wanted to be independent; in other words because the island’s strategic value became more and more redundant (2009: 151) to the British rulers, Malta gained independence without actually fighting for it. Baldacchino refers to this dynamic as “upside-down-decolonization” (Baldacchino, 2010). It is thus the very specific form of foreign rule acted out by Arabs and Muslims in the past that is now being used in contemporary discourses about boat migration. According to Pisani, the denial of Malta’s Arab and Muslim past turns:

the oriental gaze... onto the incoming threatening ‘other’, paradoxically extending the violent bordering practices, dividing, separating and influencing the lives of both the ‘illegalised’ refugee and the Maltese citizen. (ibid)

The previous paragraphs revealed that refugees are primarily represented as threatening social order and Maltese identity in prevailing discourse. Government has reacted with repressive policies, and refugees were detained and publicly represented as a societal threat. The prominent discourse in Malta assumes an “island-based and island-driven national identity” (Baldacchino, 2002: 194), primarily understood as fixed (Falzon and Micallef, 2008: 399), unique (Baldacchino, 2002: 197) and vulnerable (Abela, 2005: 10; Falzon, 2012: 1665; Pisani, 2011: 29). The following section describe how practices of spatial and legal separation enact a prison spatiality for refugees, and how this spatiality is also partially suspended to refugees with a residence permit in another EU country. Preserving the vision of a unique Maltese identity must be managed within close physical proximity and under the demands of the state (taxes, labour market), and is also embedded in EU regulations, and neighboring countries’ refugee management.

Spatial Separation and Impeded Participation

According to the Ministry of Justice and Home Affairs, detention is necessary “in the interests of national security or public safety” (MJHA², 2005 quoted in Klepp, 2011: 169).³ Until the end of 2015, all newly arrived refugees were detained for up to eighteen months. While detained, the asylum interviews were conducted and those who received refugee status or a subsidiary protection status were released, whilst those whose asylum application was rejected had to remain in detention until the eighteen months were over.⁴ One explanation for this detention policy can be found in the statement of the former Minister of Home Affairs and National Security, who stated that:

you cannot expect the government to release illegal immigrants into the streets... This would send the wrong message and spell disaster for the country... As a minister I am responsible, first and foremost, for the protection of Maltese citizens (Minister of Home Affairs and National Security, quoted by Calleja, 2009: online).

This quote suggests that persons holding Maltese citizenship are considered to be the supreme responsibility of the government. Maltese citizens are understood to be in need of protection from refugees as long as it is not clear whether their presence is legally justified (and binding). In the absence of immigration policies (see section on Legal Separation), not releasing refugees is comprehended as part of fulfilling this claimed responsibility. Detention is a way of preventing assumed chaos and danger for Malta’s citizens.

All the refugees we talked to were held in one of the government’s detention centres. They were brought to the detention centre right after a first preliminary questionnaire was filled

² What is the Ministry for National Security and Home Affairs by now was named the Ministry of Justice and Affairs before.

³ Amendment: according to the Geneva Convention (1951) compulsory migration does not require a “regular entry”.

⁴ In 2016, the detention directive was revised, and the Maltese government introduced the Initial Reception Centre, where the Immigration Police assesses each case and decides whether the person will be further detained in a detention centre, or released into one of the open centres. This process of initial reception shall not take longer than a few days (aditus and JRS, 2018; MHAS 2018). All refugees mentioned and quoted in this article reached Malta before 2015 and were therefore imprisoned immediately after their arrival.

in, and a medical check was completed. Men were detained separately from women, as were families and couples. Reading and leisure activities were not systematically provided, and refugees were dependent on persons from the outside to bring them books, magazines, or other items. Bilal, a young Somali, reported about the time in detention: “I felt very lonely and it was also very boring in the detention. Because no visitors, no nothing. I wasted my time there” (Documented conversation, 07/2015).

