

# Unmasking the Impact of Bureaucratic Violence Démasker l'impact de la violence bureaucratique

Nina Gren , Dalia Abdelhady  and Martin Joormann 

Volume 39, Number 2, 2023

Special Issue: Refugees and Bureaucratic Violence  
Numéro spécial : Réfugiés et violence bureaucratique

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111517ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.41163>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Centre for Refugee Studies, York University

ISSN

0229-5113 (print)  
1920-7336 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Gren, N., Abdelhady, D. & Joormann, M. (2023). Unmasking the Impact of Bureaucratic Violence. *Refuge*, 39(2), 1–13.  
<https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.41163>

Article abstract

This introductory article introduces the concept of bureaucratic violence as a partly new way of understanding and analyzing refugees' encounters with bureaucratic structures within authorities and organizations. Violence or the threat of violence is an inevitable part of the experiences of most forcibly displaced people. In this Special Issue, we highlight how bureaucracies as social institutions, besides providing access to rights, also impact refugees in ways that are constraining, humiliating, soul-killing and, sometimes, life-threatening. We present the theoretical underpinnings of the term bureaucratic violence and, thus, the conceptual framework that connects the different case studies included.

© Nina Gren, Dalia Abdelhady, Martin Joormann, 2024



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>



# Unmasking the Impact of Bureaucratic Violence

Nina Gren<sup>a</sup> , Dalia Abdelhady<sup>b</sup>  and Martin Joormann<sup>c</sup> 

HISTORY Published 2024-05-13

## KEYWORDS

bureaucratic violence; refugees; forced displacement; bureaucracies

## INTRODUCTION

Violence or the threat of violence is an inevitable part of the experiences of most forcibly displaced people. As a special “kind” of person (Malkki, 1995), the refugees is perceived as embodying suffering and misery, despite their own significantly diverse accounts of their struggles for survival, recognition, and a dignified life (Espiritu et al., 2022). In the eyes of the public, the violence that forcibly displaced people experience is primarily seen as direct and physical, even though research has shown that other forms of violence also play important roles (see Galtung, 1990). Physical violence is the type of violence that consists of shelling, torture, maiming, sexual assault, arrests, forced pushbacks, and other behaviours that characterize forced displacement and entail a violation of migrants’ human rights (see, e.g., Malkki, 2015). However, many forcibly displaced people also encounter nonphysical forms of violence post-migration and especially in liminal situations such as during the asylum-seeking process, while crossing borders, and in refugee camps (Abdelhady

et al., 2020). Many of these experiences of violence post-migration are enacted by national and international organizations that become increasingly significant in the lives of refugees. Specifically, bureaucratic practices inflict violence upon the lives of the forcibly displaced in distinct ways that augment the violence of forcible displacement.

This special issue focuses on bureaucratic violence and highlights how bureaucracies as social institutions, besides providing access to rights, also impact refugees in ways that are constraining, humiliating, soul killing, and sometimes life-threatening. The conception of bureaucratic violence that we advance in this special issue has its roots in post-colonial studies and builds on the writings of Arendt, Foucault, and Graeber, among others. The articles chosen as part of this collection discuss certain violent outcomes of discourses, policies, and practices in relation to forced displacement and refugee migration in diverse bureaucratic settings and the ways such violence is experienced by different actors. In this introductory article, we present the theoretical underpinnings of the term **bureaucratic violence** and thus

## CONTACT

<sup>a</sup> (Corresponding author) ✉ [nina.gren@soc.lu.se](mailto:nina.gren@soc.lu.se), Department of Sociology, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

<sup>b</sup> ✉ [dalia.abdelhady@soc.lu.se](mailto:dalia.abdelhady@soc.lu.se), Department of Sociology, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

<sup>c</sup> ✉ [martin.joormann@kau.se](mailto:martin.joormann@kau.se), Department of Social and Psychological Studies, Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden

the conceptual framework that connects the different case studies included in the issue. Ultimately, our aim is to draw attention to the ways bureaucratic practices are a form of violence unto themselves in the lives of the forcibly displaced and, in the process, to open up the field of analysis.

Agreeing that there is no consistent experience of forced displacement (see, e.g., [Espiritu et al., 2022](#)), we hold that the commonality of "refugeeness" lies in the forced engagement with structures such as border regimes, legal frameworks, and different types of humanitarian and governmental interventions that aim to control, register, process, settle, or deport the forcibly displaced ([Jansen & Löfving, 2009](#)). These structures are intertwined with bureaucratic practices in various ways. People are subjected to multiple layers of bureaucracies around the world, but those who are labelled refugees or seek such a status are especially so due to their ambiguous relation to nation-states. In a formative article, [Malkki \(1992\)](#) outlines the ways refugees come to occupy a problematic position in the present world order since they are ideologically and politically constructed as being out of place and in liminal positions in relation to nation-states. In **The Origins of Totalitarianism**, [Arendt \(1951/1976\)](#) discusses that stateless people and refugees often find it difficult to obtain basic human rights since they are not "automatically" under the responsibility of any nation-state. In her words, this comes down to the struggle about "the right to have rights" (p. 298). Being out of place or lacking the right to have rights, however, does not entail a position that is outside the purview of the nation-state and its institutional apparatuses. In fact, it is fair to say that since citizenship and sedentarism have been normalized in most parts of the world, authorities tend to surveil and control people on the margins

more than others ([Gren, 2020](#)). As refugees are not seen as a proper or "natural" part of the nation-state, they are often considered a threat that undermines national coherence and stability, and as a result, the state's interest in controlling and governing them increases. By investigating the encounters between forced displacement and different bureaucratic processes, we bring about a much-needed element in the understanding of contemporary experiences of forced displacement. This special issue provides crucial analyses that extend and complicate our knowledge of global regimes of mobility. The articles provide in-depth understanding of complex realities including experiences of bureaucratic categorization and deterrence policies. Bureaucratic violence is an analytical concept that gives expression to underappreciated experiences of forced displacement. Bureaucratic violence as a concept, therefore, can extend critical analyses of state institutional practices of managing refugee populations.

