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# Impacts of political and social contexts on refugees' experiences: A comparison between Southeast Asian refugees arriving in France in the 70s and recent refugee migration

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## ABSTRACT

The influx of refugees into France since 2015 has been framed as a crisis and marked by a restrictive turn in arrival and asylum policies. By comparison, in the 1970s Southeast Asian refugees fleeing from communist regimes were welcomed warmly in the country. This article compares two in-depth case studies of refugees, analysed using the biographical policy evaluation method, to retrace how the policies and collective representations of these two different historical moments affect the experiences of refugees over time. It shows that policies play a significant role in shaping refugees' experiences in respect of their access to papers, housing, language courses and work, thus impacting, but not determining, their possibilities of reconstructing life in exile. The comparison also raises the question of how personal experiences of arrival, viewed as a rejection or a welcome, influence refugees' life courses.

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## Introduction

This article explores how policies and collective representations of two different historical moments affect the experience of refugees<sup>1</sup> over time. To do so, it compares the experiences of two refugees: Mohammad,<sup>2</sup> who arrived from Syria in 2014 just as what would be called the *migration crisis* began, and Khao, who arrived from Laos in 1975.

As the term *crisis* suggests, the rising numbers of refugees arriving in Europe in 2015 have been primarily treated as a historical exception.

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However, social science studies have increasingly pointed out that the causes of the crisis lie less in the migration itself than in the political response to it from the EU and its member states, accordingly, calling it a 'crisis of hospitality' (Akoka, Carlier, & Coussemaker, 2017a; Balch, 2016). Historically, there have been other significant refugee arrivals in Europe that were not constructed as crises, as in the case of the influx of South-East Asian refugees in the 1970s, a period during which they are considered to have been warmly welcomed. These two periods are also characterised by different collective representations<sup>3</sup> about *the refugee*, which have been analysed in detail in the literature (Agier, 2011).

Comparative studies of refugee reception have mainly focused on their structural and political dimensions to explain how societies deal with refugees at specific historical moments (Gatrell, 2017; Kushner, 2006).<sup>4</sup> They rarely consider how arrival policies are implemented on the ground or the perspectives of the refugees themselves. Similarly, the impact of collective representations on refugees' own experiences and positionings has remained underrated (for exceptions, see Eghdamian, 2017; Gissi, 2019; Marlowe, 2010). Here, we take the case of France as a starting point for exploring how seemingly contrasting arrival conditions shape refugees' biographies in the medium and long term.<sup>5</sup>

The biographical policy evaluation method, as detailed below, analyses biographical experiences as they interweave with their socio-political-historical context and is therefore an appropriate tool to perform historical comparison based on refugees' biographies, by bringing their subjective life experiences into the analysis. It also enables us to analyse policy effects in the *durée*, making visible the impact of different arrival contexts on biographies (Apitzsch, Inowlocki, & Kontos, 2008). This is a promising avenue for research on refugees, which is still dominated by studies that *either* focus on the asylum procedure (Kissoon, 2010; Liebling, Goodman, Burke, & Zasada, 2014; Murphy, Keogh, & Higgins, 2019) *or* analyse the integration processes of recognised refugees (FitzGerald & Arar, 2018; Poteet & Nourpanah, 2016), but which rarely consider these two biographical moments in tandem (Akoka, Clochard, & Tcholakova, 2017b).

## Methodology

The cases of Khao and Mohammad are part of broader samples of ethnographic observations and biographical interviews conducted with 20 Southeast Asian refugees who fled to France in the 70s and with 30

recently arrived refugees of different nationalities. For this article, we chose their biographical interviews to demonstrate the effects of arrival policies and collective representations over time for three particular reasons.

Firstly, as Laotian and Syrian refugees respectively, they represent groups of refugees which are described in the scientific literature as relatively legitimate in the light of their historical situations. While French civil society mobilised for the admission of Southeast Asian refugees, even in the contemporary restrictive context, Syrian refugees are regarded as relatively legitimate as they are fleeing a dictatorship par excellence (Akoka et al., 2017a, p. 82). Secondly, from an institutional perspective, their arrival trajectories are representative in the sense that they are marked by policies, actors and institutional arrangements which are characteristic of both periods of refugee reception (e.g. arrival policies, types of accommodation). Thirdly, they share similarities in their life courses. Khao and Mohammad both arrived in France as young men, separated from their core families, and possessing a fairly advanced educational background. The fact that they both experienced flight and arrived at a similarly young age is particularly important to compare and to understand how arrival conditions and collective representations have affected the (re)construction of their lives in France.

