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Rethinking freedom from the perspective of refugees

Lived experiences of (un)freedom in Europe's border zones

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Introduction

“While I was sitting on the boat to [cross the border], I was looking at people’s faces. I was really concerned about my children; I did not wish to see any fear in their eyes. It was the first time that my children were facing such a dangerous journey. Although I was really scared, I started playing with water so my children could not sense my fear. As we had crossed the sea and realised that we were in Greece, I was immersed in a real feeling of freedom. I felt that we had achieved our goal.”¹

What does freedom mean once viewed from the perspective of refugees? This philosophical investigation aims to explore this question and investigate the dynamic relationship of freedom and unfreedom by drawing on the narratives and lived experiences of refugees. To take the first steps for giving shape to this inquiry, I travelled several times to Greece and spent time in refugee camps on the Island of Lesbos. My primary aim was to gain first-hand insights about the interrelation of refugeehood and (un)freedom. During this time, Lesbos became a major destination for migrants and refugees to find a place of refuge in Europe. This island hosted the largest refugee camps in Europe, which were set up and organised in accordance with Europe’s deterrence and containment approach (Tazzioli & Garelli, 2020; Squire, Perkowski, Stevens, & Vaughan-Williams, 2021, chap. 1). My presence in this border area allowed me to learn more about personal motivations, living conditions, struggles, political structures, spatial arrangements, and emancipatory practices which constitute the meaning and experience of (un)freedom.

From the very beginning of this philosophical project, I was aware that freedom and unfreedom play an important role in lived experiences of individuals whose human condition is co-determined by exposure to institutional violence, persecution, and abandonment, as well as by practices of resistance, flight, and courageous border crossing. However, it was through my personal encounters, engagements, and conversations that I truly realised that the question of freedom lies at the heart of every genuine inquiry into the meaning and significance of refugeehood. In conversations and interviews, my interlocutors told me that they were fleeing from a situation in which freedom was just an ‘empty sound’, that they were escaping from unfree conditions, characterized by political ‘filters’, that their pre-flight condition was marked by structures of ‘rejection’ and ‘neglect’, and that they undertook life-threatening journeys to put an end to conditions of unfreedom, statelessness, abandonment, and placelessness.

Through their narratives and personal stories, my interlocutors demonstrated that the question of freedom becomes most significant and meaningful in lived experiences of flight and border crossing. For them, flight and border crossing were not just physical movements from one

¹ Excerpt from a conversation with an Afghan refugee in Greece. Interview with Mina, Lesbos, March 2018.

country to another one. They perceived flight as a liberatory undertaking, which is permeated by practices and experiences of freedom. They interpreted their migration as a purposeful ‘movement from an unfree state to a freer one’, as a multi-faceted transition from ‘unfreedom’ and ‘social death’ to ‘freedom’ and ‘political existence’. My interlocutors highlighted that the question of freedom manifests itself in refugees’ everyday struggles, acts of resistance, and signifying practices in receiving countries which allow refugees to establish relations marked by equality and friendship. More importantly, these conversations, narratives and lived experiences attested once again that refugees are not passive victims who are *waiting* for the charitable assistance of humanitarian organisations and recognition of their violated rights by host states.

Refugees are *freedom seekers* in the first place. In and through their migratory movements, they negate the determinations of unfreedom and aim to create a situation in which they can obtain an equal and free place in the world. For refugees, freedom and unfreedom give shape to a dynamic relationship manifested in different phases of refugeehood. Explanation of how this dynamic relationship is perceived and understood by the people on the move is often not included in the (mainstream) theories of freedom, which tend to reduce the meaning of this political signifier to a formal guarantee, negative right, or inherited status (privilege) to which citizens of nation-states are entitled. A growing body of scholarship in the field of political theory has highlighted this theoretical and methodological shortcoming. As several critical scholars observed, prevalent reconstructions of freedom are state-oriented and citizen-centric. These reconstructions are premised on a particular notion of citizenship, which has historically been shaped by exclusionary boundaries of race, gender, and nationality. By the same token, these theories disregard the political significance of freedom for political figures who were, historically, excluded from the domain of citizenship and political membership, including fugitive slaves, the colonised, non-citizens, and present-day refugees (see *e.g.*, Hesse, 2014; Mezzadra, 2004, 2020; Rancière, 2010; Roberts 2015).