By looking at the interaction between the forcibly displaced and the nation-states they are located in, the different contributions highlight that state institutions hinder, govern, and control in ways that are often detrimental to the well-being of refugees. The encounter between the forcibly displaced and nation-states is also a place to investigate human agency as refugees respond to institutional structures in creative ways that often include an adjustment in plans and trajectories. Thus, we go beyond the analysis of restrictive discourses, regulations, and practices (see, e.g., [Davies et al., 2017](#); [Vianelli, 2019](#)) and instead approach asylum systems, service provisions, and the implementation of policies as social phenomena that must be understood in the context of the bureaucratization of everyday life ([Graeber, 2015](#)). The bureaucratization

of everyday life leads to an “iron cage” of disenchanting living (Weber, 1921/1981), threatens democracy (Graeber, 2015), and, in the case of the forcibly displaced, intensifies their dehumanization.

This article proceeds as follows: in the next section, we discuss the ways violence is enacted within bureaucracies in general and with reference to forcibly displaced people in particular. We also explain the understanding of the multi-faceted nature of violence. We then discuss the ways bureaucratic violence is experienced by those subjected to it, highlighting that it is an integral feature of bureaucracies and its immoral nature as especially manifested in the desire to “kill” the other (Foucault, 2003). The following section underlines the framework of bureaucratic violence we wish to advance in this special issue. Finally, we end with an overview of the different contributions in this collection, summarizing their main contributions to the field.

## THE ENACTMENT OF VIOLENCE WITHIN BUREAUCRACIES

Bureaucracies are dynamic and interrelational spaces rather than merely stagnant structures that form everyday realities in multiple ways (Bear & Mathur, 2015; Bernstein & Mertz, 2011; Eldridge, 2018; Eldridge & Reinke, 2018; Gupta, 2012; Reinke, 2018). Bureaucratic violence reveals itself structurally in how we live and how we deal with bureaucracy. Our starting point for analyzing bureaucratic violence is that a clear differentiation between different types of violence is, in most empirical cases of forced displacement, neither analytically possible nor desirable. Instead, we need to think of ways of violence in its different forms as interrelated and enacted along a continuum. Violence can be enacted through discourse (as in those constructing non-deserving mi-

grants, criminality, or border and institutional crises). Violence can be enacted structurally and through policies (residency/citizenship based on access to different forms of capital, or temporary protection for refugees that prevents them from family reunification). Finally, violence can be enacted in direct action, which is often the area most focused upon when analyzing refugee experiences; here it is easy to envision multiple examples of physical violence performed at the border, by patrol officers, or in immigrant detention centres. By differentiating the different arenas where violence is enacted, we can begin to analyze the ways different forms of violence are interconnected, and also the ways the different spheres are themselves interconnected (e.g., discourses have a direct impact on policies, and both have a direct impact on actions; see Abdelhady, 2020).

Connecting research on bureaucracies with studies on the multiple dimensions of violence, scholars point to the ways violence is enacted and perpetuated through normalized administrative processes and decision-making (Eldridge, 2018; Eldridge & Reinke, 2018; Graeber, 2015; Gupta, 2012; Rajan, 2001; Tyner & Rice, 2016). These scholars draw attention to the ways violence can be enacted through several processes, including the absence of effective regulation and lack of transparency and emergency planning, along with bureaucratic rituals and routines. Similarly, delays, inaction, and abstruse paperwork that often relies on technocratic language are also different aspects of bureaucratic violence. Understanding the various ways bureaucratic violence is both **enacted** (e.g., by social workers) and **experienced** (e.g., by refugees) is an important aspect of analyzing its consequences (which we turn to in the next section).

For this special issue, our understanding of the ways bureaucratic violence as enacted with significant consequences for the everyday experiences of refugees has conceptual-theoretical and empirical-analytical implications. As evidenced in all articles of the issue, the nation-state is “bordered” (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019) not only towards its outside but also inside. Explaining the ways in which bordering is a process that differentiates between groups within a particular space, Yuval-Davis et al. (2019) emphasize that state borders are experienced in the everyday constructions of symbolic lines of inclusion and difference. These symbolic constructions have important material consequences. Bordering processes as experienced by migrants in everyday life can be exercised by different actors in various contexts. For instance, in the context of a welfare state like Sweden, as both Elsrud and Lundberg illustrate in their respective articles, “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky, 1980), including not only migration case officers but also social workers, decide on refugees’ access to asylum, housing, education, and health care. Thereby, they contribute to the internal bordering of the state (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). This bordering is done in a different but equally important way from when it is exercised by the police or immigration and customs officers who patrol the external border of the nation-state, as demonstrated in, for example, Martinez’s (this issue) article on the United States–Mexican border.