The Detention Services run the detention centres, and the refugees were accommodated with several dozens of people in one room, equipped with loft beds. Barbed wire and chain-linked fences surrounded the buildings. The refugees’ asylum application was processed in detention, and their release was dependent on the results of the asylum interview. “In detention, I really felt like a criminal”, remembered Absimil, a young man from the southern part of Somalia, “because when they took us somewhere to make the interview, we were handcuffed” (Documented conversation, 06/2013).

For our refugee research partners, imprisonment meant being in a state of permanent control, of uncertainty, of being criminalised and of being hindered to make future plans. While detained, refugees did not have regular opportunities to go outside, except when allowed to use small concrete backyards during daytime. The refugees had to stay among themselves and only had contact with the guards, administrative employees, and NGOs from time to time. Even if they are not locked up in the holding cell, the production of a carceral environment is obvious, and refugees were hindered from freely interacting with non-refugee society. This led, as Bilal said, not only to the feeling of wasting time, but to the long-term consequence of stigmatisation as a criminal, furthermore complicating contact with non-refugee society. While detained, an asylum interview was conducted to determine whether the applicant was entitled to protection. The granted status not only influenced the prison term, but also the rights the refugees had. Four outcomes of the asylum interview are possible, entailing different (legal) possibilities of access to rights (see Table 1).

Being released from prison meant that the refugees found themselves in a financially precarious situation without a secured place to stay and no provision of individual assistance. The refugees had two possibilities: (1) Find work and rent a flat, or (2) move to an open centre, where they were allowed to stay for a maximum of twelve months and where they also received a per diem between 2,33 Euros and 4,66 Euros, depending on their status (Caruana, 2016: 15). Having one’s own flat was the preferred option, but the majority of refugees had to move into an open centre as finding work and a flat proved difficult as a former detainee and a Muslim African. Being stigmatised was understood among refugees as the biggest obstacle to getting in contact with non-refugee, Maltese society. “They don’t like blacks here”, was Deeqo’s perception (Documented conversation, 02/2013), which manifests in his experiences of never being allowed to enter night clubs, of colleagues who do not talk to him during breaks, and that bus drivers sometimes did not let him, but others, board the bus.

During our research, there were several open centres, of which some were run by the government and some by the church. The two biggest state-run open centres were Balbi and Tal Gebel, with the former being located along the highway and near a port, and the latter between the freeport and the airport. These open centres had capacities for several hundred refugees and were called *open* as residents were allowed to leave the premises. Nevertheless, this form of housing also made it difficult to interact with the non-refugee society, and impeded social participation (Nimführ et al, 2017).

Outcome	%	Length of residence permit	Health care	Social welfare	Access to work	Residence Permit	Movement and Mobility	Example
Refugee Status	4	3 years; renewable	full access	full access	work permit for 1 year; renewable	In Malta; after 5 years Entitled to EU/EC permanent residence, then relocation to another EU country possible	no geographical limitation, except country of origin	-
Subsidiary Protection Status	55	1 year; renewable	core access	core access	work permit for 1 year; renewable	Malta	Schengen Area	Bilal Absimil Deeqo Elais Filad (Malik in Italy)
Temporary Humanitarian Protection Status	8	1 year; renewable	core access	core access	work permit for 1 year; renewable	Malta	in case of serious humanitarian reasons also outside Maltese territory	-
Asylum Rejection	28	pending deportation	in the case of emergency	limited access while accommodated in the open centre	'permit to work' for 3 months; renewable	Malta, until deportation	only within Maltese territory	Tayeb Fatima
Closed Cases	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Table 1: Outcomes of the asylum interviews between 2004 and 2015; own presentation based on Government of Malta, 2016, JRS Malta and aditus, 2018 and UNHCR, 2018. Note: Malik has received his Subsidiary Protection Status from Italian authorities; however, he has no access to formal employment in Malta.