As Hesse contended, hegemonic reconstructions of universal freedom (represented by liberal and neo-republican conceptions) are, historically, rooted in a colonial-racial distinction, *i.e.*, the hierarchal distinction between “white citizen freedom and non-white, non-citizen unfreedom where the latter’s realisation of freedom can only be derived from the being and meaning of freedom as whiteness” (Hesse, 2014, p. 229). By prioritising and privileging the notion of citizenship, these reconstructions neglect the perspective of non-citizens and subordinate “the meaning of freedom for the colonised and the enslaved to the meaning of freedom for the colonisers/enslavers as the citizens” (Hesse, 2014, p. 300). Similarly, Rancière (2010) suggested that state-oriented and citizen-centric theories reduce freedom to a pre-given right or entitlement, which belongs to “definite subjects” (citizens) by virtue of membership in “an existing

constitutional state” (pp. 55-56). Rancière (2010) argued that for those excluded from the formal domain of political membership, freedom does not collapse into a static entitlement or right which is either granted or denied. On the contrary, the meaning and significance of freedom take shape in a conflictual domain and manifest themselves in heterogeneous practices, lived experiences, and struggles, which “open up a dispute” about what freedom signifies, “whom it concerns and in which cases” (Rancière, 2010, p. 68).

Following these critical observations, theorists have tried to examine undertheorised aspects of freedom by focusing on liberatory interventions of *non-parts* (Rancière, 2010), practices of marronage and fugitivity (Hesse, 2014; Roberts, 2015), and refugees’ acts of border crossing, escape and desertion (Mezzadra, 2004, 2020; Squire, 2021). This dissertation situates itself in this emerging critical scholarship and aims to inquire into the meaning and political significance of (un)freedom from the perspective of refugees. Why does refugees’ perspective matter? Human migration and mass migratory movements have been an inseparable part of human existence. However, it was after the World War II that refugeehood was articulated as a distinct political *problem*. Over the past two decades, mass flight of refugees around the globe has turned the *refugee problem* into a global *refugee crisis*. At present, refugeehood characterises a growing anomaly that poses a serious challenge to the intrinsic logic of the nation-state paradigm premised on the principles of state sovereignty and national citizenship (Agamben, 1998, 2000; Balibar, 2016; Douzinas, 2019).

Therefore, refugeehood should not be viewed as a temporary problem that concerns a few individuals under exceptional circumstances. In the current world order, it represents the normalised mode of existence for millions of people around the globe. Statistical data and forecasts concerning the number of refugees and displaced people suggest that the global refugee population has doubled since 2011. As of 2022, over one hundred million people have fled their habitual place of residence because of war, persecution, political abandonment, climate change, and institutional violence (United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2022b). A significant number of these refugees spend their entire life in extended exile or protracted refugee situations. Millions of children are born into societies in which they are not regarded as citizens and many of them spend their entire childhoods in refugee camps and informal refugee settlements (Hyndman & Giles, 2018; Parekh, 2020; see also UNHCR, 2022a, p. 20). All in all, refugeehood has become an inseparable by-product of organising the human world in terms of nation-states which internal borders, walls and external fortifications are, growingly, being militarised and reinforced (Balibar, 2010, 2016; De Genova, 2017; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Squire et al., 2021).

Since the World War II, several international instruments and organisations, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention and the UNHCR, were brought into existence to respond to the emerging refugee problem (Hathaway, 2021a; Refugee Convention, 1951/1990; UNHCR 2019). These instruments and organisations shaped a humanitarian framework, which has played an influential role in the way refugeehood is being conceptualised and depicted in mainstream political discourse. In this humanitarian framework, refugeehood is seen as a temporary and transitory status applying to exceptional circumstances (Miller & Straehle, 2021, p. 21; Refugee Convention, 1951/1990, Arts. 31& 33; UNHCR, 2019, p. 51). This theoretical framework is less concerned with refugees' political subjectivity and depicts them as victims of persecution (“as the neediest of the needy”) who should be given protection on a temporary basis (Owen, 2020, p. 23). As Agier (2010) and Squire et al. (2021) suggested, the humanitarian concept of ‘refugee’ has increasingly become synonymous with victimhood, powerlessness, and abnormality. By the same token, refugees are often portrayed as “vulnerable victims of persecution” who are “temporarily” in need of “humanitarian” and “charitable” assistance of “host” states and international aid organisations (Agier, 2010, pp. 4-5; Squire et al., 2021, pp. 25-27). In addition to this humanitarian image and due to the exponential growth of refugee population worldwide, refugees are, increasingly, being portrayed as enemy-like strangers who pose a threat to the borders and stability of receiving states and the well-being of their citizens. As a result, they are exposed to sophisticated bordering practices and subjected to politics of rejection and abandonment, which become most visible in border zones (Balibar, 2010; De Genova, 2017; Squire et al., 2021; Walia, 2021).