The biographical interviews with both men were conducted in French in 2018 and 2019 and fully transcribed. Our relationships with the interviewees can be described as friendly, even if, as discussed later, our first contact with Mohammad was fraught with tension. We remained in contact with both men after their interviews.

Using the method of biographical policy evaluation to understand how different arrival contexts affect refugees' experiences over time entails considering entangled objective and subjective factors. On the one hand, our aim is to retrace the arrival processes of our two interviewees in the light of historical contexts we reconstructed with the help of the literature. On the other hand, based on the interview material, we examine how the two men experienced their arrival processes in France, talk about these experiences, and explicitly reflect on certain policy measures. Thus, the general focus of the analysis is on what has happened in France. Previous biographical experiences are considered when they shed light on Khao and Mohammad's experiences in France.

In our analysis, we had to tackle the obvious challenge inherent in the fact that Khao and Mohammad recount their arrival in France, and the experiences that followed, at different moments in their life course:

while Khao is looking back on events that took place decades ago, Mohammed is reminiscing about quite recent episodes. This meant, for example, that elements that are missing or vague in Khao's interview must not be too quickly dismissed as meaningless at the time of his arrival. They must be analysed in the light of his present perspective, and with reference to the literature about the historical context of his arrival. This applies also to the case of Mohammad, being interviewed only four years after his arrival in France. His narration is dominated by some aspects related to his arrival conditions, which were very striking to him. Furthermore, Khao's temporal distance from his arrival experience allows him to draw deeper conclusions concerning its impact in the long term, in turn helping us to develop hypotheses for the evolution of Mohammad's case beyond the mid-term-perspective.

## Context situations

### *Contemporary policies*

This prevailing perception of refugees as a potential threat from which Europe tries to 'protect' itself (Pouly, 2016, p. 117) has led to stricter border policies at the European level, which in turn directly influences the means through which asylum seekers come to France. Due to the tendency to externalise 'border protection' to areas outside Europe (Morice & Rodier, 2005, pp. 58–61), crossing the EU's external border is becoming an increasingly dangerous endeavour (D'Halluin-Mabillot, E., 2012, p. 66). However, given the scarcity of resettlement programmes, 'illegal' entry into the European territory is one of the few remaining possibilities for individuals wishing to submit an asylum application (Luft, 2018, p. 287). Even after entering the EU, the mobility of refugees remains highly regulated (Bartel, Delcroix, & Pape, 2020). Operating based on the assumption that immigration is a *burden* that must be shouldered, the Dublin Agreement regulates which Member State is responsible for the asylum procedure.

The peak of the refugee crisis in Europe in 2015 did not lead to a noticeable increase in the number of asylum seekers in France. Between 2014 and 2018, only 13,384 Syrian refugees filed for asylum in France (OFPRA, 2014–2018).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the crisis discourse suggesting that 'too much' (Akoka, 2016) people were coming has also been very often heard in France. In the wake of a string of terrorist attacks in Europe, including in Paris in 2015, migration and security

policy discourses have been getting increasingly intertwined. As the sociologist Piero Galloro shows, in the discourses of some press outlets and politicians, the terms *migrant*, *refugee* and (Islamist) *terrorist* have come to be used more and more interchangeably. *Refugees* are singled out as the ‘others’ or the ‘non-us’, and have even become an object of ‘monstration’, as he calls it, combining various stigmas (Galloro, 2016, pp. 12–14). *Refugees* are not only portrayed as threatening a loss of control for the nation-state and its economy, but also as a threat to national security.

The so-called *théorie de l'appel d'air* has shaped French policy of refugee reception since the 1980s (D'Halluin-Mabillot, 2012, p. 92). This theory – which finds kinship with the *welfare magnet hypothesis* – draws on the image of the opportunistic *economic refugee*. The basic idea is that supposedly attractive welfare conditions offered by the country entices into applying for asylum people who stand no real chance of being granted protection status. While ‘refugees’ were previously able to enter France and settle quite easily, since the late 1980s those belonging to the emerging administrative category of *asylum seekers* must first prove their right to international protection through a procedure dominated by mistrust (Akoka, 2016, p. 7).

