

Making Refugees Political Agency Visible: Practices of the Subject by Amelie Harbisch

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Amelie Harbisch's book, published in January 2025 by Routledge, focuses on the significant role of refugees and asylum seekers in international relations. Harbisch works at the Department of International Politics and Conflict Studies at the University of Erfurt. Her research interests include knowledge production in international relations, ethnographic and participatory methods, forced migration and international political sociology.

This publication contributes to debates on forced migration and the political subjectivity of refugees. Harbisch points to the fact that most traditional literature on international relations has tended to view refugees as a problem rather than as individual subjects. She highlights the absence of an individual approach to refugees as actors in international migration who are part of the international system and argues that the political actions of refugees have significant implications for international relations. The very existence of refugees challenges political and academic notions about the nature of international relations, which are based on established categories such as nation-states and citizenship. The reality of forced migration questions universal democratic principles, which remain unfulfilled in the context of refugees' political rights. According to the author, to fulfill these principles, it is necessary to rethink concepts such as borders and sovereignty, which are constructed by defining refugees as 'others'.

The central argument of the book is that 'in order to understand forced migration, we must understand how refugees emerge as individual human subjects and what political power they have in this process' (Harbisch 2024: 1). In line with the aim of the text, the author formulates two research questions: 'how external constructions create refugees as subjects' and 'how refugees work with, against, or outside these discourses in their everyday practices to become

subjects' (Harbisch 2024: 3). The answer to the first question reveals the ideas about refugees that arise through political discourse, the media and their everyday interactions. The author focuses on the relationship between these often-contradictory ideas (helpless child/dangerous criminal) and the impact of this contradiction on refugees. The second question, on the other hand, reveals refugees' attitudes toward these perceptions and their role in either stabilising or challenging the contradictions inherent in these constructions.

To understand the individual political activity of refugees, Harbisch uses Foucault's concept of subjectivation. She explains subjectivation as a process in which refugees are assigned a specific identity or meaning through external influences, such as bureaucratic procedures for determining refugee status, academic discourse or media discourse. In addition to the concept of subjectivation, the author also employs biopolitics to explain the exclusion of refugees from political life and their reduction to a purely biological existence. Both concepts represent forms of power through which refugees are controlled.

On an empirical level, the book is based on an analysis of media photographs and ethnographic data collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 36 individuals who have undergone the refugee system in Germany (Berlin) and Austria (Vienna). Through quantitative analysis of media photographs, Harbisch provides a systematic overview of photographs that appeared in Austrian and German media during the migration crisis. The total sample consisted of 464 photographs from the archives of two online news servers (Spiegel-Online.de and Krone.at) from 2015 to 2017, in each country. The analysis reveals recurring patterns of depicting refugees as a de-individualised mass of people, refugees controlled and detained by authorities, or refugees as violent criminals who are out of control and represent a threat. There was also a difference between how the media represents refugees, with the Austrian media portraying refugees as suspicious subjects, while the German media portrayed them as helpless. Subsequently, a qualitative analysis of nine selected photographs is presented. It shows how refugees are portrayed as mere death through photographs of deceased persons or persons in life-threatening situations. These photographs support the construction of refugees as incapable and helpless, waiting to be rescued and requiring compassion. Similarly, it is shown how refugees are portrayed as a threat to the host country through photographs depicting uncontrolled masses of people flowing across borders. Harbisch also points to the positive portrayal of refugees through images of refugees in the workplace, confirming their successful integration into the host country's labour market.

While the analysis of media photographs conducted in the second chapter focuses on the construction of meanings attributed to refugees by the media and provides an answer to the first research question, the author uses ethnographic research to seek answers to the second question, focusing on the refugees

themselves and how they participate in shaping their own identity. Through the analysis of media photographs, three dominant scenarios are identified. The first scenario constructs refugees as bare life, which leads to the perception of refugees as helpless and incapable beings who need to be protected. They are expected to show appropriate gratitude for the protection provided. Refugees often find themselves in a situation where they internalise this scenario. At the same time, however, they reject it and transform it into a position of strength and heroism for refugees by emphasising their independence and referring to the universal concept of human rights. The author reveals how refugees have transformed this scenario through an artistic performance in the theater using specific inscriptions on their bodies, which they subsequently questioned. The second scenario depicts refugees as criminals. This scenario depicts refugees as a threat to the host country, while female refugees are perceived as victims. The third and final scenario depicts refugees as helpful workers. Here, refugees are portrayed as capable workers who contribute to the economic prosperity of the host country. The identification of these three dominant scenarios is a key contribution of the book. By describing the behaviour of refugees in these scenarios (victim, criminal, useful worker), Harbisch concludes that all three scenarios lead to the depoliticisation of refugees, indicating that refugees are either excluded from politics or politicised in a negative sense. Furthermore, the author provides insight into how refugees themselves respond to this reality, how they disrupt these scenarios, how they reject and reshape them, or even (ironically) appropriate them in order to repoliticise their role.

The book presents new data reflecting the views and needs of refugees, collected during ethnographic research. It contains several appendices that enhance the transparency of the collected data. The author presents a table with the results of a quantitative media analysis conducted in Chapter 2. It includes a table providing an overview of the interviews conducted, which lists the nationality and age of the respondents, as well as the date and location of the interviews. It is also possible to view the author's interview materials, specifically the topics and questions she addressed in each interview. In general, this book can be recommended to students and researchers in the field of international relations. It will be especially beneficial for researchers working on migration and refugees.

Harbisch, Amelie (2024): *Making Refugees Political Agency Visible: Practices of the Subject*. London: Routledge.