Several political theorists and critical migration scholars warned against misrepresentations of refugees in contemporary political discourse (see *e.g.*, Agier, 2010, 2017; Bauman 2004; Khosravi, 2010). These theorists also highlighted the significance of the question of freedom, which is manifested in different phases of refugees' migratory movements (see *e.g.*, Hardt & Mezzadra, 2020; Mezzadra, 2004, 2020; Squire et al. 2021). As Hardt and Mezzadra (2020) pointed out, by reducing refugees to absolute victims, the humanitarian logic disregards heterogeneous practices and projects of freedom that are expressed in their lived experiences of flight and practices against acts of border making. According to Hardt and Mezzadra (2020), “by crossing borders, migrants necessarily and objectively enact freedom. And it is amazing to note how intensely and consistently the word ‘freedom’ is chanted, in a panoply of languages, at migrant rallies and demonstrations throughout the world” (p. 172). Similarly, Squire et al. (2021) observed that people on the move “play a crucial role not only as ‘experts’ of migration, but also as ‘theorists’ of migration—and indeed of world politics—in their own right” (pp. 179-180). Therefore, for understanding the reality of refugeehood, theorists should underscore refugees' agency and explore

the dynamics of freedom and unfreedom that are expressed in their migratory movements, collective struggles, and everyday experiences in the receiving countries (see also Mezzadra, 2018, 2020).

Methodological and theoretical underpinnings

As indicated earlier, prevalent theories of freedom (primarily represented by liberal and neo-republican static interpretations) are often citizen-centric and state-oriented. In these theories freedom is viewed as a guarantee, negative right or status that should protect citizens (members of a nation-state) against dominating structures, arbitrary power, and coercive interference of the state (see *e.g.*, Berlin, 1958/2008; Hayek, 1960/1978; Lovett & Pettit, 2019; Miller, 2006; Skinner, 2008). By the same token, these static interpretations marginalise the perspective of refugees (non-citizens and other people on the move) whose practices and projects of freedom take shape by transgressing the boundaries of state-citizen relationship. Moreover, they disregard the dynamic nature of the question of freedom for human beings whose experience of freedom is manifested in flight, movement, and creative resistance against bordering practices.

The central aim of this dissertation is to transcend this theoretical shortcoming and to contribute to our understanding of the dynamics of freedom and unfreedom through the lens of refugeehood. This inquiry has been developed in view of three fundamental assumptions. Firstly, the question of freedom lies at the heart of many individual and collective projects, experiences, practices, and arrangements characterising refugeehood. Secondly, refugeehood is a self-standing, non-derivative human condition, which is irreducible to state-oriented conceptions of freedom and citizenship. Thirdly, refugees' interpretations, perceptions and lived experiences of freedom should be regarded as an essential source for offering a theoretical examination of the meaning of this political signifier.

To examine the dynamic relationship of freedom and unfreedom, this study draws on narratives and lived experiences of refugees, which were collected during in-depth interviews with refugees. The interviews were conducted in 2018 (Greece) and were later transcribed, processed, analysed, and theoretically discussed in accordance with the guidelines of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022). IPA is a phenomenological research approach committed to investigate the significance of concepts, categories, and phenomena (such as pain, personhood, justice, freedom, etc.), as people make sense of them in their major life experiences and life-changing signifying practices. According to Smith et al. (2022), some of these major experiences might “be the result of proactive agency on the part of the person, some come unexpectedly and are uncalled for” (Smith et al., 2022, pp.

2-3). IPA has three theoretical underpinnings. It adopts a phenomenological, interpretative, and idiographic stance and aims to offer a nuanced, detailed examination of lived experiences. It is well suited to complex and equivocal topics, which have an undertheorised experiential or existential dimension (Spiers et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022). In what follows, I provide an overview of these theoretical underpinnings.

Phenomenological: IPA builds on epistemological and ontological insights of a wide range of (post)phenomenological scholars, such as Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Merleau-Ponty (Smith et al., 2022, pp. 16-17). IPA scholars share the view that human beings are embodied and socially embedded meaning-making subjects. According to Smith et al. (2022), our understanding is, intrinsically, situated in our lived-experiences, (inter)personal sense-making, and social relationships, which constitute our lifeworld. Moreover, human beings are thrown into a world of objects, language(s), intersubjective relations, that co-shape their sense-making activities (Ahmed, 2006; Smith et al., 2022, pp. 8-14; see also Heidegger 1927/1962; Husserl 1954/1970).

