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***City of refuge* or digital order? Refugee recognition and the digital governmentality of migration in the city**

**Abstract**

This paper analyses the digital governmentality of *the city of refuge*. It shows how digital infrastructures support refugees’ new life in the European city, while also normalising the conditionality of their recognition as humans and as citizens-in-the-making. Research in Athens, Berlin and London revealed the city as a vital but fierce space for refugees to claim, and sometimes find recognition that the nation often denies. A multimethod qualitative study with refugees and civil society actors at the aftermath of Europe’s “migration crisis” recorded urban cultures of hope for cities that are hospitable and open. Yet, it also recorded conditional welcoming that sets strict requirements for newcomers’ recognition as more than a category of external Others that need to prove their “right to have rights” (Arendt 1949). As shown, a digital order requires a *performed refugeeness* as precondition for recognition: that is, a swift move from abject vulnerability to resilient individualism.

**Keywords**: politics of recognition; digital citizenship; urban citizenship; refugees; migration; digital infrastructures

**Introduction**

This paper focusses on the cities of Athens, Berlin and London as destinations for refugees who seek, find or are being denied recognition as humans and as citizens-in-the-making. Drawing on fieldwork in these locations at the aftermath of Europe’s “migration crisis”, the discussion sets out to investigate what kind of life newcomers make in the city after their settlement and whether digital infrastructures, in their functional and performative dimensions, support or hinder their prospects for equitable and respected participation in Europe’s urban societies. In dialogue with Axel Honneth’s (1992, 2007) conceptualisation of recognition, the paper aims to understand whether recognition is digitally enhanced or restricted and whether digital opportunities for connection, employment and representation in the city challenge refugees’ restricted access to rights and to formal citizenship. The discussion starts by introducing the research project that informs the present enquiry, contextualising it within wider systems of migration and its urban governmentality. It then turns to conceptual debates that identify enactments of citizenship outside, beyond and towards formal citizenship – especially as addressed within literatures on digital and urban citizenship. Critically engaging with these literatures, the paper moves to a three-part empirical discussion that explores whether and how digitally-generated and digitally-enhanced enactments of citizenship in the city support refugees’ recognition. The empirical discussion starts with a set of examples showcasing occasions when refugee recognition is advanced through digital encounters and collaborations; it then moves to fieldwork findings that show how this recognition is often granted conditionally with implications for persistent inequalities in the city. The last part of the analysis identifies an urban digital order that enhances opportunities for recognition, but narrowly frames and conditions them to the rules of the market and of the city’s racial hierarchies. The paper concludes by arguing that this order demarcates *the city of refuge* as a welcoming destination for the few, while, at the same time, creating a deep ethico-political aporia among newcomers and those supporting them, who struggle to understand how recognition becomes (im-)possible for the many, beyond narrow and prescribed ways of (digitally) being and acting.

The paper draws on research conducted across the three European cities in the aftermath of Europe’s “migration crisis”, a crisis that is as much about large scale displacement, as it is of limited political will to engage with 21st century changes in transnational migration (De Genova 2015) and border porosity (Bauman 1998). This research set out to examine whether the city, through or against digital infrastructures, can become *a city of refuge*[[1]](#endnote-1) that is, one that receives newcomers but also recognises their agency and right to the city’s symbolic and material resources. This question has become urgent as hundreds of thousands of refugees are now settled across European cities and the prospects, or lack of rebuilding a normal life are crucial both for those arriving but also for the cities that are constituted through these arrivals[[2]](#endnote-2). Understanding whether newcomers can build a new life of security and dignity, and become citizens of the urban world they now occupy is at the heart of the present discussion. More particularly, the discussion examines the (digital) experiences refugees have in cities that enable or deny them recognition as humans and as citizens-in-the-making. It draws on research conducted on the material and digital streets (Lane 2018) of Athens, Berlin and London, because recognition is claimed and denied across the city and on its digital interfaces and in everyday interactions, not only at the level of governance. While there is significant research on disciplinary governance of migration in cities, there is much less on its digital governmentality, to which this paper aims to contribute.