Theoretically, registered asylum seekers have the right to be granted shelter in specialised state accommodations, called CADA (*centres d'accueil pour demandeurs d'asile*), which offer both social and legal support. However, these centres have never offered enough beds to meet demand. As of 31 December 2015, only 37% of asylum seekers were accommodated in a CADA (Karoutchi, 2019). The lack of public accommodation places has been publicly decried since the 1990s, and the system denounced as *saturated* or *at the end of its tether*. Many asylum seekers are as a result directed to the general system for homeless, it too characterised by a chronic lack of places, leaving many with no option but to live on the streets (Kobelinsky, 2011, p. 42). Statistical studies have shown that those who must do without the legal support offered in the specialised accommodation system have a much lower chance of being granted asylum (D'Halluin-Mabillot, 2012, p. 97).

The asylum procedure in France (as experienced by Mohammad in 2014–2015) is characterised by the general absence of institutionalised participation opportunities. The main measure of French integration policy, the *Contrat d'Intégration Républicaine (CIR)*, which includes French lessons, takes effect only once a protection status is granted (cf. Law no. 2007-1631 of 20 November 2007). The opportunity to attend

French courses while an asylum application is pending depends to a large extent on the local non-profit system and on the amenities provided by the respective accommodations. Regarding work, asylum seekers are not allowed to work during the first nine months of the application process. Only then is it theoretically possible for them to apply for a provisional work permit. This interdiction can be traced back to a circular from 1991, ostensibly designed to discourage *false* asylum applications. As in the case of language teaching, the idea is that asylum seekers should 'not be given the means to integrate so that they can be more easily removed once their applications are refused' (Julien-Laferriere, 2016, p. 80).

## 1975

The Rise to power of the Communists in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos caused a substantial flight of nationals from these countries. While the majority of Vietnamese fled by sea (hence the term *boat-people*), Laotians and many Cambodians looked to Thailand. But the Thai government was not willing to offer permanent asylum. UNHCR then established and managed refugee camps in the border areas with Laos and Cambodia. Assisted by non-governmental organisations, it provided material assistance to these exiled populations but also legal protection by granting them an internationally valid refugee status, which would facilitate their reception by Western countries. Because of the scale of these events, a conference was held in Geneva in 1979 to consider a solution for these refugees. This led to the widespread reception of refugees by Western countries (Mignot, 2001, p. 381) through resettlement programmes.

To understand why Western governments took in so many refugees at a time when borders were closed, it is important to remember that the subject was eminently political. According to Guillou (2006, p. 4), there are four reasons for the momentum around these refugees:

- The mobilisation of the 'Indochina veterans', often anti-Communist.
- The mobilisation of other anti-Communists.
- The mass media coverage of the events, which caused a stir in France (in particular the shocking images of boat people fleeing).
- The generally positive opinion towards refugees as opposed to economic migrants.

According to Hassoun, in the 1980s, *humanitarian* aid also became a mobilising theme, succeeding demonstrations for political ideologies that young people now distrusted. Thus, the mobilisation of transnational or UN political organisations, humanitarian organisations, NGOs, human rights advocates and French intellectuals put pressure on governments to act on behalf of refugees. 'From this point of view, the migration of refugees from Southeast Asia inaugurated the period of "humanitarian causes" that was to mark the end of the century in the West' (Hassoun, 1997, p. 14).

In the end, according to statistics produced by UNHCR in 1995, among the 359,930 Laotian refugees who passed through Thai camps, 320,718 were resettled in Western countries and only 23,247 were repatriated to their countries of origin (Mignot, 2001, p. 382).

In France, according to an official FTDA<sup>7</sup> assessment cited by Hassoun, in 1992, 128,531 refugees from Southeast Asia were received, including 47,356 Cambodians, 45,495 Vietnamese and 35,680 Laotians. But Hassoun estimates that the total number is probably closer to 150,000–200,000 arrivals over this 15-year period (Hassoun, 1997, p. 14). According to UNHCR (2000, p. 99), between 1975 and 1995, the United States received 822,977 refugees through a similar resettlement programme (plus 130,000 refugees who came in as part of a 1975 evacuation programme (Kelly, 1986, p. 139)).