As Ahmed (2006) and Smith et al. (2022, p. 9) pointed out, “the task of approaching something phenomenologically involves a willingness and capacity to understand a perspective upon it, an orientation towards it”. This perspectival quality is the “*meaning of something* which something has for someone” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 9). The process of sense-making is always “directed towards something”, what is perceived and experienced depends “on where we are located, which gives us a certain take on things” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 27). These situational and perspectival aspects of sense-making are reflected in our embodied experiences and self-perceptions, which are co-determined and co-shaped by structures of race, gender, sex, and class (Ahmed, 2006, p. 4; Smith et al., 2022, p. 15).

The perspectival and situational character of sense-making is even more pertinent for critical examination of socio-political signifiers (such as freedom) that play a central role in the realm of politics. As Castoriadis (2010) and Rancière (2010) noted, political notions such as freedom should not be reduced to static concepts that convey a fixed transhistorical or universal meaning. According to Castoriadis, human mode of existence is expressed in a complex network of central social and political signifiers, by which we interpret and institute our common world as a social-historically meaningful whole.² Meaning and sense-making are interwoven with perceptions, historically shaped institutions, social practices, socio-political relations, and

² Castoriadis calls these central socio-political signifiers (such as ‘nation’, ‘democracy’, ‘freedom’, ‘God’, ‘capital’, etc.) *social imaginary significations* (SIS). In Castoriadis’s view, imaginary significations contribute to the creation of a particular form of society. They are “embodied” and “breathe life into” core institutions of society and play a decisive role in the socialisation process of its members, *i.e.* its social-individuals (Castoriadis, 2010, p. 47). Therefore, imaginary significations cannot be reduced to ‘real/functional’ categories or fixed conceptual schemes (see Castoriadis, 1975/1987, chap. 7).

‘language-games’³ (to use Wittgenstein’s terminology) in and through which we give meaning to social and political signifiers (Castoriadis, 1975/1987, 2010).

More importantly, as Rancière (2010) observed, freedom is an open-ended signifier which meaning takes shape in the conflictual domain of politics. As with other political concepts such as ‘equality’, ‘nation’, ‘democracy’, ‘right’, and ‘citizenship’, the notion of ‘freedom’ operates as a ‘conflictual name’. What it effectively means and whom it concerns is “a litigious matter” (Rancière, 2010, p. 56). The question of freedom becomes meaningful in a conflictual domain in which political actors take the stage—as meaning-making subjects—and open up a space for articulating and enacting its meaning and political significance (Rancière, 2010, p. 68). On this account, freedom embodies a notable experiential dimension which is reflected in personal perceptions, lived experiences, and everyday practices. These perceptions, experiences, and practices are situated in our social world and are co-shaped by juridico-political conditions, hierarchies of power, and social differentiations of race, gender, class, nationality (Ahmed, 2006, p. 4).

In this dissertation, I adopt this theoretical stance and treat the notion of ‘freedom’ as an open-ended signifier which meaning is interwoven with refugees’ lived world. In doing so, the question of freedom will be examined in view of refugees’ lived experiences of (un)freedom, as manifested in different phases of refugeehood (*i.e.*, pre-flight, flight, and post-flight conditions). This examination will be unfolded by reflecting on socio-political structures, spatio-temporal arrangements, and conflictual processes that characterise the interrelation of freedom and refugeehood.

Interpretative: IPA is an *interpretative* enterprise. It views human beings as “sense-making creatures” whose understanding of the world and lived experiences are subject to interpretation and reflection (Smith, 2018; Smith et al., 2022, p. 17; see also Gadamer, 1960/1990, p. 267). An IPA study involves a ‘double hermeneutic’ in which both participant and researcher take part in an interpretative process as sense-making agents. On the one hand, an IPA study focuses on how participants reflect on their own experiences and interpret their own signifying practices. On the other hand, it recognises that researchers should engage in a dialogical, interpretative process to gain access to participants’ perceptions of important phenomena and concepts such as freedom (Smith et al., 2022, pp. 30-31; Smith & Nizza, 2022, pp. 8-9). This dialogical approach aims to bridge the gap between the *interpreter* (analyst) and the *interpreted* (the analysed) (Smith et al., 2022, pp. 21-23).