The Tal Gebel Open Centre, where refugees were housed in accommodation containers, stands out in particular. These containers were placed on the grounds of a former military base, and the Military Rescue Unit of Malta had their headquarters on the opposite site of the street. Commercial containers and industry surround the premises. A supermarket is just as difficult to find here as is a pharmacy, a restaurant, or other recreational

opportunities. Panning the horizon, one sees concrete, containers, a few trees, and a lot of fences. A concrete wall and barbed wire surrounded the Tal Gebel Centre itself, and it was almost impossible for non-residents to get an idea of how life looked like inside. A food truck, mostly visited by bypassing drivers, sold coffee and small snacks and was within walking distance from the centre, and sometimes a few men from Ghana came by with a car from which they sold food. The nearest discount shop where residents could buy reasonably priced goods was about four kilometres away, which took about an hour to walk to. As the Tal Gebel Open Centre's accessibility was particularly poor, it was difficult for them to leave the centre. Buses were supposed to stop at the centre's bus stop about every fifteen minutes, but this was not what the local bus system users experienced. Elais, a young man from Somalia who arrived in Malta in the winter of 2012, and who lived in Tal Gebel for a while, reported: "Usually, the bus is late, or the driver refuses to take us... so you cannot rely on the bus" (Documented conversation, 06/2013). Living in the Tal Gebel Open Centre, thus, was especially problematic for those who were working: Elais was employed in the north of the island and had to quit as he could not reach work from Tal Gebel on time.

The analysis so far has shown how an integration of refugees into Maltese society is highly impeded by sociotechnical practices of separation: actual imprisonment with walls and fences; physical distancing of refugees from Maltese citizens. Despite being *open* the centre was experienced and perceived as an extension of detention among refugees. Bilal stated: "Tal Gebel is hell. Really, Tal Gebel means no life" (Documented conversation, 07/2015). Consequently, the majority of refugees shared the wish to move out of these centres as soon as possible. After twelve months, the accommodation contract with these open centres ended automatically, and the refugees were required to move out. Separating refugees and non-refugees, however, does not only happen through physical distancing. It is also a matter of unequal rights and (absent) policies targeting the integration of refugees in terms of promoting social contacts between them and non-refugees, of enabling participation and long-term residence and working perspectives, or of granting equal rights.

Legal Separation and Its Partial Suspension

Apart from the expectation of the Maltese government that Malta was only a transitory country along the refugees' ways into the mainland of the EU, most refugees remained in Malta due to the legal obligation inherent in the Dublin Regulation not to leave the country. Even though the majority of the refugees we talked to wanted to leave Malta, most of them were legally not allowed to do so. Although Malta had received refugees for years, the government did not undertake efforts to implement integration strategies. The failure of the Maltese government to adopt an integration policy was repeatedly criticised by EU authorities. In March 2014, the EU commission recognised with regard to Malta that "(t)he legal framework for a common migration policy is still to be completed and further efforts are needed in the area of integration" (Fernandez, 2016). Under such external pressure, an integration policy was finally passed in December 2017 (Schembri, 2017). The recently passed policy, however, did not change much in practice, as Paul Keller, who works for a local NGO, reported: "It exists on the paper, but not in practice" (documented conversation, 06/2018).

Again, the emergence of the prison spatiality becomes apparent in the story of Tayeb, a Sudanese in his early thirties who has lived as a refugee in Malta for more than ten years:

He arrived in 2005 and has lived there ever since. He did not enjoy much education when he still lived in Sudan and found a job in construction work in Malta. Together with his family – a wife and four children – he lives in a small town house, with the wife, Fatima, taking care of the children and the household. After having lived in Malta for more than a decade, he still has the feeling of being excluded and unfree, even though he participates in society, learned Maltese and English, and earns enough money to financially secure his family on a basic level:

I'm paying my rent, I pay water and electricity bills. Since more than ten years I pay national insurance, but I don't have documents. I have paid my taxes for nearly ten years in Malta but still no benefits... They always keep me working and I pay national insurance since 2005 but I get nothing. After ten years, I should have the right by law. I have work permit, and pay taxes, like everybody else. But no pension, no child allowance, nothing... I'm stuck on this island. Malta is like a prison (documented conversation, 07/2015).

