

University of California, Irvine  
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SPRING 2005

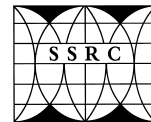
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*Forming “immigrants,” embodying the state, governing the European Union:  
detention and deportation at the southern border of the EU*

Paper prepared for the

**SUMMER INSTITUTE ON INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION**

The University of California, Irvine  
and  
The Social Science Research Council  
27-30 June, 2005



It's a bright day in Otranto, a small coastal town in southeastern Italy. Driving toward the periphery, I am amazed by the impressive mountains of Albania and Greece across the Adriatic sea. I arrive at the national "Center for the Identification of Asylum Seekers," for my first day as a volunteer. In the dining hall I notice watercolor pictures of "Kurdistan", and a welcoming poster in several languages. Some guests are playing poker, others foosball, and a few are watching Arabic TV. About ten soldiers of the *Finanza*<sup>1</sup> ensure "order and security," as some of them put it. Through the big window you can see the pine trees, the ten-foot concrete wall and the guarded gate I've just passed through. I'm welcomed into the staff office by the center's lawyer, the psychologist, and the interpreter. They sound enthusiastic about their jobs in the center. I'm there to conduct part of my Ph.D. research, I explain, and I'm willing to do anything I can to help managing the center.

Several competent people have advised me not to waste my time at this center. Supposedly, no major decisions are ever taken here. Nothing is really going on other than routine bureaucratic and police practices. Yet, one of the reasons why I am eager to conduct fieldwork in this site is precisely to scrutinize the actual everyday exercise of these practices, and of the legal power informing them. What do these everyday practices, and their actors, accomplish, or *perform*, in addition to ensuring the prolongation of their own necessity? *How* do they contribute to state and EU policies and discourses of immigration, security, and human rights? How and why do certain migrants end up in this center? How is information about them produced and

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<sup>1</sup> Custom and excise army force. Within the center, the *Finanza* has no investigative task in matters of immigration.

transmitted at different institutional levels? More broadly, what can I understand about the way migration is managed, looking at this apparatus?

This center was built in 1999 as a humanitarian response toward the management of undocumented immigration. It replaced temporary metal containers and a camping ground. In 2002 it became a state-regulated and financed institution. Still run by the municipality and a local NGO, it is now a node, together with another dozen such centers, of the national (and EU) network of migrant-processing facilities. Its stated legal function is to host, for up to two months, non-EU would-be asylum seekers. During this time the police “identify” them, collecting photos and fingerprints and using transnational databases; interview them; compile their asylum application; and grant them a temporary permit for residence in Italy.<sup>2</sup> The center is essential to EU migration policy, and especially to the enforcement of the 1997 “Dublin Convention.” Most of these guests have in fact been “sent back” to Italy by other (northern) EU countries, where often they had started a family and found a rewarding job. Italy, as the country through which they first entered the EU (often having landed on these very coasts by speedboats) is responsible for accepting and examining their applications. In addition, the police use the center as a last resort for “sheltering” (in fact, keeping in custody) non-EU “undocumented migrants” until expulsion from Italy.

January 14<sup>th</sup> 2005 is my second day at the center. I’m there at 9am. There is a new group of guests, about 30 people. They might be Roma, from South-eastern Europe. They do not understand the interpreter, who is trying to communicate in English,

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<sup>2</sup> As asylum seekers waiting for their asylum application to be examined.

German, French, and Spanish. I ask them in Serbian<sup>3</sup> where are they from, and we manage to understand each other: they are from Bulgaria. Everybody gathers around me; women are crying, asking when *we* will let them go, for they are just tourists. They also ask for socks and slippers from the storage room (the guests are not allowed to wear shoes in the center). Unexpectedly, I become the unofficial and only mediator between the staff and soldiers and the Bulgarian guests. Quite abruptly, the technical director of the center calls me into the office and explains that until my arrival everything has been working just fine, and that I am putting the staff's *unity* at risk. Moreover, the staff thinks that these new arrivals are just being intransigent: they could find "ways to communicate" if they wanted to. I am warned not to believe everything they say, and that it is not even sure that they are really Bulgarian citizens as they maintain.

As it often happens with migrants and refugees, the new guests are being deprived of one of the essential characteristics thought of as conferring humanity, namely, the relevance and credibility of speech.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the staff warning finds *me* as its immediate addressee, making *my listening* to them inappropriate, for it might disrupt the otherwise seemingly clear distinction between staff and guests, and it is not considered necessary anyway. My translation into Bulgarian, on the other hand, finds a place as a necessary tool: the Bulgarians are now in Italy and "Italian law must be respected; certain procedures need to be followed, no matter what you [the Bulgarians] have to say".