³ By deploying the notion of language-games, Wittgenstein underscores the fact that our language (meaning and sense-making) is interwoven with our interpersonal signifying practices and interactions, which constitute a particular ‘form of life.’ (see Wittgenstein, 1951/2001, #23).

In view of this interpretative approach, the notion of ‘freedom’ will be investigated by studying how this signifier is being perceived and interpreted in refugees’ narratives, signifying practices, and personal life stories. The interpretative process takes place on two levels (Smith et al., 2022, pp. 30-31). On the one hand, this approach allows refugees to articulate and interpret the dynamics of freedom and unfreedom in their own terms. On the other hand, this approach allows the researcher to critically reflect on these experiential accounts and interpret them in view of existing theoretical debates concerning freedom and refugeehood.

Idiographic: IPA is committed to an idiographic approach and is primarily concerned with the “particularity” or “singularity” of experiential phenomena, which are often overlooked or neglected in theoretical discussions (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 8). As Smith et al. (2022) pointed out, this methodology is “committed to understanding how particular experiential phenomena (an event, process or relationship) have been understood from the perspective of the people, in a particular context” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 24). It utilizes “a small, purposively-selected, and carefully-situated samples” and focusses on a fairly homogenous group whose experiential accounts could be interpreted, analysed, and thematized, in view of their family resemblances and notable differences (Smith et al., 2022, p. 24)⁴. Therefore, instead of establishing general laws or universalised concepts, this approach aims to inform existing theoretical discussions based on phenomenological insights and critically examine their limitations.

Design, participants and context

In view of the theoretical underpinnings of IPA, eight participants were invited to take part in in-depth semi-structured interviews. The participants were refugees residing on the Island of Lesbos and in Athens. The interviews were face-to-face conversations of about 90 to 120 minutes. Having a dialogue between the inquirer and participants was a guiding principle for the development of this research project. To underscore the dialogical nature of this research project, the participants will be called ‘interlocutors’ throughout this dissertation. This term is being deployed to emphasise the *dialogical* nature of this philosophical investigation⁵. The term ‘interlocutor’ is an agent noun stemming from Latin *interloqui*, meaning ‘to speak between’ or ‘to interrupt’ (Hoad, 1996). Following this semantic demarcation, an interlocutor is someone who speaks and intervenes in a

⁴ Most IPA studies recruit small, homogenous groups of participants between 6-10 (see Smith et al., 2022).

⁵ This term has been chosen as an alternative for a more common term ‘respondent’. The term ‘respondent’ alludes to an asymmetrical linguistic interaction in which the participant has a passive and reactive role. As the term suggests, a ‘respondent’ is expected to perform the act of *responding* to predefined questions.

dialogue. Together with the inquirer, the interlocutor co-creates, co-shapes, and co-directs the course of our inquiry into the notion of ‘freedom’.

The interviews were conducted in February and March 2018. Interview schedules were constructed based on the literature review and included several open-ended questions with respect to the intersubjective, political, and existential aspects of (un)freedom. Participants were informed that the conversations could be regarded as a (philosophical) dialogue one might have with one’s friends or relatives. Here are a few questions, which give an idea of the interview style: ‘do you think that freedom is important in your life, if so in what way?’, ‘who is a refugee according to you?’, ‘what does freedom mean to you?’, ‘can you recall a moment that you truly felt free?’, ‘does freedom have any links with specific form of politics or type of government?’, and so on (see Appendix II). These open-ended questions were intended to provide insights into the way interlocutors perceive and interpret freedom within their specific juridico-political condition.

To prepare interview schedules, I visited two major refugee camps on the Island of Lesbos in 2017 and 2018, namely Moria and Kara Tepe. Both camps were intended to provide temporary shelter to refugees after their arrival on the European soil. In terms of size, functionality, and structure, these refugee camps were illustrative cases and were designed and organised in accordance with the EU Hotspot Approach. Since 2015, the Hotspot Approach represents the official European asylum policy framework, which was implemented to manage irregular migration and refugee flows (Tazzioli & Garelli, 2020; Spathopoulou, Carastathis, & Tsilimpounidi, 2020). Until its total destruction in 2020, Moria was the largest refugee camp in Europe and functioned as one of the main registration centres in Greece. Kara Tepe was considered a ‘model camp’ and its main mandate was to accommodate vulnerable refugee groups (Oxfam, 2022).