In more abstract terms, both Arendt (1969) and Schepers-Hughes and Bourgois (2004) emphasize a **violence continuum** where different forms of violence interconnect, mingle, and lead to one another. As a result, violence should not be understood merely in its physicality; it always includes attacks on people’s integrity, dignity, and sense of worth (Schepers-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004,

p. 1). As discussed in this special issue, bureaucracy demonstrates outcomes that span the violence continuum (Eldridge & Reinke, 2018; Norberg, 2022; Schepers-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004), which implies that forms of physical, structural (Farmer, 2004), symbolic (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2004), and slow violence (Nixon, 2011) may and often do overlap. In this issue, Martinez’s (this issue) analysis of the United States–Mexico border reveals that symbolic violence committed in the production of medicalized knowledge blends with the slow violence of waiting indefinitely, often bringing about physical violence in the repeated encounters with US border authorities and gang activities. Demonstrated in Elsrud’s (2023) article focusing on Afghani asylum seekers in Sweden, the physical violence experienced in Afghanistan and in the process of flight is followed by symbolic violence, which discursively constructs Afghans as bogus refugees who are not worthy of protection, and structural violence, which places untenable requirements on their ability to receive legal status and survive in Sweden. Survival in the face of bureaucratic violence, as the two case studies demonstrate, has long-term physical and mental effects, which often leave the affected refugees demoralized and without hope.

The acts of violence we are interested in are often enacted by politicians writing laws and bureaucrats implementing policies (e.g., Joormann, 2020; Lindberg, 2020). Yet these acts of violence may also be carried out by volunteers and NGO workers or even other migrants. For instance, Martinez (this issue) describes how fellow Central American migrants manage the list of people waiting to cross the United States–Mexican border and become implicated in enacting violence on other migrants on the border. By applying the concept of bureaucratic violence to experiences of forced displacement, we

also draw attention to encounters where state authorities and other large-scale yet non-state organizations, such as United Nations agencies and NGOs, exert bureaucratic control, engendering struggle, harm, and (sometimes physical) violence. Processes of decision-making, paperwork, meetings, and mass/social media discourses, as well as the inaction of state officials at times, are examples of the bureaucratic enactment of violence that diminish refugees' possibilities to live a dignified life (Eldridge & Reinke, 2018; Norberg, 2022). However, while inaction can play a significant role in many cases, bureaucratic violence is far from accidental, as we show in the next two sections.

## EXPERIENCES OF BUREAUCRATIC VIOLENCE

The pace and complexity of the bureaucratic processes we just mentioned exacerbate stress and anxiety, contribute to perpetual states of recovery, and compound feelings of loss, uncertainty, and helplessness. Bureaucratic violence engenders harm and cruelty in the everyday lives of recipients, even when the acts of violence themselves are not physical. Such violence is in line with various understandings of the role of bureaucracy in society. Weber (1921/1981) discussed the rationality of a well-functioning bureaucracy, which can promote the efficient administrative organization of societies, even though he also dreaded the expansion of bureaucratic structures, with the risk of developing into the constraints of the "iron cage" mentioned above. Since bureaucrats need to guarantee the equal treatment of all citizens—at least in theory and according to the formal regulations of contemporary nation-states—they have to strictly follow rules based on a certain version of rationality. In the different case studies presented in this special issue, most bureaucratic actors

seemingly reflect Weber's ideal type of bureaucratic institutions as they follow a certain version of rationality and rely on rules and regulations to carry out their work. At the same time, bureaucracy's references to rationality and efficiency often seem intentionally vague or even nonsensical (Graeber, 2015, p. 41), leading to a more violent reality than Weber theorized. Formalized rules and the resulting bureaucratic practices also leave little room for individualization and compassion, as Weber noted. Although there is indeed research that discusses bureaucratic work as negotiable and morally challenging (Bernstein & Mertz, 2011; Weiss & Gren, 2021), many social scientists have discussed the inherent ambiguity of bureaucracy and its capacity to harm its clients, not least through moral indifference (e.g., Bauman, 1989; du Gay, 2000, 2005; Eggebø, 2010; Fassin, 2013; Graham, 2003; Herzfeld, 1992; Huber & Munro, 2014; Kelly, 2012).

In the context of refugees' lives and experiences, the capacity of bureaucracies to harm often starts with dividing the forcibly displaced into groups of deserving and undeserving clients (see Holmes & Castañeda, 2016). As shown in the Swedish context, observed by Elsrud (this issue), ill-intended civil servants do not intend to promote equal treatment; to the contrary, their rationality is to intentionally create divisions and injustice between different categories of people. National bureaucracies always differentiate between citizens and noncitizens (or "nationals" and "foreigners") even though they might attempt to treat their respective minorities and migrant communities in fair and nonviolent ways.