**Digital connectivity, recognition and active citizenship**

The present interrogation starts by asking whether and how digital infrastructures support or hinder urban justice, especially by opening up spaces for claims, agency and voice for those arriving with little symbolic power and rights. I define digital infrastructures here as a complex socio-technical system consisting of two dimensions: a functional dimension (access, connectivity, use of technologies) and a performative dimension (engagement with technology for seeing and representing one’s self and others and enacting citizenship digitally)[[3]](#endnote-3). While drawing on empirical data associated with digital infrastructures’ both dimensions, their performative dimension is more central to the present enquiry. Inspired by Honneth’s conceptualisation of recognition outlined below, I argue that cities cannot tackle inequality and marginalised subjects cannot become citizens unless they are fully recognised – ontologically, legally, socio-culturally. Such recognition is not synonymous with formal citizenship rights. In fact, the city presents us with possibilities for justice that contest the denial of formal citizenship, which is the case for many migrants and refugees. As argued elsewhere (Harvey 2009; Isin 2002; Marcuse 2012; Georgiou 2013), the city constitutes a site where citizenship can be enacted and collectively shaped through engagement with strategies and technologies that define access to rights and recognition; in these definitions, active citizenship directly challenges the exclusionary system of formal citizenship, which, in its core conceptualisations and applications, ties rights and recognition to national identity and territorial belonging (Marshall 1950; Turner 2009). Against this formal exclusionary system of membership, Isin emphasises that citizenship can be enacted as claims, while “new actors articulate claims for justice through new sites that involve multiple and overlapping scales of rights and obligations” (2002: 370). The city can become such a site, precisely as it is a difference machine (Back and Sinha 2018; Hall et al. 2017; Isin 2002), bringing together people from everywhere and opening up opportunities for collective projects that advance recognition outside formal citizenship, while, at the same time becoming pathways to formal citizenship.

Such theorisations of urban citizenship increasingly converge with another literature of active citizenship, that of digital citizenship, emphasising that civic activity and agency are increasingly shaped digitally (Hintz et al. 2019). Internet and social media in particular often mediate political engagement and access to information about critical public matters – not least “the migration crisis”, campaigns for or against welcoming refugees, but also online interactions between different actors involved in civic life who would not otherwise “see” each other, i.e. citizens and refugees. Such initiatives, some of which are discussed in the next section, show how both those receiving and those arriving constitute themselves as citizens through digital acts and digitally-enhanced urban encounters (Alevizou 2019; Isin and Ruppert 2015; Zivi 2012) that set forward claims for just cities, cities that make recognition possible not only for the national citizen but for all urban subjects.

Digital citizenship literature has through time moved from its original optimism about digital democracy (Barlow 1996; Coleman and Blumler 2009) to critical, even pessimistic, responses to internet’s democratisation potential. The personal information individuals voluntary submit online and which is associated with identity and every element of life’s conduct has become data that benefits state and corporate surveillance (Van Dijck 2013), but also a valuable source of profit (Bigo et al. 2019; Couldry and Mejias 2018). As Arne Hintz *et al.* (2019) argue, the constant and vast collection of data has epistemological and ontological implications, including for the reconstitution of knowledge and subjectivity.

The role of digital infrastructures in the constitution of knowledge about who refugees are and the kinds of subjectivities they shape in the European city, are at the core of the present investigation. More precisely, this enquiry explores how digital opportunities and restrictions help us understand the governmentality of migration in the city. Critical literature on active citizenship is central to addressing this question, precisely because it moves beyond formal urban governance and, instead, examines how rules and orders surrounding migration and migrant lives and citizen subjectivities are digitally constituted and diffused in everyday life. However, this literature comes with a bias itself, as it assumes that a digital order threatens established individual freedoms. Since such freedoms have never been taken for granted for many people at the national and urban margins, this discussion considers the everyday role of digital infrastructures in revealing but also amplifying inequalities. For example, concerns about the normalisation of surveillance and of a monitoring culture (Hintz et al. 2019; Lyon 2017), or about decisions made on people’s right to work or consume based on the analysis of data they have no control over (Kitchin 2014), assume pre-existing freedoms that the urban or migrant subaltern, always over-surveilled and controlled (Hall et al. 1978; Mattern 2018), never enjoyed. Similarly, active citizenship research that has persistently privileged white middle-class subjects has underestimated how agentive acts of citizenship in the city have often promoted a neoliberal order by marginalising further the non-white, urban poor (e.g. Neighbourhood Watch) and advanced social cleansing (e.g. gentrification led by the “creative class”). Active citizenship thus is neither in itself liberating, nor could its critique be fully contained within concerns about the digital order of urban life. Rather, what is needed is a fuller understanding of the ways in which digital order ordinarily reproduces, accelerates and tackles pre-existing inequalities that divide the city, but also how this order is sensed and disrupted by those experiencing it.