To gain first-hand insights about everyday experiences of refugees, regulations, restrictions, and existing power dynamics, I spent two weeks as a volunteer in Kara Tepe. My field observations made me realise that it was more feasible and conscientious to conduct interviews among refugees who were already settled on Lesbos for a few months. This strategy was chosen for two practical reasons. Before arriving in the country of destination, almost all refugees arrive on the European soil after a life-threatening journey, crossing the Aegean Sea with unsafe boats. This experience has a traumatising effect on many of them. Therefore, it takes some time before they can talk to others and reflect on their experiences. Moreover, in the first stage of their asylum procedure (also called ‘registration phase’), refugees face serious bureaucratic challenges and must

reside in excessively overcrowded and underequipped registration centres (such as Moria) (Fieldnotes, 2017, 2018; see also Gordon & Larsen, 2021)⁶.

In addition to interviews, my existing network in Greece offered me the opportunity to carry out informal conversations with many stakeholders, including Greek citizens, social workers, police officers, and international solidarity activists. I also brought a visit to a self-organised squat in Athens, Refugee Accommodation and Solidarity Space City Plaza (hereinafter City Plaza). City Plaza was a privately-owned abandoned hotel that closed in 2010. In 2016, a group of activists occupied this place and turned it into a refugee squat. Since then, the squat accommodated about 400 people, including refugees, activists, locals, and volunteers. City Plaza had a reception, dining room, storage, playground, health centre, roof terrace, classroom, library, and a bar (City Plaza, 2019). It was completely run by the residents and was funded by individual donations. It is important to note that the residents of City Plaza used to call themselves *solidarians*. This term was deliberately chosen to highlight the friendship and solidarity between activists and refugees and to challenge the existing power dynamics in state-run refugee camps (Fieldnotes 2018; see also Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Lafanzi, 2018; Mezzadra, 2018, 2020). In the summer of 2019, City Plaza was forced to close after the electoral win of the liberal-conservative New Democracy party (City Plaza, 2019).

Analysis: In light of IPA's guidelines and procedures, each transcribed interview was first read line by line for exploring notable linguistic, conceptual, and descriptive observations (see Appendix III; Smith et al., 2022, pp. 78-79). After this exploratory process, the interviews were analysed several times to identify notable experiential statements and to cluster them as Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) (Smith et al., 2022, pp. 86-87). PETs represent the key elements in every single narrative and capture the main characteristics of individual reflections on the question of freedom. In addition, I examined family resemblances and notable differences by moving back and forth between different narratives. In doing so, I searched for connections and patterns across PETs and compared them with other field data. In view of this multi-layered cross-case analysis, Group Experiential Themes (GETs) and sub-themes were developed using the techniques of abstraction and subsumption (Smith et al., 2009, 2022, pp. 100-104)⁷. GETs represent the common characteristics of interlocutors' reflections on the question of freedom.

⁶ While Moria was constructed to accommodate about three thousand refugees for a short period of time, the number of its residents were extremely higher than its official capacity. Apart from extreme shortage of sanitation facilities, healthcare centres, lack of shelters forced many refugees to live in improvised tents outside the camp. Despite these limiting factors, I was able to organise a few visits to Moria and have informal meetings with camp residents, border activists, and volunteers.

⁷ In earlier editions of the IPA, the Group Experiential Themes (GETs) are called 'super-ordinate themes' (Smith et al., 2009).

Ethical considerations: This research was given ethical approval by the Faculty of Humanities, University of Amsterdam⁸. Prior to every interview, the interlocutors were given an information brochure and a consent form in their native language (see Appendix I). They were informed that they have the right to decline to participate in this research at any stage. The conversations took place at the location of interlocutors' preference. The interlocutors could pause or end the conversation at any point. With interlocutors' permission, the conversations were audio recorded for later transcription and further analysis. All data have been anonymised.

Overview of the IPA-study	
Method of enquiry	Interpretative phenomenological analysis
Data collection method	Semi-structured interviews
Target group	Asylum seekers residing in refugee camps and informal shelters
Number of interlocutors	8
Location	Lesvos & Athens, Greece

Analytical focus and research limitations

As indicated earlier, this study has an idiographic character and does not follow a random or representative sampling strategy. All my interlocutors were (former) residents of Moria and Kara Tepe. Some of them had managed to rent a house in the city of Mytilene (the capital of Lesvos). All interlocutors had spent some time (from weeks to months) in Moria, a place which they described as 'hell' [*Jahanam*] (Fieldnotes, 2018; Nasiri & Jansen, 2020). Considering the delicate nature of the research topic, my interlocutors were chosen from a group with whom I shared a common language. The interviews were conducted in Dari, Persian, and English. Most interlocutors were (young) adult Afghan men aged between 20-37. In addition, one woman (aged 25) and one Kurdish man (aged 30) participated in this research⁹. This choice was made in view of linguistic and cultural constraints which pose a limitation to an IPA study¹⁰. Therefore, the voices and perspectives of different genders and ethnicities are not equally represented in this research. However, it is worth highlighting that Afghan refugees make up one of the largest refugee populations in the world since the 1980s. According to the UNHCR, more than six million

⁸ The Ethics Committee, Faculty of Humanities, University of Amsterdam (file nr. 2017-38).