In addition to the labelling of refugees, bureaucracies are often invested in producing knowledges and truths about the forcibly displaced in order to better govern them. The resulting forms of governance inten-

tionally trap refugees within the very bureaucratic structures ensuring control. In this special issue, the different case studies illustrate that such bureaucratic imaginings and reimaginings often produce experiences of violence in the lives of refugees. In a case study of the Swedish migration bureaucracy, [Lundberg \(this issue\)](#) demonstrates the intricate ways bureaucratic evaluations and decision-making are produced and how they result in trapping stateless Palestinians in a state of limbo, where they are unable to gain the right to stay in Sweden or return to their homeland. In another case study, [Bejan and Glynn \(2024\)](#) show that evaluations made during the COVID-19 pandemic had drastic effects on refugee groups in Greece, where they were denied access to services and their ability to exercise daily routine activities was limited. While both examples illustrate ways a state can exercise governance and control over an unwanted population, they also demonstrate that such effective form of discipline takes place through entrapment within a bureaucratic structure that is seemingly justified by rules and guidelines.

Entrapment within bureaucratic structures threatens individual freedoms as much as societal democratic structures. In *On Violence*, [Arendt \(1970\)](#) describes the expansion of bureaucracy in public life:

“In a fully developed bureaucracy there is nobody left with whom one could argue, to whom one could present grievances, on whom the pressures of power could be exerted. ... We have a tyranny without a tyrant” (p. 81).

That form of tyranny is one that commits acts of violence without a specific actor to take responsibility for these acts. To Arendt, violence is not necessarily physical but mostly manifests itself in the refusal of rights and freedoms, especially the right to appeal and resist the injustices of dominant structures. The different case studies presented in this is-

sue all demonstrate tyranny without a tyrant, as street-level bureaucrats and policy-makers often resort to existing laws, policies, or even discourses that absolve them from considering the harmful effects of their actions on the lives and well-being of the forcibly displaced. The forcibly displaced, having once lost the right to have rights ([Arendt, 1951/1976](#)) as they no longer belonged to a state that would grant them their human rights, become an easy target for the bureaucracies of many of the receiving governments, which continue denying rights without taking responsibility for such denials.

While violence tends to be considered an unintended consequence of bureaucratization (see, e.g., [Gupta, 2012](#); [Mathur, 2015](#)), it is our contention that the capacity to harm unwanted migrants is often an **intended** consequence of the bureaucratic structure (see, e.g., [Giansanti et al., 2022](#)). [Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois \(2004, p. 5\)](#) write that frequently, violent acts are not socially condemned but rather acceptable, supported, and understood as a right or duty. Most violence is seen as being in the service of conventional social, economic, and political norms. “Everyday violence encompasses the implicit, legitimate, and routinized forms of violence inherent in particular social, economic, and political formations,” argue [Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois \(p. 21\)](#). As such, the authors call for an understanding of violence as encompassing all controlling processes that assault basic human freedoms and individual or collective survival. What they call “peacetime crimes” exemplify such processes. The legalized violence of American border raids on people perceived as illegal aliens makes a certain kind of domestic peace possible while the simultaneously devaluing certain human lives (see also [Lins França & Ribeiro, this issue](#)). In a similar way, Swedish migration bureaucrats

can keep stateless but “failed” Palestinian asylum seekers in a legal limbo with very few rights over the span of many years, despite it being clearly impossible to deport them, exemplifying the desire to maintain societal harmony at the expense of other people’s lives (Lundberg, *this issue*). Similarly, Bejan and Glynn (2024) show that to protect the health and safety of the Greek population during the COVID-19 pandemic, authorities were justified in curtailing the rights and freedoms of asylum seekers and even disregarding their needs for health and safety.

Much of the violence described and analyzed in this special issue seems to be committed with the purpose of establishing “internal stability” and ensuring the ability of the state bureaucracy to serve its legitimate (or “natural”) members—that is, legal, native and/or non-racialized citizens. The case studies from Sweden and Greece demonstrate the ways the desire to maintain order and stability, or the national order of things (Malkki, 1995); all lead to the normalization of violence in the encounter with refugees. As Foucault (2003) explained, in order to defend society, the state acts preventively to protect the biological well-being of its “natural” citizens and therefore must “kill” the national other: “If you want to live, the other must die” (p. 255). Such killing of the other, however, is not perceived to be murder but is justified for the sake of national security. This form of biopower relies on a binary categorization between “us” (“legitimate citizens”) and “them” (“illegal immigrants,” “unqualified refugees,” or “bogus asylum seekers”); “they” are considered expendable and not worthy of living. A well-known example of such othering processes that render certain life expendable is the European Union’s external bordering, which results in thousands of deaths when migrants cross the Mediterranean to be allowed to file an

asylum application in Europe, as Bejan and Glynn (2024) demonstrate. For refugees who survive the perilous crossing but are then forced to wait in facilities like the infamous Moria camp on the Greek island of Lesbos, biopower employs violence to decide who can live and who is left to die (Joormann, 2015). As part of the workings of biopower, bureaucracies are in charge of protecting the “us” from “them” and therefore can justifiably expose the other to violence and, in certain cases, death.