It is at the juncture of these critiques that I here examine how active citizenship, enacted digitally in the city by both those receiving and those arriving, supports or denies refugees recognition. Recognition is fundamental to social justice, especially if understood at the juncture of philosophical arguments associated with Hannah Arendt’s (1949) emphasis on the universal need of the “right to have rights” (Arendt 1949), Fraser’s identification of the importance of autonomy and moral worth for all subjects’ self-realisation (Fraser and Honneth 2003) and Honneth’s emphasis on recognition as a mutual process where all subjects can recognise each other for their value (2007). Honneth has taken these claims further in arguing that recognition is a system of realisation and self-determination that all subjects need in order to develop capacities as citizens (1992). Three conditions need to be fulfilled for subjects to be fully recognised as equal respected participants in the society: self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem, emerging respectively through emotional-developmental, legal and social recognition (Honneth 1992, 2003). Honneth’s approach contributes to understanding recognition as necessary for subjects’ capacities to raise and defend claims as equal members of a community – as “fully fledged partner[s] in interaction” (1992, 191) rather than as subjects that need to converge and be assimilated into “the Same” – a singular way to conduct everyday life, socially, economically, communicatively – in order to gain rights. This theorisation inspires the present analysis of the ontological, legal and socio-cultural dimensions of recognition digitally enhanced and denied among participants. How much is this multileveled recognition that depends on respect of newcomers’ different biographies, capacities and trajectories reflected in an urban politics of reception that opens up (or closes down) refugees’ pathways to citizenship?

**Method**

The discussion draws on a 7-month intensive multimethod qualitative study in a neighbourhood of each of the three cities – Athens, Berlin and London. All three cities received and hosted refugees in the aftermath of the 2015 “migration crisis”, constituting desired or undesired destinations for many who have been uprooted from their homes in places that include but are not limited to Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, Eritrea and Somalia. We identified refugees in all cities based on individuals’ self-identification and not on their official status, as formal state recognition of refugee status is anything but inclusive and excludes many who have been uprooted as a result of violence, deprivation and exile. The three cities were chosen for their similarities and differences. For example they are all immersed in the effects of the global financial crisis and the advance of austerity politics, and are rooted in a Europe where rhetoric of hard borders and xenophobia are on the rise. At the same time, they are European capital cities receiving refugees; all three cities have in place some structures for refugee reception and advanced digital systems of connectivity; and as cities they belong to nation-states that offer some formal rights to newcomers, thus they bring together progressive politics for *the right to the city* (Harvey 2009) with national and European policies that respond to liberal conceptions of human rights. Their comparable differences include: the different numbers of refugees settling in each city; different levels of public investment in newcomers’ welfare and services; different access for newcomers to digital infrastructures and different political and media discourses with regard to refugee reception and refugee rights. While the diversity between cities and participants is fundamental to the analysis, the present discussion focusses on a key dimension – but not a holistic claim – of research findings: the restricted environment that materially and digitally enables and restricts refugees rights and recognition. Data analysed here was collected during creative workshops with newcomers and civil society actors in each city (where participants identified and discussed digital and material needs, resources, and obstacles that make/constrain the city of refuge); and during individual storytelling walks in the city with actors of *the city of refuge* (these were unstructured walking interviews between locations in the city that participants selected for their meanings to them).

**The fieldwork: Digital advances of recognition**

The city represents a space where the nation’s rigid system of citizenship that clearly separates those who have full recognition (citizens), temporary recognition (residents) or no recognition (undocumented migrants, nationals of other countries) becomes complicated. The privilege of national citizenship is reproduced, adjusted but also contested, especially in cities that are culturally diverse and where claims on the street complement or contest formal rights (Back and Sinha 2018; Roy and Ong 2011). Thus, in urban life, national authority is partly reaffirmed and partly challenged. This ambivalence of the city as space of recognition has been apparent in the aftermath of “the migration crisis” in Europe. Since the early days of refugee arrivals, a warm welcome has been expressed on the material and digital streets of Athens, Berlin and London, while widespread provision of material support by citizens and urban governments pointed to the possibility of a shared urban ethos of conviviality. Some of the most vibrant expressions of this ethos and the hope of a city recognising newcomers as citizens-in-the-making became manifested in collaborative, shared digital projects. The discussion reveals how projects promoting newcomers’ voice, visibility and creativity advance newcomers’ ontological, legal and socio-cultural recognition across digital landscapes of *the city of refuge*. While the city is constituted through complex technologies of governance – not least, infrastructures for surveillance and tracking of everyday conduct – digital collaborative projects present opportunities to understand the complexity and contradictions of technologies shaping the governance of migration, as shown below.