Rather uniquely in the EU, refugees like Tayeb whose asylum application was rejected are nevertheless allowed to work, hinting at the fact that the separation of refugees and non-refugees is not absolute and determined. However, having a 'permit to work' does not mean that their stay in Malta is secured: The government reserves the right to deport at any time. The 'permit to work' is tied to a specific employer, and consequently authorities are always informed about who is working where. Thus, refugees are constantly monitored and contact with authorities is maintained by the renewal obligation of the papers. Living with this note of rejection and his 'permit to work' entails that, even though Tayeb contributes financially to social welfare programs, the rights Maltese citizens hold in terms of access to insurance and social welfare were withheld. It keeps refugees like Tayeb in the prolonged state of being 'deportees-in-waiting' (Haas, 2016).

In the context of forced 'boat migration', the absence of integration policies was legitimised by politicians' view that "Malta is not the location of their dream" (Interview with employee of Social Affairs Ministry, 07/2015), leading to the assumption that refugees would try to leave Malta and therefore would not want to integrate. Whilst many refugees indeed told us that they did not know about Malta prior to their arrival, it did not mean that they initially disliked the place. Filad, a young man from Somalia who arrived in Malta in the summer of 2013 and who still remained there in the summer of 2018, stated: "Malta is a good place, I like it here. I like the beaches, and the sun. And there is peace" (documented conversation, 07/2015). Filad especially valued the peaceful atmosphere, as he had already experienced intense forms of violence in his young life. Constructing refugees as potential leavers, however, was used as an argument among governing actors to leave them unsupported. The lack of integration policies fostered their departure, even though as shown above, mobility was highly restricted as a representative of LMAO stated:

We are like a bus stop... It is very obvious that no asylum seeker wants to stay in Malta. And I think the more we are making people stay (...) by integration, the more we are doing harm... integration is not a win when people don't want to stay (Interview, 02/2015).

Listening to the refugees, however, revealed that they were not motivated from the very beginning to leave Malta again. Instead, the wishes they communicated included living a safe life, being allowed to participate in education and having work, as well as being equipped with proper rights. The assumption that refugees would want to leave again and

therefore framing the absence of integration measures as harm reduction, however, fostered an understanding of Malta as not being the livable final destination among refugees. Malta was produced as a prison by allowing refugees to work and requiring them to pay taxes, but at the same time making social participation more difficult. They were, on the one hand, denied equal rights and access to social services, but, on the other hand, could not (legally) escape from the island due to their status.

Tayeb is an example that the separation in Malta is partially suspended. He lived in a regular townhouse in a neighbourhood where Maltese people also lived, he contributed to GDP, he paid his taxes and his share for the social welfare system. At the same time, however, he did not have the same rights as people with Maltese passports who also paid into the same systems. This shows that separation still exists, but certainly in a softened form. It was precisely this specific form of separation that made Tayeb experience Malta as a prison. He had to remain in Malta, but could not become a full, equal member of society.

The Absence of the Prison Spatiality

Whilst Tayeb worked in a regulated and documented fashion, other refugees worked without documents in the Maltese Archipelago. Refugees, holding a status elsewhere, come to Malta and work in the informal sector, as already briefly mentioned in the introduction. In comparison to most other states which also entered the EU in and after 2004, Malta's economy has developed positively, reflected by its low unemployment rate: at 3.6% Malta ranks second in the EU (Eurostat, 2018), making the labour market attractive for refugee immigrants from other EU member states like Italy. Milán, who worked for an NGO in Italy, was aware of these dynamics and reported: "I know some who go to Malta... here, they cannot find work (which is) why they go there" (Interview, Italy, 08/2016). One of them is Malik, who is in his mid-twenties and grew up in The Gambia, where he graduated from school, but did not continue with further education.