### WHAT IS BUREAUCRATIC VIOLENCE? TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK

The concept of bureaucratic violence that we use in this special issue has its roots in post-colonial studies. Historically as well as in present colonial contexts, bureaucratic violence has been used to discipline or even eradicate colonized people and their cultures (e.g., Fanon, 2008, 1970/2014; see also Dwyer & Nettelbeck, 2018; Lewis & Mills, 2003). Based on work with Native Americans, the psychologist Duran (2006) discussed “colonial bureaucratic violence” as the various means through which institutions alienate, isolate, and oppress Native people. The purpose of colonialism and bureaucracy (on which colonialism depends) is to control all aspects of human life, as has become clear in the bureaucratization of schools, hospitals, municipalities, and social services. For example, Mitchell (1991) showed that the colonization of Egypt relied on large bureaucracies that institutionalized order, made the colonized comprehensible to colonial power, and maintained control over colonized bodies. In the process, institutions also ignore and renounce the significance of Indigenous cultures (see also the notions of epistemic violence in Spivak, 1990; and orientalism in Said, 1978). Immigration bureaucracies’ claims to being neutral, effective, rule-based,



and formal also lead to alienation, seclusion, and subjugation of the forcibly displaced (see, e.g., [Evans, 1997](#)).

Bureaucratic violence in its colonial and post-colonial forms often claim that the aim is to enlighten and help those subjects they pretend to serve. While colonial powers claimed to enlighten and help their colonial subjects by bringing them education, religion, and new social norms, post-colonial bureaucracies promise refugees resettlement, integration, and rights. Though we do not compare these two types of violence (colonial and post-colonial) as similar manifestations of power, we hold that the two types of bureaucratic violence operate through similar mechanisms. The tension between helping and controlling is exemplified by [Lins França and Ribeiro \(this issue\)](#) focusing on LGBTQI+ refugees in Spain and Brazil. Narratives about sexual orientation ensure asylum become a collective work involving not only the refugees but also humanitarian agents and psychologists. The gay men in [Lins França and Ribeiro's](#) study were advised by their helpers to underline their sexual orientation in ways that they were not totally comfortable with to adjust to the framework of migration laws. As [Fassin \(2015\)](#) concluded about the contemporary French state and its street-level bureaucrats, they "represent a dual dimension of order and benevolence, of coercion and integration" (p. 2). The concurrent benevolence and coercion described by [Fassin](#) can be traced in the colonial violence described above by Duran. The results, as the articles in this special issue show, are dehumanization and disregard of people's lives, replicating some characteristics of colonial violence.

In European, North American, and other Global North settings today, racialized refugees and other migrants are often fused with the colonial other of historical times

([Espiritu et al., 2022](#)). In addition, one of the consequences of post-colonialism is that many colonized and racialized subjects migrate to previous colonial states and their metropolises. Racial imaginations also shape who is considered to belong to the nation and, indirectly, who is considered worthy of assistance from authorities and other institutions (see, e.g., [Fox, 2012](#)). In her analysis of the governmentality of control and exclusion as practised by modern nation-states, [Sharma \(2020\)](#) stressed the racist foundations of the nation-state in its colonial and post-colonial manifestations. The racist logic of nation-states implies that hierarchical exclusion of migrants and refugees is central to the understandings and practices of sovereignty. In line with Sharma's argument, the bureaucracies in some of the case studies in this special issue, such as the post-colonial bureaucracy of Brazil, have inherited traits from former colonial powers. Many countries in the Global South do not see immigrant integration as a desirable outcome of mobility within or from their borders ([Abdelhady & Aly, 2022](#)). While states in the Global South enact policies that sometimes create conditions of precarity, they simultaneously prohibit the integration of immigrants by enforcing temporality and denying access to rights. As such, our analysis of bureaucratic violence is not confined to the Global North but to the very structure of the nation-state and its tools of governance.

The violence of bureaucratization also depends on "a near-total inequality of power between the bureaucratic structure and individuals" ([Graeber, 2015](#), pp. 59–60). When we interact with bureaucracy, we are normally aware that the relationship is unequal; we are at the whim of the bureaucrats. These power imbalances are even more acutely experienced by poor or marginal communities, constantly being exposed to surveillance,

monitoring, and auditing (Graeber, 2015). The global power imbalances that reflect the colonial past and much of present-day international and domestic politics (and conflicts) are experienced by the forcibly displaced in their everyday interactions with bureaucratic structures.

The inequality of power that is integral to bureaucratic violence is also reflected in the added work for those at the receiving end, or the clients of a particular bureaucracy. People who are subjected to the whims of bureaucracies find themselves doing the intricate work of imagination or “interpretative work” when trying to understand or predict the acts of the dominant party. Bureaucratic structures, and by extension their bureaucrats, do not need to engage in interpretative work—to try to communicate their rationales and processes to the objects of their action—and this can in itself be understood as a type of violence (see Galtung, 1990). Despite the irrational facets of bureaucracy discussed above, given the power imbalance, those who occupy the weaker position are left with the job of interpreting and uncovering the ways bureaucracies can be rational. For instance, when an asylum seeker receives a letter in a language they do not understand (e.g., Swedish, as in two of the articles in this issue), they are charged with the literal task of interpretation, since rationally, following the logic of the bureaucracy, the letter should be in Swedish (see Lundberg, this issue). The power imbalance between bureaucrats and asylum seekers without Swedish-language skills burdens the individuals or families in the subordinated position with the added responsibility of deciphering the rationality of the bureaucracy. It is always assumed that such rationality must exist somewhere but needs to be uncovered. Several articles in this special issue bring up examples of situations that are not visibly violent—for instance, writ-

ing a decision to reject an asylum application, asking people to wait in line, or requesting people to provide documents that are impossible to get hold of. Yet they provide striking examples of bureaucratic violence as they demonstrate the onus of interpretative work on behalf of the bureaucracy and the lack of openness and debate.