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<sup>3</sup> Serbian is the only language of South-eastern Europe I can speak. Serbian and Bulgarian are both southern Slavic languages.

<sup>4</sup> See Arendt 1958: 296-7; Malkki 1996

I start talking with two young men, Tyundjar and Bilgin. They say they left Bulgaria on January 6, 2005, for a trip to Italy. They have traveled by minibus, through Romania, Hungary, Austria, and finally Italy. In Brindisi, about 30 miles north of Otranto, they embarked on a ferry to Greece, on their way back to Bulgaria.



In Greece, about 30 miles past the port of Igoumenitsa, a patrol stopped them. Bilgin, who was driving the bus, was beaten with a baton, and the group was sent back to Brindisi, Italy. The police have brought them here. I'm sure the problem is their visa stamp, but they say as Bulgarian citizens they may enter and stay in the EU for up to

three months without visa. The center's lawyer is on holiday, and will come back in four days. I don't know what to think. They repeat they "are not criminals or terrorists, but tourists from a *European* country, Bulgaria". I'm confident both Greek and Italian police made a mistake. It's already Friday afternoon. I'd like to help before Monday, at least calling the center's lawyer. But even if the staff understands and believes their case, can they do anything at all? That is, can they persuade Brindisi police, who are keeping their passports and vehicle, to let them go immediately?

The weekend has gone by. The lawyer is back and he explains that the Bulgarians have been sent back from Greece because they failed to present adequate evidence of financial support there. Thus, there is no mistake. As I have verified, it is since 2001 that Bulgarian tourists don't need a visa for the Schengen area; yet, border officers of Schengen countries, at their own discretion, are legally entitled to request evidence of financial support, such as daily allowances. The lawyer says they will have to exit the EU from where they entered it --Austria<sup>5</sup>, and that they will stay at the center while the Italian Interior Department contacts "Austria". It's already the third day of their involuntary detention. Disappointed and angry they skip breakfast. At the Brindisi police station the Russian interpreter told them (in Russian) they would have to stay here for two days. The lawyer tells me that "*these kinds of procedures develop nearly automatically, and once they start there is a whole machinery that has to conclude its cycle, despite the actual situation of the people involved.*" Uncanny resonance is

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<sup>5</sup> They have in fact entered the EU in Hungary. Austria is the country where they entered the Schengen area.

surfacing, between this impersonal, unstoppable machinery and the previous function of this site. It used to be the municipal meat processing farm...

The Bulgarian guests have been skipping all meals for two days, making a political—albeit unsuccessful—statement. One of the psychologists takes pains to let them know that the staff here has nothing to do with the police, and that their job is simply to provide food and shelter. But the guests have made evident they do not want their survival to be a matter of charity, but of right<sup>6</sup>. They are referring to their right to continue on their journey, but also to the right to know what their rights in this situation are.

According to *police* policy, no guest may leave the center, such as to go to the post office, without a 2-3 days advance request and police escort. Would-be asylum seekers may actually leave without notice if they want to. But they would lose their right to claim asylum.... The Bulgarians, instead, would be brought back and possibly prosecuted. Therefore, the least I can do is run their errands: buying cigarettes; sending and receiving money to and from their families; and printing out some readings in their native languages.

Early in the morning all the Bulgarian detainees have carried their baggage to the hall, saying they are leaving. About 15 soldiers and additional police patrols guard the exit, their batons in hand. I tell Tyundjar that the policemen are indeed going to prevent their exit, and I'm relieved when they give up and go back to their dormitory. A

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<sup>6</sup> As in Arendt 1958: 296; see also Balibar 2004, pp. 117 ff.

bit shaken, I stand in the corridor in front of the big map of Italy, often a “conversation piece” with guests. It also functions as a reminder, together with the pervasive refrain that “we are in Italy, and therefore you [guests] must respect the Italian law,” of the juridical and geopolitical location of this center. The lawyer has phoned the police in Brindisi and tells us all that the police should let the Bulgarians go in a couple of days, by January 21st.