The first kind of digital communication discussed here relates to voice, as this is fundamental to ontological recognition: digital initiatives enabling, performing and representing newcomers’ voice in the city open up digital modalities for online and offline engagement between newcomers and those receiving them. Importantly, in those initiatives newcomers are the primary agents – they speak *with* and *to* those receiving them. Thus, their self-confidence and ontological recognition can arguably be advanced, while also countering the many experiences of dehumanisation they encountered before reaching the city. Berlin is an exemplary case – the city that received the largest number of refugees in Europe since 2015 (Katz et al. 2016), it swiftly established a culture of welcome and of private and public investment in digital initiatives with and for refugees. Since 2015, hundreds of digital projects have come to life, first welcoming newcomers and later transforming campaigns into digital networks for “integrating” refugees, not as receivers of help but as participants in a shared urban culture. Such collaborative initiatives proactively aimed to shift the unequal humanitarian relation between the German benefactor and the newcomer victim into collective projects of urban conviviality. Among the many examples, *Give something back to Berlin* represents a network that, as its name indicates, emphasises “community integration, intercultural dialogue and participation” and “working together for a better city” (<http://gsbtb.org/about> ). An online collaborative platform, which pre-existed 2015, but which gained prominence and more funding since, *Give something back to Berlin* identifies refugees and migrants as primary agents in urban encounters (but also identifies a responsibility they have as determined in its name: *Give something back to Berlin*). Thus, this is an initiative, which aims – and at least partly manages, as we were told by participants – to destabilise the discursive communicative hierarchy that orders citizens and non-citizens. Instead, newcomers become the main speakers – not hearers – of the story of the city, appearing agentive but also dynamic urban subjects that do not only have agency, but who also have responsibilities (which they can deliver and evidently, according to *Give something back to Berlin*’s communication strategy, do deliver, like other citizens). In practising but also representing this ethos of active digital citizenship with newcomers at its core, *Give something back to Berlin* feeds into imaginaries and acts of citizenship where newcomers can see themselves as agents of urban life and of urban change. Importantly, the practice of this ethos is largely generated and enacted digitally, through initiatives for the digital economy (e.g. coding classes, social enterprises); digital democracy (citizens’ training and information provision on public affairs) and creative projects where newcomers are represented as talented, productive, innovative citizens who can and do contribute to the city.

A second set of digital projects contributes to legal recognition – a necessary dimension of recognition and pathway to citizenship (Honneth 1992) – by offering training and access to employment. Recognised refugees[[4]](#endnote-4) can seek employment, which enables many to envision a secure future in the city (as the legal framework allows those earning certain income to apply for permanent residency). In both London and Berlin this hope was particularly prominent among young men, especially those with digital capabilities. During fieldwork, we heard from a number of young people – especially men – that they want to develop digital skills so that they can tap into the two cities’ digital economy. As many newcomers are aware of the disproportionate public and private investment in digital refugee skill-building and the promotion of digital work as a pathway to “integration”, they unsurprisingly turn their hope for employment to the digital economy. Speaking to us, a 20-year-old Syrian participant, Imad, described his plan to study computer programming, something he knows little about but a plan which makes him confident that he’ll succeed in the city’s fast-growing start-up economy. He is among thousands of newcomers who have joined the many coding schools set up for migrants and refugees in London and Berlin , aiming to enhance their chances for digital work. One example which started from the ground up is that of *Code your Future* in London. A coding school established by two computer engineers, it runs every Sunday in the buzzing environment of a borrowed start-up space and brings together volunteers from the digital sector and newcomers determined to find digital work. Teaching and learning advanced digital skills, talking about job opportunities and cooking together, those receiving and those arriving share their intense interest in digital work. As others, the case of *Code your Future* powerfully demonstrates how a pathway to legal recognition can be digitally supported, not by engaging people with technology through/as the category of “the refugee” but rather as partners in a collective project that advances individuals’ pre-existing interests and future employment prospects.

