

The Middle of Nowhere

Presentation of the work done in August 2008 among Chechen refugees in Poland

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This project represents an interplay between philosophical work with refugees, essentially Chechens living in Poland, which took place in the summer of 2008, and photographic work carried out in the shelters and retention centres where they were being held. The photographs do not show the people themselves, nor does the text present the locations. But the people's words are marked by the places, in the same way that the places, though empty in the images, are marked by the people. And the work grew out of this joint presence, or what the sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad would have called a "double absence".

Producing visibility

Visibility versus clandestinity

The interviews were informal. They resulted from chance encounters – in a corridor, at a street corner, on a doorstep, in a common room, a classroom or a communal kitchen – and were of course requested, never forced. The interviewees were keen to talk, despite having to struggle against language difficulties, or obstacles imposed by the directors of the centres, or, on occasion, other people's attitudes. They all knew there was nothing we could do for them, that we were not members of an NGO and had no administrative or decision-making power. But they also knew that the project was to result in a book which would convey their words and show their lives in transit. And that was something they all wanted.

This desire to be visible, to be present in the public space, was the philosophical object of the project.

The lives of asylum seekers are marked, first and foremost, by clandestinity. They are concealed from the public eye to the same extent that they are exposed to controls. They are subject to the double language of the political authorities, both in their places of origin, where they are subject to violence but also condemned to live, and in their places of "refuge", where they are kept under surveillance with a view to extradition. Not integration, but expulsion. Even when permitted to remain, they have access neither to housing nor to work.

Clandestine violence

Those we met were privileged, in a sense. They had managed to survive the violence inflicted on them by their former oppressors; by the police and the traffickers; by their fellow refugees, and infiltrators from their places of origin, who continued to pursue them; by their own families, at times, and by the effects of overcrowding; by the ever-present mafia, whose influence they felt both in their countries of origin and in those where they ended up. The fact is that stateless people, not being protected by the authorities, are exposed to the exercise of illicit, hidden power. Such is the fate to which refugees are abandoned by governments' refusals to grant them asylum. But these "privileged" survivors are themselves extremely diverse. Coming from a wide variety of social backgrounds, they must live together in the centres.

Producing audibility

Interrogating or questioning

My queries were quite basic. Why did you leave? Where do you want to go? What is your life like now? And there was another: what kind of positive image do you still have of your place of origin? Surprisingly, no such questions had ever been put to these people before. They all talked about their impression of never having been approached with the intention of creating a space for attentiveness, only formally interrogated in order to get information out of them. In other words, they had been questioned without ever really being invited to speak.

My reasons for doing this work were in no way disinterested. I wanted to understand, and I wanted to write. But my interests coincided with those of the refugees, and this gave rise (though of course not in every case) to curious relationships of confidence and understanding, in a context that was far from favourable.

Relationships that began in a mood of legitimate wariness, if not hostility, often became more placid and relaxed.

Frameworks of truth and refuge

The interview situation is not necessarily a situation of truth. The articulation of sincerity, authenticity and veracity is never an easy matter, and it was particularly complex in the extreme situations under consideration. I did not in any way seek to establish what Michel Foucault called a "regime of avowal". I asked no one to testify on oath, simply to talk to me. And the convergence of these people's voices was in itself extremely eloquent. They kept many things from me, of course, and their desire for visibility did not give me any automatic right to probe their inner feelings, or what they felt it necessary to withhold. In certain contexts, too, there were questions that my interpreter, a highly sensitive woman, quite rightly refused to translate.

Something like a protocol generally took shape in the discussions, and it was often as instructive as the words themselves. The appearance or disappearance of interviewees, their silences or expressions, the way they participated in a dialogue, an offer of food, a table moved around or a chair pulled forward, told me that I was being welcomed by people who themselves were welcome nowhere, in surroundings which, through a kind of space-time aberration, were opening up onto new

projects for existence that the entire judicial apparatus was bent on wrecking.

Producing intelligibility

Disturbing forms of political irrationality

What is critical here is the form of madness that is induced by ostensible political reasoning. At every level of our encounters, interviews and thinking processes, what came through was a destructive form of political irrationality, under the guise of *raison d'état*. And it was this oxymoron of radically irrational irrationality that struck me most forcefully.

In a 1983 interview entitled *Structuralism and post-structuralism*, Michel Foucault said:

*"I absolutely refuse to accept the identification of reason with all those forms of rationality which at a given time, in our age, and up to a very recent period, have been dominant in the types of knowledge, the techniques and the modalities of government or domination that are the major areas for the application of rationality."*⁴¹

I found that the validity of this view was confirmed daily, in every utterance and reaction. The kinds of rationality that are applied by contemporary political systems to questions of migration are anything but manifestations of reason.

And the refugees themselves did not only criticise the explicitly criminal, murderous folly of the countries they had fled, but also the administrative folly – destructive in its own way – of the countries they wanted to live in. "This system drives you mad" was the kind of comment I often heard. And in effect there was no sense in the endless circular wandering they had to put up with, between successive rejections of their requests for asylum. As one of them said:

"In Chechenia, you have no chance to live normally, for physical reasons: it's dangerous. Here, there's more safety, but there are psychological dangers, and they can destroy you."

Duplicity and disaestheticisation

The system also spells madness for those who operate it. Officials do not know how to respond to calls for treatment, or for improvements to the accommodation and security arrangements which are their responsibility. Doctors and nurses slip from powerlessness into indifference. Administrators cannot provide the legal information they are asked for, which is totally contradictory. Border guards are patently unhappy about locking up people whose only crime is their desire to survive.

The malaise, the conflict between European directives, the administrative absurdities of the politico-legal decision-making process demonstrate the duplicity of the linguistic regimes to which refugees are permanently subjected. Supposedly protective laws are precisely those that expose them to the perils of lawlessness and placelessness.

But this placelessness also entails what I would call a state of "disaestheticisation". Denying refugees rights of residence does not just threaten their physical survival, but also prevents them from representing themselves to themselves, and sharing in the common space that allows people to ground their lives in a concept of humanity, as Hannah Arendt demonstrated in her essay on

imperialism, regarding those without rights.

Processes of disaestheticisation are linked to a radical contradiction: barriers to the globalisation of financial circuits and communications networks are being lowered at a time when barriers to the circulation of people are being raised. The modernity of economic spatialisations contrasts with archaic representations of national space.

This project, carried out among Chechens living in Polish refugee centres, brought to light the different levels in a biopolitical system of duplicity that has extended beyond the Foucault's seminal analysis into the internal contradictions of deregulation and ever-stricter control. Migrants are ceaselessly confronted by a form of legal and political hypocrisy that makes the "regulation of flows" a forerunner to the disappearance of people. The machinery of contemporary deception, using legalistic doublespeak to euphemise the reality of violence, is responsible for a pervasive perversion of politics.

And this globalised duplicity is literally terrorising migrants. Delivering them up to a double language of abandonment and protection, it leaves an implicit but genuinely fearful threat hanging over them – that of extermination.

Note

¹ In *Dits et Ecrits*, Gallimard, 2001, p. 1266.

Translated from French by Andrew Goffey

Notes