Don Ciro is a catholic priest and the director of one of the only two NGOs allowed to send volunteers, that is, external personnel, to the center. It was he who, taking care of the necessary paperwork with the police, originally enabled my access to the center. He had advised me not to spend too much time with the soldiers and the staff: I would end up thinking like them and hating the guests. In fact, I feel a rage coming up, but not toward the guests. Why aren't the staff pressuring the police to accelerate their bureaucracy? I feel powerless and concerned, while I also keep working with another 15 people. Processing and detention centers like this one manage to exclude migrants and their cases from a web of potential legal, political, and social engagements and more generally from critical sight.<sup>7</sup> Should I call the media then? Would it speed things up, or perhaps just make the police spiteful? Don Ciro has warned me that I would definitely be kicked out of the center if I were to call the press; furthermore, his NGO might not be allowed to send volunteers anymore. The staff has also informed me that calling the press would be illegal. It would “violate the guests' privacy”.

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<sup>7</sup> *E.g.*, Rahola 2003

Today, January 20<sup>th</sup>, they are finally having breakfast. I learn it's *Kurban Bajram*, the Sacrifice feast. So, they are Muslim, mostly Turks of Bulgaria, contrary to my assumption that they were of Roma ethnicity. I have lunch with them. There is even a sliced Christmas cake, and Italian champagne, which everybody obviously refuses. A soldier has phoned Brindisi police, who have phoned the Interior Department in Rome. Verification of their IDs (possibly using the transnational Schengen Information System) began on January 17, and should take one week.

I can't stand anymore functioning as the transmission wheel of this machinery nurtured by inaccuracy. Why are they in the center? Has there ever been any genuine basis for the police to promise they would go after two days, then one week, and now two weeks? I am staggering between revolt and investigation, and between the denunciation of individuals (the staff members; the police high-officers; my own inadequacy) and of larger entities<sup>8</sup>. I'm tempted to just leave the center, for I can't look my Bulgarian friends in the eyes anymore. I could easily smash a window, or throw a fist at the wall. I've finally come to appreciate why I need to get razor blades back after guys are done shaving. But I can't do much about their (and my) gastritis and high blood pressure.

We have realized that the center lawyer's duty is limited to providing legal information, rather than direct counsel or advocacy. After much internal debate my

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<sup>8</sup> see Boltanski 1999

friends have asked whether they have the right to a lawyer. They do, and they are told that the State will pay for it (for it has classified them as “indigent”).

Tyundjar thinks they are here because supposedly they don’t have enough money to travel, and/or because Greek and Italian police suspected they wanted to settle in these countries. In any case, he asks rhetorically, “even if in Greece they thought we wanted to remain there, *is it possible that all this is based only on some policeman’s thought, with no piece of paper?*”. Later today two policemen from the local station have arrived looking for Tyundjar, requiring him to submit a “spontaneous declaration.” I learn from him that so far nobody from the group has been interviewed by the police or by any judicial authority, neither in Greece nor in Italy. At the police station, he has explained the group’s journey, indicating dates, purpose of the trip, route, etc. He tells me he would have never imagined he would be taken and interrogated by the police, “like in American movies”. And I would have never imagined myself translating for the police, moreover from Bulgarian.

It’s already February 3<sup>rd</sup>. The center’s lawyer recommended a certain Marco as a lawyer for my friends; they have accepted. Marco will send a certified letter to Brindisi police, simply asking for a written statement explaining the reason for “a restriction of their personal liberty.” The police have three days to reply. I’m realizing there hasn’t been any actual police or judicial measure defining the Bulgarians’ status in Italy, nor requiring their detention in the center. And I have learned there is another problem. Marco has to be careful not to get them freed through a decree of expulsion from Italy,

which would result in confiscation of their minibus and prohibition to re-enter Italy for the next 10 years. *He speculates that they are still here because the police in Brindisi lack the funds to escort them to Austria.*

A soldier has told me the Bulgarians are to leave tomorrow, February 10<sup>th</sup>, and I tell Bilgin. It is difficult to trust this new information. But after a couple of hours police officers and the Russian interpreter from Brindisi arrive with a bunch of folders. They hand each Bulgarian a paper to sign. Tyundjar and Bilgin ask me to translate it for everybody, making sure the police interpreter is not “tricking” them again. The paper states in English and Italian that, on the basis of *preexisting* bilateral agreements with Italy, Austria has agreed to their transit. They will be escorted to Austria tomorrow, and Austria should escort them to Hungary, from where they can return back home. Hugging and thanking me for being the only one helping them, Bilgin has made me feel just a bit less useless. He has asked me to send him my book one day and to let everybody know about their story.