In egalitarian relationships, discretionary power would bring about discussion, justification, and negotiation, but none of these is deemed necessary in many bureaucratic settings (Graeber, 2015). Hence, in such settings that lack deliberation, bureaucratic violence is generated by a lack of openness and debate. A consequence of the inequality produced within bureaucracies and lack of grievance mechanisms is intentional harm and cruelty embedded within the bureaucratic structures themselves. In the study of Afghan refugees in Sweden (Elsrud, this issue), migration officers are found to be involved in “acts of cruelty” during their work, which puts into question the assumption that they can be morally indifferent when they seem to personally take a stance against a specific asylum seeker. Forcing people into situations of legal liminality while knowing the consequences of these actions (Lundberg, this issue) also cannot be understood as trained indifference but rather as an intentional form of action. In short, these contributions to this special issue reflect the earlier central point that bureaucracy is at times intentional in its relationship to violence.

## THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

Collectively, the articles in this issue investigate new manners of understanding both forced migration and bureaucratic violence in diverse political and cultural contexts. Martinez’s (this issue) article demonstrates the interconnectedness of different types

and acts of violence. [Martinez \(this issue\)](#) brings up examples of actors beyond the state and what we would normally consider bureaucrats who are involved in the bureaucratic violence against migrants at the United States–Mexican border. This article also clearly demonstrates how seemingly nonviolent acts, like making someone wait in a Mexican border city, can still be connected to physical and psychological injuries and death.

As [Arendt \(1976\)](#) underlined, stateless people are often subjected to extreme violence and remain unprotected since they do not have a state that can provide them with (access to) rights. This is discussed and problematized in [Lundberg's \(this issue\)](#) article on stateless Palestinians in extended limbo in Sweden. Here as in so many other empirical cases, power imbalance is a key feature of bureaucratic violence. Moreover, the weak, and in this case stateless, asylum seekers, are left to do the interpretive work to understand bureaucratic procedures and the decision-making of those in power. Case workers with power to decide on their cases can remain indifferent. The bureaucratic thinking (regardless of the bureaucrats' personal convictions) comes out as immoral and seems intent on keeping people out despite the seeming impossibility of deportation ([Lundberg, this issue](#)).

The connections between bureaucratic violence and bordering mechanisms are emphasized in several articles. In [Lins França & Ribeiro's](#) article, the connection between bureaucratic violence and borders is clearly exemplified by the in-between spaces of airports and border cities where migrants gather and wait. The narratives of inclusion/exclusion within asylum processes force some refugees to enact performances of sexual identity that are deemed credible by the bureaucracy.

Tiny acts of bureaucratic violence are discussed by [Elsrud \(2023\)](#) and concern many different areas in people's everyday lives. Not giving Afghani refugees access to housing, health care, or even leisure activities, such as playing football, hinder, in delicate ways, them from having a life. Within the Swedish migration system, the discretionary power of individuals has the effect of discouraging people and making them lose hope. Also, in the article by [Bejan and Glynn](#), tiny acts of bureaucratic violence during COVID-19, such as imposing a fine on bathers on a beach for not wearing a mask or curtailing the ability of service providers from helping refugees, work to ensure the exclusion and disempowerment of refugees.

Research on, with, and/or among forcibly displaced people is often entangled with many ethical dilemmas, and research on the violent experiences of refugees is even more so. As researchers producing knowledge about violence experienced by the forcibly displaced, it is important that we address these issues and discuss the difficulties encountered in conducting research. All scholars who contributed to this special issue have been in their research fields for a long time, allowing them to observe and elicit narratives in ways that are not complicit with the violence that they criticize in their analyses. A close knowledge of their interlocutors and an interest in understanding the complex aspects of the diverse life histories of forcibly displaced people, involving the eliciting of consent over time and in repeated and informal ways, give researchers the potential to undermine some of the power dynamics that are often hard to escape in the research process. More importantly, long-term engagement in the field, and the various informal interactions such engagement brings about, allows researchers to tap into narratives and experiences that may only surface over

time and that demonstrate the violence in many bureaucratic interactions that may not appear explicitly violent.

Provoked by witnessing bureaucratic violence, the researchers who contributed to this volume frequently engage in activism or voluntary work. Such engagements are also ways to gain access to people who may find it difficult to trust outsiders due to their own vulnerable positions. However, when working closely with activists, humanitarian workers, and aid organizations, we risk being less critical of these gatekeepers. Being identified by interlocutors as a humanitarian worker, not a researcher, is also a frequent and sometimes unavoidable concern. Can our research projects actually help anyone beyond raising awareness of their plights? Although these are important issues, this is not the focus of this special issue. It is, however, our hope that our writings will inspire others to further discuss similar theoretical and ethical concerns.