⁹ All interviews with Afghan refugees were conducted in Dari or Persian. The interview with the Kurdish interlocutor was conducted in English.

¹⁰ Considering cultural differences, I was mindful that, for a male researcher, it would be quite difficult to invite an equal number of female interlocutors to participate in this research.

Afghans have fled their home in 2021, due to geopolitical conflicts and socio-political violence (UNHCR, 2022c). Therefore, their perspective could considerably contribute to our understanding of refugees' perceptions of (un)freedom and everyday practices that embody their migratory movements. Moreover, it should be noted that this research was carried out in the European context which has its own political and legal characteristics.

The analyses, interpretations, and discussions presented in this dissertation do not lay claim to empirical generalizability, in the sense that they would apply to *all* refugees in *all* contexts. Considering the philosophical nature of this research and its defined scope, the main purpose of this study is twofold. Through an interpretative process, it critically contextualises refugees' perceptions and understandings of freedom in ongoing theoretical discussions concerning refugeehood and freedom. Based on these critical discussions, this study develops a theoretical examination of the dynamics of freedom and unfreedom in different spatio-temporal phases of refugeehood.

To realise these theoretical objectives, this dissertation engages with a variety of scholarly sources and discussions in the field of political theory. In the first two chapters, I will offer a critical overview of mainstream discussions that are, implicitly or explicitly, premised on the humanitarian framework offered by the Refugee Convention and relating international instruments (see *e.g.*, Blake, 2013; Carens, 2015; Fine 2014; Miller, 2016; Miller & Straehle, 2021). As will be argued, this humanitarian framework fundamentally disregards refugees' political subjectivity and poses several limitations for addressing refugees' practices and perceptions of freedom. To articulate an alternative theoretical point of departure, I will employ the notion of '(non)-subjectivity' and reformulate refugeehood as a self-standing, non-derivative juridico-political condition. Following this theoretical approach, in this dissertation I argue that the meaning of freedom and unfreedom should be understood in the context of a conflictual dynamics. This conflictual dynamics manifests itself in three spatio-temporal conditions (phases) that characterise refugeehood, namely pre-flight, flight, and post-flight condition. Four chapters of this dissertation examine the dynamics of freedom and unfreedom based on refugees' narratives and lived experiences, spanning from their pre-flight to post-flight condition.

Overview of the chapters

The first chapter provides a critical overview of the humanitarian framework, which represents the prevailing conception of refugeehood and its relation to freedom. I argue that this framework has been shaped within the Conventional paradigm (the 1951 Refugee Convention) and is conceptually determined by the boundaries of national citizenship, statehood, and territorial sovereignty. The

humanitarian framework conceptualises refugeehood in terms of a transitory, temporary, and exceptional status that should, ultimately, transform into national citizenship, either by inclusion (naturalisation) or exclusion (repatriation). Correspondingly, it envisions refugees as ‘victims of persecution’ who should be granted protection on a temporary basis. This humanitarian vantage point tends to reduce refugees to depoliticised victims whose biological life should be rescued by host countries and international aid organisations. In the second part of this chapter, I discuss a line of critique of this humanitarian framework, which was first formulated by Hannah Arendt and further developed by Giorgio Agamben. According to this criticism, the formal discourse of human rights has a paradoxical nature and rests upon the exclusionary boundaries of the nation-state paradigm. These exclusionary boundaries amount to the systematic exclusion of refugees from the domain of freedom, rights, and citizenship. While this critical approach sheds light on several institutional structures and political conditions characterising refugees’ unfreedom, it overlooks lived experiences, political interventions, and struggles through which refugees exercise and enact freedom. This chapter concludes that the humanitarian approach and the Arendtian/Agambenian criticism are either state-oriented or citizen-centric. Therefore, they do not offer an adequate analytical framework for addressing freedom from the perspective of refugees.