It's the day of their departure. We are collecting what they had to leave in the soldiers' office upon arrival: lighters, some *rakija*,<sup>9</sup> trouser belts, nail clippers, and perfumes. A tourist bus has finally arrived escorted by three police vehicles. There are about 35 policemen with their batons, helmets, and military apparel. My friends are body-checked one by one, and asked to get on the bus. The anti-guerrilla apparel makes me anxious, for these people have nearly 800 miles ahead of them together.

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<sup>9</sup> Homemade plum brandy.

Did Tyundjar, Bilgin, Zhivko, Emil, Mitko, Marijana, Asija, and all my friends want to “migrate” to Greece, as everybody in the center suspected? Probably not. Most of them have children and jobs in Bulgaria. Did they intend to temporarily work in Greece? I’ve never asked them. It is a question I am not entitled to pose, as tempting as it might be from the relatively powerful position of ethnographer, volunteer, and citizen of Italy. To *suspect* they intended to work in Greece and Italy, rather than going shopping and sightseeing, is precisely what the Italian and Greek police did. They would have no such suspicion about a group from Switzerland or the U.S.. But in this case, the police were dealing with people from so-called Eastern Europe, already characterized as a reserve of labor force. They were dealing with a phenotype, paradoxically not that different from the “Mediterranean” one, that unfortunately might have worked as an alerting feature generating suspicion, and then as a confirmation of the “ill intention” to work.

Police forces, in order to ensure subsequent deportation, had to resort to their *power of attribution* of intention. That is, they attributed to these supposedly indigent Bulgarians the intention to work . Yet, in the arena of legal practices, this attribution can be consequential only if enabled by the authority position of the police vis-à-vis the traveler. Power of attribution, in turn, is an important constituent of state actors’ “right to be right”.<sup>10</sup> Once performed, the “suspicion” of these people being “immigrants” reconfirms what Abdelmalek Sayad calls the “original sin” of “immigration” as a

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<sup>10</sup> See Oberweis and Musheno 2001: 6

“latent, camouflaged offence”<sup>11</sup> (at least within the nation-state logic which the EU largely uses as its building blocks). The burden of proof, then, is easily shifted, from the police on to the alleged “immigrants.”

Evidently “intention”, referring both to the Bulgarian travelers (to work) and to the police and the staff (to detain them for one month), is not the longed-for reward of the social scientist’s digging into people’s psychologies to discover their motivations and desires; rather, it includes the distribution of power, the representation of events, the interplay of trust and deception, and the social assigning of social and moral responsibility<sup>12</sup>. The question as to *why* they have been kept in the center in the first place, and for one month, cannot be exhaustively answered, especially in light of ethnographic research: no legal or other basis for detention has been identified. Could it have been 2 days, or 2 months? Have they been liberated merely because the police did not have grounds to reply to the lawyer’s letter, which inquired *why* they were being deprived of their “personal liberty”?

It might be that there is nothing purposeful to be unveiled beyond these border practices of inspection, detention, and deportation. It might be, as Talal Asad (2004) suggests, that the State’s and the EU’s abstract character hides nothing, but rather is an authority-granting enabling condition for the exercise of specific kinds of legal power. And the observation that the secular nation-state locates its authority and its laws as the privileged domains of absolute meaning,<sup>13</sup> rationality,<sup>14</sup> and *certain* belief,<sup>15</sup> gives us

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<sup>11</sup> Sayad 2004: 282

<sup>12</sup> Rosen 1995: 5

<sup>13</sup> See Herzfeld 1992: 110

one more reason *not* to take for granted the necessary rationality of state mechanisms. State border and migration management practices are not *necessarily* the outcomes of interested, rational, and intentional choices. As the lawyer took pain to explain, certain procedures “develop nearly automatically, and once they start there is a whole machinery that has to conclude its cycle.”

Border practices of inspection, detention, and deportation are fundamental tools in state and EU production of information. As I suggest above, information does not necessarily coincide with the transmission of empirical, retrievable knowledge. It is also *in-formation*. Certain bureaucratic procedures do form and shape the people they are supposed to detachedly examine.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, this case suggests that these procedures also sustain the formation of the very entities they are supposed to emanate from. How will our understandings of migration management change if we start looking at the state and the EU as complementary networks that form and maintain themselves through patterned, *performative* interactions and practices,<sup>17</sup> including border practices?<sup>18</sup>

Within established “people management mechanisms,” a single police patrol has the discretionary authority to enforce, or rather to *embody*, the state’s potential to reject from its territory --immediately at the border, or within immigration centers, or finally with deportation-- certain categories of people, categories that the act of rejection

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<sup>14</sup> See Gramsci 1971: 247

<sup>15</sup> See Asad 2004

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Coutin 2000.