A third area of digital practice identified here as critical to recognition relates to digital opportunities to manifest, reflect and promote newcomers’ contribution to public culture. A number of initiatives on social media have enhanced opportunities for urban cultural encounters between diverse publics, constituted by newcomers and citizens alike; in all three countries, such opportunities for socio-cultural recognition are expressed in cultural and artistic initiatives that promote a civic culture that recognises newcomers as accomplished and talented members of national but also transnational creative communities. In most cases, social media become fundamental for newcomers to gain visibility and recognition based on those talents and achievements. For example, in Athens, the school Farzant Karmangar, established by Iranian refugees, advances intercultural collaboration through poetry, music and film nights, while also offering language lessons in Farsi, Greek and German. Located in downtown Athens, it has a material entity and contributes to the cultural life of the city, projecting difference as a way to share the city. While its main activities take place in a material space, its members and their contributions have gained prominence through their mediation and sharing culture of social media. While only a few attend the actual events, Facebook brings the voices of exilic poets to a wider public. As in the case of Farzant Karmangar, often it is not only social media users that are reminded of newcomers’ contribution but also the mainstream media, which have repeatedly picked up stories of Farzant Karmangar online and remediated them, multiplying the visibility of its creators’ socio-cultural contribution. Such initiatives project newcomers’ difference as a way for finding socio-cultural recognition – in such cases, refugees can see themselves as recognised not for being the same but for being valued through their difference.

**The fieldwork: Digital conditionality of recognition**

Narrating *the city of refuge* through these fields of practice reveals a range of digital pathways to recognition and citizenship in the city. Indeed, we repeatedly recorded the many – often ordinary and invisible – ways in which digital infrastructures support newcomers’ engagement with symbolic and material resources, networks of solidarity and a public imagination where those arriving and those receiving them share the city. In addition, we recorded policy makers and media representations that repeatedly and consistently celebrated digital economies’ role in “digital integration”. Yet, this story of digital promise is incomplete; the story of *the city of refuge* we encountered is also a story of digital order. In this second part of the discussion, I examine how the digital governmentality of refugee lives in the city delimits their access to rights and recognition: ontological, legal and socio-cultural dimensions of recognition are streamed into the material and digital street of the city to reaffirm an order of bodies and rights, an order that in many ways is constituted digitally.

I here refer to digital order, not because claims to recognition are fully constituted digitally, but because digital order partly generates, partly represents and party amplifies the requirements for newcomers’ recognition at the juncture of the digital and material street. Returning to the digital landscapes discussed above, this part of the analysis shows how the visible and successful journey to citizenship for the few also comes with invisible penalisation for many who do not meet certain conditions for recognition. The critical analysis of data that follows does not diminish the ethico-political significance of many of the initiatives discussed above and the associated agentive acts that disrupt digital order – such initiatives often make a huge difference to a sense of security and belonging that *the city of refuge* supports. Instead, this part of the discussion highlights how the digital governmentality of migration delimits *the city of refuge* and access to rights and recognition.

The first domain to return to is that of ontological recognition. As shown in the previous section, a whole set of digital initiatives has advanced ontological recognition for (some) newcomers, by enhancing spaces for voice, agency and representation in the city. More often than not, the voices heard on these spaces belong to resilient individuals who have made a new life out of a very difficult situation. Such (self-)representations directly challenge *perfomative refugeeness* of the abject victim by instead setting forward voices of determined agency. However, the determined resilience of certain voices digitally gaining prominence comes with the silencing of other voices, experiences and complexities. For example, none of the successful (privately and/or publicly funded) digital initiatives promoting conviviality included representations of fully veiled women or dissenting voices questioning ideals associated with the nation or the market. These voices only find space in politically radical digital domains, remaining at the margin of the digital as well as the material street of *the city of refuge*. Even more so, many participants revealed their anxiety with regard to the new kind of requirements of a *performative refugeeness* they feel they have to operate under, even when their voice is heard. A female participant whose voice is often heard in digital and other mediated spaces painfully explains how, even with a voice heard, the conditions of recognition remain strict. As she said, she has to hide all the pressures she faces in trying to make it in the city but also to manage all different requirements at home and in the street. “I put a poker face on”, she says. And explains how her often celebrated route to success feels like she constantly has to prove something. What does she have to prove?

That we are not what the media here portray us to be. This is something facing Syrians in particular. We are not criminals. We are not here to take money from the state. The media here is full of those portrayals. Germans also look around and think we are using their taxes to eat and hang out in restaurants and have fun. We need to show them that we are not here to waste their money. That we have escaped war. That we are enterprising and will stand on our two feet, support ourselves. I am most proud of the fact that I have been able to show this. To prove this.

Ontological recognition here comes with extreme effort but also at a cost. Ironically, even those who seem to be on the right pathway, meeting language requirements, advancing prospects for employment and declaring their commitment to neoliberal values (e.g. entrepreneurialism as above) are aware of the fragility of the promised rights, dignity and respect they aim at. For many others, this promise is even more distant. The coordinator of a refugee women’s centre in an East Berlin housing estate is well aware of the unrealistic requirements set to the women using its services to become digitally savvy and entrepreneurial – requirements that many are likely to fail to meet as citizens, requirements that also fail them as humans: “Slower is better. We need space and time for transition, to build that necessary peace, to have time to go back to ourselves”, she says identifying the humanity that the expectations for swift transformation often hide.