While the political context of the late Cold War years, as we have noted, contributed significantly to the positive image of South-East Asian refugees who were perceived as *victims* of Communist regimes (Fassin & Kobelinsky, 2012, p. 665; Meslin, 2011, p. 88), widespread stereotypes about the docility and obedience of *Asians* were also influential.

Thanks in part to these positive collective representations, South-East Asian refugees were received exceptionally well (Akoka & Spire, 2013). First, the implementation of resettlement programmes facilitated their arrival and helped to foster an image of honourability. Then in France, although they had to apply for individual asylum status like any other refugee, they were granted recognition of this status almost automatically, without having to provide evidence of being persecuted or of having feared for their lives (Meslin, 2006, p. 37).<sup>8</sup> They also benefited from an institutionalised reception system (Guillou, 2006, p. 5). Upon their arrival in Paris, after a brief stay in a reception centre in the greater Paris region, they were offered to join one of the temporary accommodation centres (CPH) scattered across the country. In these centres, refugees were provided with French language courses and support in their



daily activities. In addition, exceptional measures made it easier for them to be employed as soon as they arrived in France.<sup>9</sup>

Overall, unlike refugees today, regardless of their provenance, the positive and *legitimate* image of South-East Asian refugees contributed to them receiving a very good welcome. The large-scale reception and integration policies implemented for them simplified refugee status applications and facilitated access to French language learning, housing and employment.

## Comparison of the case studies

### *Fleeing to France and arrival narratives*

#### *Mohammad*

Mohammad was born in a large Syrian city in 1996. He remembers his childhood as idyllic, spent among the reassuring presence of the many members of his large family. As for many Syrians we interviewed, the outbreak of the Syrian war in 2012 dramatically disrupted his everyday life, and he began to live in a state of permanent. Upon graduating from high school in 2014, aged 18, he was faced with the prospect of military conscription. To avoid this, his father decided that Mohammad would leave Syria together with his uncle's family. The plan was for them to join another uncle, who had left Syria for political reasons 20 years before and had since been living in France. In Mohammad's recollection, this *injunction* to leave gave him a sense that his fate had been chosen for him by his family, and he was distressed at being unable to say goodbye to some of his friends.

Thus, Mohammad and his uncle's family left Syria for France in the autumn of 2014. 'I didn't come the regular way', Mohammad says. With the aid of smugglers, his family passed through multiple borders between Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya, before finally crossing the Mediterranean to reach Italy. In Italy, the police forced the family to have their fingerprints recorded under threat of incarceration, before letting them travel onwards to France – an additional obstacle on an already exhausting migration journey:

We just wanted to get to our destination and get this chapter over with, because we were so tired, since the trip had taken a month. We travelled across the sea, through the desert, all that ... it was so hard.

Upon finally arriving in a French city, the family (comprising Mohammad, his uncle, his wife and their five children) was temporarily

housed by the other uncle's family for a month, while they were seeking asylum. But in order to obtain an appointment at the prefecture, they had to wait in line from 4am for three days in a row:

I don't know what I can call this act from them, but it wasn't that nice. At least they could have made a tent so we could go inside, because it was really so cold.

Having eventually managed to make it into the building, they were initially denied from seeking asylum, and placed in the 'Dublin Procedure'. Since the family had entered France via Italy, the French authorities could in theory send the family back to Italy within the next six months. Only after this period had expired would France then permit them to apply for asylum. In the meantime, the family found shelter in a hotel under the emergency accommodation plan for the homeless. Mohammad does not go into detail about this accommodation situation, merely stating that the family felt *isolated* (being about an hour from downtown), and that it was difficult to be *too many* people in a *small room*.