The second chapter offers an alternative approach for rethinking the interrelation of freedom and refugeehood. By employing the notion of (non)-subjectivity, I elucidate that the meaning and significance of (un)freedom cannot be reduced to static political categories or citizen-centric conceptions. ‘(Non)-subjectivity’ denotes the human condition of political figures who articulate and enact freedom by resisting, exposing, and unsettling the determinations of politics of exclusion and unfreedom. To develop the idea of (non)-subjectivity, I reflect on Rancière’s politics of non-parts, political writings of Olympe de Gouges and Frederick Douglass, and theoretical observations raised by critical migration scholars. Following this I then explain in this chapter that refugeehood represents an ambiguous juridico-political position, which transgresses the binaries of inclusion versus exclusion and citizenship versus rightlessness. On the one hand, refugees are thrown into a juridico-political situation in which their formal right to freedom is denied or violated. On the other hand, they are fully capable of articulating and exercising freedom in different phases of refugeehood.

The next four chapters adopt the concept of (non)-subjectivity and discuss the results of my IPA study. These chapters describe the different dimensions of (un)freedom and are organised in a chronological order. The third chapter examines the dynamics of freedom and unfreedom in refugees’ pre-flight and flight condition. To elaborate this dynamic relationship, I dwell on

interlocutors' reflections on their pre-flight condition and their interpretations of escape and flight. This chapter is structured around three main observations. Firstly, I argue that the Conventional concept of 'persecution' is too narrow and too reductionistic to account for the conditions and root causes that, currently, give rise to the emergence of refugeehood in the sense of a mass-phenomenon. Secondly, I present an analysis of refugees' interpretations of unfreedom and embed them in theoretical discussions concerning migration. To elucidate how refugees make sense of unfreedom, I adopt the notion of 'abandonment' and itemise its spatio-temporal and juridico-political characteristics (*i.e.*, placelessness and inconsistency). Thirdly, I examine in what way the act of flight and escape represents the dynamic transition from unfreedom to freedom. Drawing on insights from critical race theory and autonomy of migration school, I conclude in this chapter that flight is a purposeful and multifaceted act, which is permeated by refugees' practices and lived experiences of freedom.

Chapters four and five are interconnected and present an analysis of unfreedom in the post-flight condition. Chapter four is, primarily, concerned with socio-political conditions that engender refugees' unfreedom in the receiving countries. In this chapter, I problematise misrepresentations of refugeehood, which underly humanitarian and securitised narratives of migration. I contend that, in receiving countries, refugees are thrown into an unequal host-guest-enemy relationship. By depicting and treating refugees as vulnerable victims or unwelcome guests, refugeehood undergoes a derogation process in the host countries. I analyse in what way this derogation process is being reflected in refugees' perceptions of unfreedom. Drawing on Derrida's criticism of politics of conditional hospitality, I examine hierarchal relationships (powerful hosts versus vulnerable guests), humiliating processes, and political practices that amount to the abandonment of refugees in host countries. The central thesis of this chapter is that refugees' unfreedom stems from alienating and reifying practices, processes, and relations that expose them to the state of abandonment and placelessness.

Subsequently, chapter five focuses on spatial characteristics of unfreedom as reflected in political practices and arrangements of encampment. Drawing on interlocutors' lived experiences, I elucidate that encampment is a clear manifestation of politics of abandonment, which subject refugees to physical isolation, segregation, rejection, and neglect. In this chapter I present a detailed analysis of placelessness and argue that refugee camps represent non-places in the symbolic, political, and architectural sense. Moreover, I discuss the underlying political logic that gives shape to the proliferation and normalisation of these hostile spatial arrangements within the nation-state paradigm.

Finally, in chapter six, I present an examination of the meaning of freedom in refugees' post-flight condition. This chapter is structured around three key observations. Firstly, I show that experiences of abandonment and placelessness are never totalising and do not (fully) determine refugees' human condition. By exploring interlocutors' narratives and politics of cross-border solidarity, I highlight the signifying practices, encounters, and counterstrategies, by which refugees articulate and enact freedom. Secondly, I maintain that, for refugees, freedom is understood and experienced in an autonomous relational field that is marked by equality, friendship, and mutual belonging. Thirdly, in receiving countries, this relational field is the result of autonomous interventions, interpersonal relations, and collective struggles in and through which hostile determinations of unfreedom are resisted, exposed, and unsettled. The central thesis of this chapter is that the notion of 'freedom' becomes intelligible, meaningful, and experienceable within this conflictual process and expresses itself in a relational field that refugees interpret as *friendship*.