



H.F.R.I.
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Research & Innovation

Description of the funded research project
1st Call for H.F.R.I. Research Projects to Support Faculty
Members & Researchers and Procure High-Value
Research Equipment

Title of the research project:

Settling in the “humanitarian city”: The social, cultural, and political impact of the interaction between asylum seekers, agents of humanitarian governance, and local society (in Lesvos and Athens)

Principal Investigator:

Evthymios Papataxiarchis

Reader-friendly title:

HUMANcITY

Scientific Area:

Social Anthropology

Institution and Country:

University of the Aegean, Greece

Host Institution:

University of the Aegean

Collaborating Institution(s):

**University of Groningen, University of Pittsburgh,
Brunel University**

**Project webpage
(if applicable):**

<https://refugeeobservatory.aegean.gr/>

Budget:

175.612,00€

Duration:

24 months

Research Project Synopsis

The European “refugee crisis” was marked by the humanitarian intervention in Greece and the formation of an apparatus for the government of the refugee and migrant flows as well as by the mass mobilization of humanitarian actors from all over the world. The research project focuses on humanitarian governance as a field of social and cultural interaction and political negotiation among asylum seekers, private and public, personal and collective humanitarian actors and local communities. The project emphasizes the settlement of asylum seekers, which it approaches holistically, and with regard to the fields of reception, care, education, legal protection and more generally to the field of sociality. Specifically, the research studies the interactions between the mechanisms of humanitarian governance and the local communities in three locations: a first reception village (Skala Sykamnias), a border town (Mytilene), and the Greek capital (Athens). In this way it follows the transformation from the “humanitarian village” to the “humanitarian city”. It compares different settlement models for the newcomers, refugees and migrants –the camp, municipal or private projects of apartment letting, occupations of public or private spaces and funded or not “hosting” at home, and investigates the different impact these have on all the actors –asylum seekers, humanitarian actors, and members of the local communities. Particularly, it investigates interaction and its social and political impact with regard to formal and informal forms of sociality (“hospitality”, “solidarity”, “care”) and to different ethno-culturally mediated perceptions all the actors of the “humanitarian city” hold.

Project originality

The proposed research is cutting edge because it concerns a *highly topical issue* with original methodology and *innovative deliverables*. As it approaches the humanitarian régime from below, in its local dimension, at the level of everyday life, this project seeks to cover an ethnographic gap in the study of a phenomenon of global significance such as the recent “refugee crisis” and complement other disciplinary approaches that achieve a systematic yet more superficial understanding of processes and transformations on the ground. Its greater strength lies in the ethnographically rigorous analysis of the *emic foundations* of informal discourses and the different cultural logics that organize them, in the unraveling of the mismatches between formal discourse and everyday practice, in the critical interrogation of formal -bureaucratic, political or scientific/ analytic- categories, and the move beyond the ethnocentric bias and the subsequent pathologization or idealization that dominates much of the existing literature .

One of the innovative aspects and strengths of this project is the almost *unique* opportunity to *contextualize* the current “refugee crisis” in the PI’s long term ethnographic knowledge of the area concerned and of “local” perspectives. Another lies in its *comparative* orientation: the comparative analysis of the different localities/ stages of the refugee journey through an original focus on the crucial issue of social mediation, not only at the level of the individual actor but also at the institutional and structural level. On the basis of the above methodologies and through its programmatic emphasis on the emic understandings of humanitarian governance by all those involved in it, HUMANcITY also seeks to overcome the camp-centrism that prevails in the existing literature and counteract any ethnocentrism biases.

Expected results & Research Project Impact

The deliverables of the project (interactive map, studies, doctoral dissertations, international workshop, postgraduate courses) will contribute to a better knowledge of the refugee issue, while offering material for the shaping of more effective policies for the integration of refugees in Greek society. The outcome of all ethnographic researches that will be carried out within this project, combined with the work of the Observatory for the Refugee and Migration Crisis in the Aegean, will make a decisive contribution to strengthening this important documentation initiative of refugee movement, which is still at a relatively early stage.

The research aspires to contribute to addressing some of the major cognitive challenges produced by the refugee issue. Specifically:

- It allows the critical approach of all normative and disciplinary formations and discourses, which organize humanitarian action, irrespective of their origin and ideological orientation.
- It contributes to the making of a new “vocabulary” for the “refugee issue”. At the same time, it can be used to develop effective policies for the “refugee issue” at European, Greek and local level:

through a thorough understanding of i) the processes that take place in the field of first reception and settlement of asylum seekers and ii) the impact of the implemented policies.

by allowing the better understanding of the experimentations carried out in the management of the refugee issue from below and from within, which is of international interest both in terms of research and politics.

by providing the factual background for reviewing existing policies and producing new ones.

Last but not least, despite the fact that the extra-ordinary conditions of the pandemic undermine the ordinary procedure of anthropological fieldwork, research will be carried out by employing inevitable methodological modifications; these will conform with the conditions of social distancing, working online, etc., while safeguarding the health of the researchers and their interlocutors. We consider this to be a significant methodological challenge that will inform the dialogue in the field of anthropology.

The importance of this funding

The research project “HUMANcITY” is funded exclusively by H.F.R.I. Without this funding the ethnographic studies that form part of this project would not have been possible. Therefore, the project :

- A) renders possible a research procedure that deals with a complex and highly topical issue in Greece and Europe today – humanitarian governance with special emphasis on the settlement of asylum seekers
- B) offers the opportunity to three post-doctoral researchers and two doctoral candidates to engage into a systematic research procedure, which becomes even more important during the hard times of the pandemic
- C) allows the PI to extend and deepen his long-term ethnographic research on the island of Lesbos, and
- D) supports the Department of Social Anthropology and History of the University of the Aegean –which, in terms of geography, is based at the epicenter of the “refugee crisis”– in contributing to the study of the interaction between the actors of humanitarian governance and local society, while giving it the opportunity to produce academic knowledge that may prove useful for policy making.



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