## ORCID

Nina Gren 

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8929-7239>

Dalia Abdelhady 

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9447-0390>

Martin Joormann 

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0373-3536>

## REFERENCES

- Abdelhady, D. (2020). Media constructions of the refugee crisis in Sweden: Institutions and the challenges of refugee governance. In D. Abdelhady, N. Gren, & M. Joormann (Eds.), *Refugees and the violence of welfare bureaucracies in northern Europe* (pp. 122–143). Manchester University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526146847.00015> plus 0.01pt minus 0.01pt
- Abdelhady, D., & Aly, R. (2022). Coming to and coming from the Middle East: The unfolding of diaspora. In D. Abdelhady & R. Aly (Eds.), *Routledge handbook on Middle Eastern diasporas* (pp. 1–19). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429266102>
- Abdelhady, D., Gren, N., & Joormann, M. (Eds.). (2020). *Refugees and the violence of welfare bureaucracies in northern Europe*. Manchester University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526146847>
- Arendt, H. (1969). Reflections on violence. *Journal of International Affairs*, 23(1), 1–35. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24356590?seq=1>
- Arendt, H. (1970). *On violence*. Harcourt.
- Arendt, H. (1976). *The origins of totalitarianism*. Harcourt. (Work originally published 1951).
- Bauman, Z. (1989). *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Cornell University Press.
- Bear, L., & Mathur, N. (2015). Introduction—Remaking the public good: A new anthropology of bureaucracy. *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, 33(1), 18–34. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ca.2015.330103>
- Bejan, R., & Glynn, T. (2024). “A total black hole”: Bureaucratic violence and refugees in Greece during COVID. *Refuge: Canada’s Journal on Refugees*, 39(2), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.41079>
- Bernstein, A., & Mertz, E. (2011). Introduction—Bureaucracy: Ethnography of the state in everyday life. *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 34(1), 6–10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1555-2934.2011.01135.x>
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. (2004). Symbolic violence. In N. Scheper-Hughes & P. Bourgois (Eds.), *Violence in war and peace: An anthology* (pp. 272–274). Blackwell Publishing.
- Davies, T., Isakjee, A., & Dhesi, S. (2017). Violent inaction: The necropolitical experience of refugees in Europe. *Antipode*, 49(5), 1263–1284. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12325>
- du Gay, P. (2000). *In praise of bureaucracy: Weber, organization, ethics*. Sage.
- du Gay, P. (Ed.). (2005). *The value of bureaucracy*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199275458.001.0001>
- Duran, E. (2006). *Healing the soul wound: Counseling with American Indians and other Native people*. Teachers College Press.
- Dwyer, P., & Nettelbeck, A. (Eds.). (2018). *Violence, colonialism and empire in the modern world*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62923-0>
- Engelbø, H. (2010). The problem of dependency: Immigration, gender, and the welfare state. *Social Politics*, 17(3), 295–322. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxq013>
- Eldridge, E. R. (2018). Administering violence through coal ash policies and practices. *Conflict and Society*, 4(1), 99–115. <https://doi.org/10.3167/arcs.2018.040109>
- Eldridge, E. R., & Reinke, A. J. (2018). Introduction: Ethnographic engagement with bureaucratic violence. *Conflict and Society*, 4, 94–99. <https://doi.org/10.3167/arcs.2018.040108>
- Elsrud, T. (2023). Fragmentation of hope through tiny acts of bureaucratic cruelty: Another kind of war on Afghan people seeking asylum in Sweden. *Refuge: Canada’s Journal on Refugees*, 39(2), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.41064>
- Espirito, Y. L., Duong, L., Vang, M., Bascara, V., Um, K., Sharif, L., & Hatton, N. (2022). *Departures: An introduction to critical refugee studies*. University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2vr8vfw>
- Evans, I. (1997). *Bureaucracy and race: Native administration in South Africa*. University of California Press. <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft2n39n7f2/>
- Fanon, F. (2008). *Black skin, white masks*. Grove Press.
- Fanon, F. (2014). *The wretched of the earth*. Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1970).
- Farmer, P. (2004). An anthropology of structural violence. *Current Anthropology*, 45(3), 305–325. <https://doi.org/10.1086/382250>