A lingering uncertainty about the family's future and their uncertain status dominated Mohammad's account of his first experience in France, as is the case with most of our interviewees who fled to France in recent years. Mohammad's fear of deportation reached a climax when the prefecture sent them tickets to Italy:

Then we contacted a lawyer to help us get this business over with, because we were stuck at one point. We must finish this story. We would like to stay here. Well, they refused, we lost the case and then they sent us tickets to Italy. And then I thought, I actually had lost then, because we had tickets. They paid for us to go back. So ... when the lawyer, she saw this, she said, no, it's not possible. We have to make a new application. So, we did it again and then we won the case and as a result, the prefecture accepted our request.

Having filed an asylum application in the spring of 2015, the family was able to move to a CADA, an accommodation centre for asylum seekers, where for the first time since their arrival in France, they had a sense of *peace and quiet*. Interestingly, in Mohammad's narrative, the move to the CADA is presented as a more significant turning point for the family than their obtaining asylum. We found a similar representation in other narratives of recently arrived refugees, whose housing situation had been precarious for a long time. This shows that precarious living conditions during the arrival period are often recalled as particularly striking experiences.

After the initial difficulties, not only had their accommodation conditions clearly improved, but staying in France had finally become a

realistic option. Only a few months later, in the summer of 2015, Mohammad and his uncle's family were granted refugee status and received 10-year residence permits.

The strategy adopted by Mohammad's family, seeking refuge in a city where they could count on the help of an already established uncle, turned out to be successful: 'What is most important is that we have someone here, our uncle, he can help us find a job [...] or learn a new language [...] to make our lives easier.' This is particularly true in situations where institutionalised participation possibilities are impossible, such as before and during the asylum procedure, when the uncle provided both his brother and Mohammad with their first jobs. For Mohammad, working is a rare opportunity to put the rudiments of French that he acquired via YouTube into practice: 'So that too helped me improve in French, because it forced me to talk to the customers [...] because before I didn't have any direct relations with French people. I had Syrian friends who spoke Arabic.'

### **Khao**

Khao was among those who anticipated the arrival of the communists in Laos and had time to leave the country before it became really dangerous. He was born in a village about 60 kilometres from the capital, Vientiane. He comes from a modest background, but despite this attended the Vientiane High School, a formerly French high school where the language is still taught. During the school holidays, he worked for a tourism company whose boss was French. The man provided him with an invitation to carry out an internship in France in order to facilitate his departure from Laos by obtaining a French visa.

The youngest of many siblings, he is the only one who came to France. Khao was 20 when he left Laos in August 1975. He first went to Bangkok and applied for a visa at the French Embassy. When I asked him how he obtained it, he replied that he did not remember the process very well, but explained:

I put my cards on the table there [at the embassy]. I explained to them that my boss gave me this document but that I am a real political refugee. I don't know if they believed everything. They gave me a visa, but I think they doubted my story. They must have told themselves that even if this wasn't true, they'd still give me the visa to do the internship.

It is interesting to note that Khao speaks of being recognised by France as a 'real' refugee. Emphasis on his 'real' refugee status, as opposed to the

status of an ‘economic immigrant’, recurs in the discourses of our interviewees from this group. This token of legitimacy remains important to them after 40 years living in France, even though most have been citizens for many years.

After describing his situation at the embassy, Khao then enthusiastically recounted the welcome he received when he landed in Paris:

In Roissy, there was a welcoming committee for us, I think from the Red Cross, and from others. When I arrived, it was the Secours Catholique (SC) that welcomed us, but we were lots of Asians getting off that plane. There were at least two buses for those who were welcomed by the SC. Then we were housed in a home, you know, the YMCA homes in Paris. In my opinion, there were many organizations willing to welcome refugees from Southeast Asia at that time!

When I then asked him about the administrative formalities he had to complete in order to stay in France, he explained that the shelter staff took care of everything:

They were the ones who were claiming refugee status for us. [He pauses to think] I remember going to the prefecture to extend my residence permit. The first permit, the organization applied for us, too. We had nothing to do! [laughs] I didn’t stay in there very long: a month and a half or two months. Immediately, we were given the official refugee status documents.