The second domain – legal recognition – comes with opportunities but it is a process torn by uncertainties and by shifting and growing requirements expressed differently among different constituencies. In London, for example, the Job Centre constitutes the core provider and collector of information about individual refugees, determining in many ways their future. Refugees have to report to the Job Centre, including their progress with finding employment, but also making sure that their digital profile does not risk their prospects for permanent residency in the future. What does this mean? As a number of participants in London told us, they need to demonstrate that they are willing to work and reduce as much as possible their dependence on the welfare state. This is, as we heard, what they are being told at the Job Centre and by social workers. A paradox drives the digital and material evidence on whether newcomers are entitled to long-term security and recognition: while their recognition as rightful refugees who could settle in London was determined through demonstrated vulnerability[[5]](#endnote-5), they swiftly have been asked to perform a competent individualism, taking full control over their lives. The knowledge of how to perform best within this narrow set of binary roles causes anxiety among many, keeping them in a state of suspension. As crucial services and processes that define whether this state of suspension will ever be overcome are digitally managed and surveilled, the agentive ability to resist suspension of lives and rights is diminished. More specifically, as legal recognition for secure long-term residency and a future in Europe is hidden behind data and digital systems on which refugees have little say or control, legal and political recognition remains an open-ended process of perpetual uncertainty. Its requirements for a swift change into the self-sufficient “good migrant” (Ticktin 2017) inevitably sets the bar high, with a few managing the expected *performative refugeeness* and many others being on a pathway to be denied rights. Ahmed, a young participant in London, is a resilient young person who goes out of his way to increase his prospects for recognition: he volunteered in Poundland[[6]](#endnote-6) just so that he could improve his English and develop some social connection in the city. He is also one of the very few people who delve outside their new urban neighbourhood, with Googlemaps at hand, Ahmed cycles to coding classes offered in a start-up hub that promises integration and progress. Another female participant of similar age, Fatima, looks at a very different future. Being a disabled girl with no mobility in her body, Fatima, is looked after by her mother and has been perpetually waiting for a tailored wheelchair that would allow her to leave the house. Neither she nor her carer mother can fully benefit, if at all, from resources that will support long-term rights. Always lying on a mattress on the floor, Fatima has her mobile phone next to her, the technology that connects her to the outside world; but that’s all the digital prospect she can count on.

Finally, socio-cultural recognition seems to be the most conditional of all. Socio-cultural recognition is increasingly governed through a disciplinary culture that spreads across the digital and the material street and which celebrates liberal values of diversity, human rights and western-centric humanitarianism but also (or precisely because of that) it also reaffirms a hierarchical system of recognition, where only certain kinds of subjects have the right to it; that is, subjects who have to prove they adhere to the rules of the market and of the nation-state. We came across individuals who have demonstrated incredible strength in overcoming obstacles and being on a pathway to recognition; we also heard many civil society actors and policy makers narrating incredible stories of success where individual newcomers made substantial contributions to education, arts and the digital economy. In fact, the creative, digital economy is the most common reference among participants who identify opportunities for socio-cultural recognition. For example, the Innovation Hub in Athens, with the support of major digital corporations and the US Embassy, organised one of the many refugee hackathons in Europe and the most prominent one in Athens, titled “Hack the camp”. Using the discourse of digital success and of the prospect of recognition through entrepreneurial achievements, the hackathon attracted enormous attention in social media and mass media. The winners used their own experiences as refugees to develop their innovations and their talent and entrepreneurship were warmly welcomed by the organisers, the media, and audiences. However, the promised success was short-lived for most. Subjected to a regime of European securitisation, their future has been primarily determined by their right to move in Europe, while the promise of success became fragile within the digital economy of intense competition and professional precarity. In this case, as in many hackathons celebrating refugees’ contributions, the digital economy becomes a site where socio-cultural difference is celebrated but where the conditions for its success are also reaffirmed; the digital economy in this case fits very neatly within a formal and informal vision of the transformed individual who can swiftly change positions from being vulnerable to becoming a fully integrated worker. The organisation and hierarchisation of desirable (and valuable for employability, visibility and participation) skills also divide and segregate newcomers along the basis of gender, age, class, education, ability. Those who are younger and with higher education, for example, have higher cultural capital and the ability to move fast and to see themselves recognised. The divides between young and old and between women and men are strikingly reproduced and expanded based on the framework of expectations – not least with young men becoming much more likely to succeed than women and older refugees, as we repeatedly observed.