<sup>17</sup> As in Riles 2000; see also Bourdieu 1977

<sup>18</sup> And *how, then, to understand the role in these performative practices of the “embedded” social scientist?* This is one of the (implicit) questions this paper wants to draw attention on.

reconstitutes and reconfirms. Deportation, *whether it takes place or not*, remains “one of the essential prerogatives of national sovereignty,” in the same way in which liability to deportation is a main constituent of “foreignness”<sup>19</sup>. As noted by several scholars, border practices too often “escape the sight of the democratic citizenry in the name of whom and for the protection of whom they are exercised.”<sup>20</sup> My main concern is not only about the secrecy or (un)democratic nature of these practices. The border, as the iconic<sup>21</sup> container of the national and EU “democratic citizenry,” is continuously constructed, maintained, and related to certain popular perceptions and experiences.<sup>22</sup> It works as a powerful tool in the creation of subjects, both “non-EU immigrants” and “EU-Italian citizens”: if the former become “subject to someone else by control and dependence,” the latter become subjects *tied* “to their own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge.”<sup>23</sup> The center’s soldiers, the staff, and the policemen, southern Italians still often subjected to a disparaging moral geography as culturally and economically inferior to northern Italians and Europeans<sup>24</sup>, do finally position themselves as full-fledged members of Italy, the EU and the West,<sup>25</sup> and as sensitive gatekeepers. In the center’s lawyer’s interpretation, the Bulgarians’ detention can be seen as a form of governmental humanitarian assistance for people who could have potentially been rejected also by Austria, and thus left wandering in Italy with no money, food, and shelter. Tourism is reinforced as a prerogative of fair-skinned and wealthy people

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<sup>19</sup> Sayad 2004: 293; see also De Genova 2002

<sup>20</sup> Benhabib 2000: 62

<sup>21</sup> See Herzfeld 1992: 107ff.

<sup>22</sup> *E.g.*, Driessen 1996; Darian-Smith 1999.

<sup>23</sup> Foucault 1982: 777-8

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Gramsci 1971 (especially pp. 55 ff.); Cole 1997; Schneider 1998

<sup>25</sup> For an account of identitarian and political interplays in Italy see Grillo 2002.

(possibly from wealthy countries), and as an activity fully compartmentalized: one cannot simultaneously work and be a tourist. The EU keeps marking its candidate members as unequal outposts of labor-recruiting and filtering. It is not too paradoxical that one of the concerns underlined in the EU Commission's reports about Bulgaria is that this country needs to make progresses toward the joint management of non-EU migrants, for example building detention centers. Hierarchies between states are cultivated: the Bulgarian embassy in Rome, which we contacted several times, dismissively abandoned its citizens in the center for one month, perhaps concerned not to spoil Italian-Bulgarian relations.

In this case study, *police* measures, according to or beyond the executive's measures, are allowed to count as "enough": adequate not only for the detention of non-EU nationals but also for depriving "the public" of critical capabilities and potential engagements; the same public in whose name and for whose security and well-being<sup>26</sup> immigration regulation measures are said to be taken; a public also constituted as those nationals who are not immediately subjected to the underlying *potential* detention in such centers<sup>27</sup>—and are not allowed to visit them. The *very existence* of a global spectrum of extra-judiciary governance tools, including immigration detention facilities in Europe and North-Africa, poses pressing questions. Whether this spectrum lies outside the means of "democratic" governance, or it is in fact integral to it, is being vibrantly debated. This study of the forms of migration management brings to the fore a

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<sup>26</sup> Foucault 2003: 239ff.

<sup>27</sup> See Agamben 2004

predicament that is in any case troubling. For this predicament features on the one hand hegemonic<sup>28</sup> liberal-democratic principles, such as respect for migrants and their cultures, universal human rights, and legal egalitarianism; and on the other hand everyday, often mundane, forms of routinely unaccountable governance of “immigration”. That these two arenas are often represented, analyzed, and perceived as distinct stands, in my opinion, as an unwelcome state and EU accomplishment.

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<sup>28</sup> Although referring to a somewhat different socio-historical frame work, Gramsci put forward the observation that “intellectual, moral and political hegemony” might often be attained through “molecular”, “private” enterprise, that is, *not* through a programme “worked out and constituted according to a plan, *in advance of the practical and organizational action*” (Gramsci 1971: 59-60, my emphasis).

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