As Khao insisted that he had *nothing to do*, the tone of his voice and his laughter suggested that he was aware of how lucky he was. Like many of our Southeast Asian interviewees, he knew about the current situation of asylum seekers and repeatedly acknowledged that he was *privileged*. However, after obtaining his refugee status, however easily and quickly, he fell into what he calls a *post-traumatic shock*:

You know, I left Laos but I didn’t know where I was going! I didn’t have plans in France. It was the unknown. What shocked me, plunged me into this state, was when the person in charge of the center came to see me, he gave me the refugee document and told me ‘you have refugee status and from now on, you no longer have the right to return home as long as the situation in your country does not change. And the countries bordering yours may refuse to welcome you’. It plunged me into despair. We didn’t know when we left Laos. So I realized: damn it, I won’t be able to see my parents or anyone else there! You know, it was getting cold ... We were taken to a refugee shelter in [a small town in northeastern France]. It was in an abandoned American military barracks. And there was, in the winter of 1975, at least a meter of snow there! In fact, everything you thought you knew about France through your studies, I had learned French already in primary school, and well ... you don’t know anything about it. It’s not even one percent of it. How can I put it ... It was

all in the imagination. And now you're in reality and everything's different. That is, the language, the mentality, the climate. That, with the climate and everything and with uprooting and exile, I personally had a hard time coping. It damaged me.

Not knowing when his country's situation would change, he said he felt *total despair*. His *psychological state* made him lose his command of the French language: *nothing came out anymore*. Khao says he did not get treatment and stayed like this for about five years.

### Comparison

The respective narratives of their arrivals in France show a significant gap in the way Mohammad and Khao felt welcomed. Khao was helped by a Frenchman while he was still in his country of origin and then by the French Embassy, which granted him a visa despite possible doubts about the reality of his situation. He was able to come to France via a direct flight and remembers a *reception committee* for Southeast Asian refugees even though they were *so many Asians* getting off the plane. According to his memories, many organisations came to *welcome* them. Mohammad's memories contrast sharply with this: he arrived *so tired*, having crossed many borders and been arrested in Italy; he considers that he did not reach his destination 'the regular way'. There was no welcoming committee for him, and he initially had to rely on relatives for support. Then, when he was put up in an emergency centre, he felt isolated, and lived with a nagging fear that France would deny him refugee status. This is a result of the Dublin procedure, which even before the asylum application process formally begins, extends uncertainty and makes it more difficult for individuals to plan for the future. Further disparities between their experiences emerge in the remainder of their narratives. Khao remembers that he was *given all the papers* without having to do anything. He was, in a way, allowed to remain on French territory unconditionally, while Mohammad had to hire a lawyer to deal with the paperwork and fought to the point where he felt like he was losing hope.

At this point in the story, Khao's experience takes an unexpected turn, while Mohammad is finally allowed to seek asylum in France and is therefore housed in CADA where he now feels a little *peace and quiet* at last. The stressful events of the previous months have made him perceive this precarious situation as reassuring. The process is reversed for Khao. Everything happened so quickly that he only fully grasped the

implications of his situation when he was granted refugee status. The ban on returning to his country until an unknown date and the discovery of an unknown country he ‘thought he knew’ plunged him into a state of psychological shock that lasted for five years. At that stage, even though Khao’s reception conditions facilitated his arrival and settlement, they did not spare him the suffering linked to the trauma of exile.

## Rebuilding a life

### *Mohammad*

Having been granted refugee status, Mohammad and his family moved to a *temporary accommodation centre* (CPH) for six months. This place is important to Mohammad, because it is there that he met a social worker, Brigitte. Beyond the support of his family in France and regular contacts with his father in Syria, Brigitte played a central role in Mohammad’s educational trajectory due in part to her local ties and knowledge.

While he was still studying in Syria, as protests grew in 2012, Mohammad and his best friend, had imagined themselves advocating for a more *democratic* Syria after their schooldays. In the autumn of 2015, Mohammad tried to pursue this plan from France and moved to Paris with the intention of studying law. For reasons he did not want to go into in detail in his interview (‘I was tricked [...] had no financial means, [...] no accommodation’), he returned after four weeks, disillusioned. He again accepted a job from his uncle and had to spend the year improving his French in order to try again to study at university. This decision was made while constantly consulting with Brigitte:

This woman, she really helped me. She’s always helping me, actually. It’s true that I’m no longer there [in the accommodation centre], but she’s a woman I really appreciate, because she respects the human being [in me]. She respects the fact that I am driven to study, and she helped me find my purpose. [...] At my age – actually I was 19, she said, no, you better study. You just finished high school, so I’d rather you study.