Digital infrastructures’ and representations’ delimited potentials for recognition reveal how a digital order subverts the meaning and value of *the city of refuge*. More specifically, the disproportionate investment in digitally connected cities where start-ups and the geek economy thrive is applied here as everywhere else – the vision of a digital urban future celebrates diversity but does not recognise it. Furthermore, and even more so than in other cases in the city, the converged public and corporate digital vision and practice advance a digital order which reduces digital infrastructures to systems of surveillance and of sorting out deserving and undeserving subjects; in this order, the digital economy often appears as the panacea, the most promising pathway to “integration”. The digital project is visibly over-supported by the state and the private sector with investment on digital training and digital projects for and by refugees (which includes the German Federal Government; companies like Facebook and Microsoft in Berlin, the American Embassy in Athens, the many start-up coding schools in London and Berlin). Those who made it or dream of making it in the digital economy and any other element of the urban economy in such hopeful and successful ways are exceptions – they cannot but be and remain exceptional. This raises questions about what, if any kind of, recognition of difference expands beyond the exceptional, resilient subject.

**A hierarchical system of recognition**

Digital infrastructures expand spaces of visibility, even of recognition, but privilege certain subjects who can and who should be recognised against others. This conditionality, which is digitally expanded and normalised in everyday life, sets yet another set of obstacles that further divides the city. This conditionality in practice establishes a hierarchy of access to recognition, constituted through three pathways that assort people, allowing only the few to join a pathway to citizenship.

As shown at the beginning of the empirical discussion, recognition for refugees as humans and as citizens-in-the-making is possible for those who actively produce themselves in the city. This is the first pathway to recognition, opening up for the few who have proved their entrepreneurial abilities and their endurance within the neoliberal economy and racial order of the city. These are the people who have themselves learned how to culturally, socially and digitally “speak the language” of the neoliberal market and of a city where newcomers have to prove themselves to “natives” all the time; these are those individuals who, either because of age, class background, gender or personal traits, can perform to cultural norms but also become fluent in the national language; many of those individuals are those benefitting the digital economy through innovative practice, training and the ability to become incorporated in the neoliberal project.

There is a second pathway to recognition, much more often observed during fieldwork, which sets more complex and fundamental requirements for (potential) recognition. Many participants are granted conditional recognition – e.g. in the form of the temporary right to remain in the country – but their access to permanent security and rights that are comparable to the national citizen is still to be determined. These are the many people we encountered and who still have to prove themselves for being worthy of security and citizen rights: they are the ones that still need to learn to be entrepreneurial, that need to still “liberate” themselves from the welfare system and become independent and resilient but also compliant with the predetermined rules of the market and of the nation.

The third pathway in this hierarchical system of recognition is the one that is tied to failure, most likely a pathway where recognition will eventually be denied to many. This pathway is comparable to what Tim Christiaens (2018) refers to as exclusion as abandonment, the full denial of the possibility to actually gain rights as citizen in the long-run, by predetermining the failure of any such possibility early on. How does this occur? In two ways. First, even the fundamentals such as access to language and digital training are usually denied to many asylum seekers, as those providing the scarce resources are aware that many “categories” of people among those seeking those skills (depending on origin, age, etc.) will never get the right to remain. Thus, even networks of solidarity and support become engaged in this “assorting” of people, often without choice. Second, the requirement for recognition through successful results in integration and language tests as well as independence from welfare systems enable some but exclude most. Such requirements “weed out” those predetermined to fail, those who in two or three years, depending on status, will be fully denied any recognition and asked to leave.

**Conclusions: *City of refuge* versus digital order?**

Evidence collected on the digital and material streets of Athens, Berlin and London shows that *cities of refuge* emerge as hopeful but fragile ethico-political projects. Cities’ inherent openness and long histories of migration (De Genova 2015; Isin 2002; Mayer 2018; Roy and Ong 2011), alongside urban economies and established solidarity networks sometimes offer refugees recognition as humans and as citizens-in-the-making that the nation denies. In fact, this paper has shown how *the city of refuge* becomes possible through imaginaries and acts that open up opportunities for newcomers to speak with dignity and to gain access to life opportunities and to the city’s resources. It offered glimpses of refugees’ and civil society actors’ deep awareness of a digital order and their attempts to disrupt that order by mobilising collective networks and individual capacities to expand opportunities for recognition. But this paper has also shown the intense difficulties – deep ethico-political aporias – that refugees and civil society actors face in trying to disrupt an order that “assorts” subjects and, effectively, their access to rights through recognition. Aporia emerges among refugees as they see digital opportunities opening up pathways for recognition of some, while seeing others becoming wide shut, shuttering many newcomers’ hopes for accessing rights by developing their own, diverse capacities and trajectories. Similarly, civil society actors face their own predicament, with deep aporia: engaged in digital acts of citizenship that enhance certain newcomers’ opportunities for work, visibility and thus recognition, they also become implicated in a system of deepening inequalities that reinforce divides between those who have the right to have rights (Arendt 1949) and those who don’t.