In 2010, Malik arrived in Lampedusa on a cargo ship, which he shared with about 700 other refugees. He was transferred to the Italian mainland after being issued a temporary Subsidiary Protection Status. Holding this status, he was allowed to travel for up to 90 days in the Schengen Area. After an unsuccessful job search in Italy he decided to go to Malta in 2013. Having a Subsidiary Protection Status issued by Italian authorities does not provide Malik with Maltese labour rights. He started working informally as a gardener on the premises of a Maltese EU delegate. Every few months, Malik is required to go back to Italy to renew his travel document. Since 2013 Malik commutes regularly between Italy and Malta. In Italy he lived in a small town in Veneto with an Italian family; in Malta he lived together in a house with other refugees, where he shared a room in which slept three men and for which he paid 70 Euros rent per month: "Every Christmas I spend at 'Mamma's' house in Italy. I'm happy to meet my friends and family there, but I'm also happy to have a great job in Malta. I like my boss, I can use his pool, I can drive his car, it's like being also part of his family" (documented conversation, 10/2015). In cases like Malik's, refugees who hold rights from other EU countries are not captured by sociotechnical separation practices. This is not needed, as they do not threaten the vision of a unique Maltese identity. They are not entitled to claim rights and access to social services in Malta and need to remain rather invisible due to their illegalised stay.

Even though Malik is also integrated into the EU's migration management system, Malta is a *different* place for him compared to Tayeb. First and foremost, Malta is the place where

he found work, and he did not feel imprisoned. Malik's specific form of movement undermines the island prison spatiality, showing that this spatiality does not affect every refugee in Malta. Not all refugees living in Malta are (partially) separated by the state but only those who legally (have to) reside in Malta. The vision of a unique Maltese identity that is to be protected and preserved, however, is stabilised by both separation practices and their absence.

Conclusion

Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the context of forced migration in Malta we have analysed the management of the presence of these refugees against the backdrop of existing EU regulations and a specific societal vision of Maltese identity, which was also contextualised within Malta's history of having experienced different forms of foreign rule and colonisation. These historical experiences Malta and its society underwent need to be considered when we aim at understanding the contemporary prison spatiality as its emergence is also a fundamental part of both colonial and postcolonial formations in the present. We have shown how diverging practices of separating refugees from non-refugee society produces a prison spatiality which is visible in the narratives and experiences of refugees. Whereas all refugees were kept in detention after their initial arrival, the majority still perceived Malta as a prison after being released. It was thus not only actual walls and fences that produced the prison spatiality, but it also emerged through various forms of (bureaucratic) control, through infrastructural impediments of social participation and through granting unequal access to rights and social services. Furthermore, Othering of the refugee-seeking individual in public and political discourse also reinforced these dynamics. This led to a prison spatiality in spite of many refugees living regularised lives and contributing financially to Maltese welfare state programs. Malta is not, however, a prison experienced by those refugees who gained rights and access to social services in other neighboring EU member-states, but a source of (illegalised) economic benefit.

Our analytical vantage point has been that islands are not simple objects 'out there' in the world with specific characteristics; rather, they are social products. We extended island studies' theoretical framework on the social production of islands (eg Baldacchino, 2012) by focusing on socio-material practices rather than symbols, meaning and discourse. The notion of sociotechnical imaginaries by Jasanoff and Kim (2009; Jasanoff 2015a and 2015b) highlights how the emergence of this prison spatiality is historically and politically embedded within the vision of a unique Maltese identity, stabilising societies' normative desire of preservation, especially in terms of Catholicism and *whiteness*. Refugees in Malta are primarily understood as unwanted strangers on the shore who potentially threaten a unique Maltese culture (Bradford and Clark, 2014). Separating refugees from non-refugees is thus legitimised by pointing to the potential 'dangers' for social order that supposedly emanate from refugees and by alleging that Malta is only a stepping stone for most refugees on their way into the EU, although practically most of them (have to) remain in Malta because of their granted protection status, EU regulations and transnational agreements. Enacting a prison spatiality experienced by those refugees who (are forced to) reside in Malta upholds the vision of this uniquely Maltese, Catholic *white* identity. At the same time, however, the state does not control and separate those refugees residing in other EU member states as their illegal presence does not destabilise this vision. Whereas Malta is not a prison for them, but a source of economic benefit, they do not question Maltese identity.

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