Brigitte helped Mohammad navigate the maze of academic curricula, assisted him with paperwork (recognition of his Syrian diploma, his application for a scholarship) and was there on his first day at university in the autumn of 2016, when he started studying computer and communication sciences. This was his first time coming into contact with French people of the same age:

I was also so afraid to meet new people I didn't know at all. And what would be the reaction of these students? For these French students who would see a foreigner or a Syrian, because [...] the media here when I arrived were talking about Syria, and they always made a connection between ISIS and Syria.

He found his studies to be a mixed experience. On the one hand, he recounts being able to make friends quickly, through which he gained an important support system at university. He describes this as a success, although he was forced to repeat his first academic year:

The first year, I didn't pass because of the language, but it wasn't really wasted, because during that year, I acquired a lot of information. I was able to connect with French people. I also managed to improve my French, because I worked a little bit to get my diploma. But I missed the mark, too bad.

On the other hand, especially in this early period, he was panicked at the thought of being unable to graduate for linguistic reasons:

I was in class, listening to the teachers, but I couldn't understand anything. It was ... sometimes I'd cry, and think, it's not possible. I have to succeed, but I can't, actually.

With respect to education, like many of our interviewees, Mohammad had the impression that his history has placed him in a situation of having to constantly catch up, having *lost* the time he would have invested into his studies under *normal* circumstances.

In the course of the interview, Mohammad repeatedly positioned himself against the negative collective representations of *refugees* and *Syria*. These were explicitly addressed at the very beginning of our meeting, as Mohammad began our conversation by pointing out that I would never have met him had he not been a refugee. This led to a discussion about the exclusionary effects of categorisations. Mohammad recounted everyday situations in which he was particularly disturbed by people mobilising the image of Syria as a backward developing country:

As I told you, Europeans and French people sometimes think that we are savages, that we come from a country that has nothing at all. [...] Even my friends sometimes in class, they think that Syria is too hot. There are lots of goats, there's lots of desert.

By giving short presentations about Syria, at university for instance, he has actively tried to counter this image and put forward a more positive vision of the country.

## Khao

Even though Khao did not highlight this fact himself, it is worth noting that the end of the five years of despair he experienced after his arrival to France coincided with his marriage to a French woman. During these five years, he very quickly found jobs as an unskilled worker thanks to Laotian friends. When asked if the social workers from the home where he was staying helped him to find work, he does not remember receiving any kind of assistance from the staff, his relationships with whom he described as *brief*. He adds that he did not need much assistance anyway because like his fellow refugees, he knew that they would have no difficulty finding work. He stayed only 3 or 4 months in that accommodation, and then followed his friends to other cities in search of work. Finally, in 1977, when he *felt ready* to study, being no longer *lost*, he decided to train to become a nurse, a profession he would pursue until retirement.

The surprising ease with which he dealt with bureaucracy after arriving in France was not limited to his obtaining refugee status. Here he describes the process of obtaining French nationality:

I got married in 1981 and a few months later we bought a small house in the countryside. One day, a gendarmerie van came. They told me 'here is a letter for you, you can use that to get your citizenship papers from the city court'. I didn't ask for anything! I was barely married, and it was automatic! That's it, that's how you can be privileged. There is no comparison with the way people are living their exile today.

While it is unlikely that Khao obtained French nationality without applying for it, in any case it seems that the process was straightforward for him, very much in contrast to the situation at present.

Khao divorced his first wife and married another French woman in 1988. It should be noted that mixed marriages have been more common among this first generation of South-East Asian refugees than among other immigrant groups. The positive image they conveyed certainly played a role in bringing these refugees closer into French society, whether in the context of marriage, or friendship more generally. Looking back, Khao thinks this image came about as the result of several distinct phenomena. First, he believes that France may have felt guilty for *abandoning* Laos after the Second World War, and that this generated a surge of generosity towards Laotian refugees. In addition, he thinks that the French 'saw in Asians an exceptional workforce, well, no, that's not the word, but handy, hardworking, uncomplaining'. In his view, this



image has changed little over time, but today he hears more and more racist remarks along the lines of 'you are not like us'. 'We never heard that in 1975', he concluded.