These aporias remain unresolved as inequalities become disguised and hidden behind the prominence of digital narratives and practices of creative, resilient and entrepreneurial agency and images of the digitally savvy refugee. As many voices and practices converge within a digital utopianism that foresees citizenship via the digital promise, investment in a digital urban future becomes disproportionate. In practice, of course, digital networks constantly prove their enormous value by connecting refugees and liberating them from the state’s full control over their lives as they can autonomously connect with people and places in the city and beyond. At the same time, digital networks do not liberate them from state and corporate surveillance that might define their chances for long-term settlement and rights, they do not liberate them from the marketisation and fragmentation of urban life that demands compliance into the Same. Thus, old mechanisms of management and control of difference now become managed digitally in the city. As Richard Sennett was writing in 1970, the order of the city absorbs difference into the familiar, not unlike what Han recently wrote of *the digital* as the promotion of the violence of the Same, a violence which becomes invisible because of its positivity (2018).

In narrowly recognising difference and refugees’ capacities, histories and trajectories, the digital governmentality of migration appropriates but also obscures the core values of *the city of refuge*. *The city of refuge* is a city that is open, diverse, disordered, but also, and fundamentally, committed to urban justice. As *the city of refuge*’s most fundamental values become obscured within the digital governmentality of migration, the conditions set for refugees’ recognition become narrowly defined: instead of being recognised as equal participants (Honneth 1992) in the urban society, newcomers need to prove themselves, as one of our participants painfully noted, showing that they can swiftly move from a *performed refugeeness* of abject vulnerability to that of resilient individualism. The digital order thus hides many desires, needs and concerns that participants spoke about in the three cities but which hegemonic narratives and disproportionate investments in a digital urban future have no space for. And as many of them critically reflected upon, recognition remains conditional; its conditionality is subject to a new set of required performances: that of resilience against fragility; that of determination against consolidation; that of individual ambition against collective dissent.

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1. 1 *The city of refuge* first appears in Biblical times with reference to six cities that Judaic authorities identify as being able to offer asylum to those fleeing prosecution. The city of refuge reappears in contemporary imagination, for example in small-scale community projects, especially in the US and especially in association with churches and religious groups (e.g. <https://cityofrefugeatl.org>) or in popular culture, such as in Nick Cave’s song with the same title identifying changing Berlin in the 90s as a city of refuge. The most significant contemporary incarnation of the city of refuge is that of *the city of sanctuary*, a movement that spreads across boundaries and which constitutes a range of diverse ethico-political and policy commitments for the protection of migrants and refugees. This is a movement that is most prominent in the US with more than a hundred American cities having declared themselves *cities of sanctuary. The city of refuge* as applied here speaks to the history and politics of such collective commitment for the protection and recognition of migrants and refugees as rightful citizens of the city. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. 2 As the vast majority of newcomers currently have temporary right to stay, the conditions of their settlement at present will define whether they will have the right to stay in the future. While legislation across Europe varies, in Germany, Greece and the UK refugees or asylum seekers are granted temporary leave to remain (usually between two and three years). Those granted refugee status can eventually apply for permanent residency, a pathway to formal citizenship. In both Germany and the UK, being granted permanent residency depends on a combination of national language skills (set a high standard based on recent legislation in Germany), stable income and variations of resident/citizenship tests. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. 3 I here draw on STS conceptualisations of digital infrastructures emphasising that pipelines, networks and platforms have become basic everyday tools but also systems so deeply embedded in our lives that enable and contain possibilities for communication, connection and representation (cf. Plantin and Punathambekar 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. 4 Recognised refugees are those who are formally identified by the state as refugees based on the Geneva

Convention; depending on country they are granted a right to stay for 2 or 3 years. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. 5 The UK officially only agreed to honour its EU commitment to receive refugees through the Vulnerable Persons Programme of Resettlement. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. 6 Poundland is a chain of thrift shops. Job Centres encourage (and sometimes demand) job seekers to volunteer in the corporate sector until they find paid employment. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)