- Fassin, D. (2013). *Enforcing order: An ethnography of urban policing*. Polity.
- Fassin, D. (2015). Introduction: Governing precarity. In D. Fassin et al. (Ed.), *At the heart of the state: The moral world of institutions* (pp. 1–14). Pluto Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt183p5tb.6>
- Foucault, M. (2003). In M. Bertani & A. Fontana (Eds.), *Society must be defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*. Picador.
- Fox, C. (2012). *Three worlds of relief: Race, immigration, and the American welfare state from the progressive era to the New Deal*. Princeton University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7sq50>
- Galtung, J. (1990). Cultural violence. *Journal of Peace Research*, 27(3), 291–305. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/423472>
- Giansanti, E., Lindberg, A., & Joormann, M. (2022). The status of homelessness: Access to housing for asylum-seeking migrants as an instrument of migration control in Italy and Sweden. *Critical Social Policy*, 42(4), 586–606. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02610183221078437>
- Graeber, D. (2015). *The utopia of rules: On technology, stupidity, and the secret joys of bureaucracy*. Melville House.
- Graham, M. (2003). Emotional bureaucracies: Emotions, civil servants, and immigrants in the Swedish welfare state. *Ethos*, 30(3), 199–226. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3651871>
- Gren, N. (2020). Living bureaucratisation: Young Palestinian men encountering a Swedish introductory programme for refugees. In D. Abdelhady, N. Gren, & M. Joormann (Eds.), *Refugees and the violence of welfare bureaucracies in northern Europe* (pp. 161–179). Manchester University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526146847.00018>
- Gupta, A. (2012). *Red tape: Bureaucracy, structural violence, and poverty in India*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125jn9d>
- Herzfeld, M. (1992). *The social production of indifference: Exploring the symbolic roots of Western bureaucracy*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003135029>
- Holmes, S. M., & Castañeda, H. (2016). Representing the “European refugee crisis” in Germany and beyond: Deservingness and difference, life and death. *American Ethnologist*, 43(1), 12–24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12259>
- Huber, C., & Munro, I. (2014). “Moral distance” in organizations: An inquiry into ethical violence in the works of Kafka. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 124(2), 259–269. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24033267>
- Jansen, S., & Löfving, S. (Eds.). (2009). *Struggles for home: Violence, hope and the movement of people*. Berghahn Books. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qd582>
- Joormann, M. (2015). From Malmö to Lesbos: Tracing a trans-European network of voluntary work and activism for refugees. *Newsletter of the European Group for the Study of Deviance and Social Control*, 10, 12–18. <http://www.europeangroup.org/?q=node/97>
- Joormann, M. (2020). Social class, economic capital and the Swedish, German and Danish asylum systems. In D. Abdelhady, N. Gren, & M. Joormann (Eds.), *Refugees and the violence of welfare bureaucracies in northern Europe* (pp. 31–49). Manchester University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526146847.00009>
- Kelly, T. (2012). Sympathy and suspicion: Torture, asylum, and humanity. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 18(4), 753–768. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2012.01790.x>
- Lewis, R., & Mills, S. (Eds.). (2003). *Feminist postcolonial theory: A reader*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203825235>
- Lindberg, A. (2020). Minimum rights policies targeting people seeking protection in Denmark and Sweden. In D. Abdelhady, N. Gren, & M. Joormann (Eds.), *Refugees and the violence of welfare bureaucracies in northern Europe* (pp. 85–104). Manchester University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526146847.00012>
- Lins França, I. L., & Ribeiro, B. N. (2024). Multiple encounters: Queer asylum seekers and bureaucratic violence. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 39(2), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.41072>
- Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. Russell Sage Foundation. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7758/9781610447713>
- Lundberg, A. (2023). “They stopped the lives of others”: Stateless Palestinians facing bureaucratic violence in Sweden. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 39(2), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.41063>
- Malkki, L. (1992). National geographic: The rooting of peoples and the territorialization of national identity among scholars and refugees. *Cultural Anthropology*, 7(1), 24–44. <https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1992.7.1.02a00030>
- Malkki, L. H. (1995). Refugees and exile: From “refugee studies” to the national order of things. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24(1), 495–523. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.24.100195.002431>
- Malkki, L. H. (2015). *The need to help: The domestic arts of international humanitarianism*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125jptn>
- Martinez, C. (2023). Waiting in captivity: Slow borders, predatory bureaucracies, and the necrotemporality of asylum deterrence. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 39(2), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.41069>
- Mathur, N. (2015). “It’s a conspiracy theory and climate change”: Of beastly encounters and cervine disappearances in Himalayan India. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 5(1), 87–111. <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau5.1.005>
- Mitchell, T. (1991). *Colonising Egypt*. University of California Press. <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft587006k2/>
- Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2jbsgw>
- Norberg, I. (2022). Austerity as bureaucratic violence: Understanding the impact of (neoliberal) austerity on disabled people in Sweden. *Sociology*, 56(4), 655–672. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385211051210>
- Rajan, S. R. (2001). Toward a metaphysics of environmental violence: The case of the Bhopal gas disaster. In N. L. Peluso & M. Watts (Eds.), *Violent environments* (pp. 380–398). Cornell University Press.
- Reinke, A. J. (2018). The bureaucratic violence of alternative justice. *Conflict and Society*, 4(1), 135–150. <https://doi.org/10.3167/arcs.2018.040111>
- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
- Scheper-Hughes, N., & Bourgois, P. I. (Eds.). (2004). *Violence in war and peace: An anthology* (Vol. 5). Blackwell Publishers.
- Sharma, N. (2020). *Home rule: National sovereignty and the separation of natives and migrants*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smzfs>
- Spivak, G. (1990). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Grossberg & N. L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.

- Tyner, J. A., & Rice, S. (2016). To live and let die: Food, famine, and administrative violence in Democratic Kampuchea, 1975–1979. *Political Geography*, 52, 47–56. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2015.11.004>
- Vianelli, L. (2019, April 25). Warehousing asylum seekers: Salvini's attempt to dismantle the Italian reception system. *Border Criminologies Blog*. <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2019/04/warehousing>
- Weber, M. (1981). Bureaucracy. In G. Grusky & G. Miller (Eds.), *The sociology of organization* (pp. 7–39). New York: Free Press. (Original work published 1921).
- Weiss, N., & Gren, N. (2021). Mission impossible? The moral discomfort among Swedish and Norwegian welfare bureaucrats encountering refugees. *Nordisk Vårldsforskn- ing/Nordic Welfare Research*, 6(3), 192–203. <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2464-4161-2021-03-06>
- Yuval-Davis, N., Wemyss, G., & Cassidy, K. (2019). *Bordering. Polity*.



This open access work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

This license allows for non-commercial use, reproduction and adaptation of the material in any medium or format, with proper attribution.