### **Comparison**

While Khao quickly gained full access to social rights and the labour market after arriving in France, for Mohammad, making plans, imagining a future, and attending university were only possible once he had been granted refugee status. Even then, he found himself struggling due to his difficulties with the French language and his fear of the prejudice held against Syrian Muslims. Although supported by relatives, he relied mainly on a social worker from the CPH, whose help he says was highly valuable. On the other hand, Khao never doubted that he would find a job. He does not remember getting any help from social workers in his accommodation, possibly because he and the other refugees would not have needed it anyway. Fellow Laotians secured him several temporary jobs before he undertook his nursing studies. His life course was facilitated by the economic context of France in the 1970s, and the positive image of Southeast Asian workers that held sway at the time of his arrival.

The collective representations of refugees in the 1970s and in 2015 have exerted a considerable influence upon Khao and Mohammad's accounts of their interactions with French people and their perceptions of their places in French society. In Mohammad's case, his constant fear of being dismissed as a terrorist or a savage, as a Syrian refugee, coloured his interactions with his fellow students and his everyday life. To him, every new contact represents a risk of stigmatisation. In Khao's account, on the other hand, this fear of rejection is less pronounced. It was precisely his marriage to a French woman that helped him to feel that he had properly settled in France, a position cemented by his easy access to French citizenship.

### **Conclusion**

The biographical analysis of Khao's and Mohammad's cases first shows how strongly refugees' life courses are shaped by the policies and collective representations that prevail in different historical contexts. They influence the way refugees arrive in a host country, whether by *illegal* means and at the risk of their lives, as in Mohammad's case, or in an

institutionally organised manner, as in Khao's case. They also influence the very first experiences of newcomers in France: Mohammad's case evidences the impact of policies that engender a state of constant uncertainty, as a result of the Dublin procedure, and of precarious living conditions that have accompanied these policy reforms. The case of Khao, on the other hand, shows that, in favourable political circumstances, refugees can be welcomed. Policies and collective representations shape the rebuilding of a life in exile by influencing the chances for individuals participate, through access to work, education or citizenship; by opening up or closing down opportunities depending on whether one is perceived as a legitimate citizen or as an unwelcome intruder.

Secondly, it is precisely the limits of the power of policy that become apparent in the case comparison, especially in the context of the painful experience of having to flee one's country. In this sense, the experiences of both refugees are similar. In Khao's case, good reception conditions could not fend off a long period of *psychological despair*. Mohammad, by contrast, seems to have had to go through the worst before eventually finding himself in a bearable situation. Despite major obstacles that can partly be interpreted as policy effects, he successfully managed to make positive plans for his future and to clear these hurdles. This was possible because of his own resources (e.g. his educational background and his relative ease in learning French), but also thanks to his family support network in France and the strong commitment of a social worker.

Thirdly, policies and the prevailing images of various groups of refugees shape not only their initial experiences in the host country but also their emotions and memories over the longer term. Despite his *psychological shock*, Khao has positive recollections of the circumstances of his arrival in France. He openly states that he was *privileged* and maintains the perception that he was welcomed warmly in France. His memories of arrival have become a valuable resource. In Mohammad's case, we do not yet have the necessary hindsight to assess the medium-term consequences of his very difficult arrival in France. Which traces will the experience of rejection leave in the long run, for example in situations of crisis or with regard to the transmission of the migration experience to the next generation?

## Notes

1. From an institutional perspective, the term 'refugee' is defined under international law by the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees. Determining who

belongs to this category is therefore also always a political question.

From a wider sociological and anthropological perspective, we use the term of refugee more broadly, to the empirical reality of people seeking refuge (Weiß, 2018).

2. The names of our interviewees have been anonymised.
3. We refer to “collective representations” as dominant imaginations circulating in the public sphere, relying on a distinction concerning categories of migration made by Crawley & Skleparis, 2018. In reference to Hear 2012, they singled out policy categories, vernacular categories and social science categories. Our analysis takes into account both policy categories (in the form of policy measures) and vernacular categories (in the form of collective representations).
4. The example of the Jewish refugees of the 1930s and 40s has been used as a point of comparison for the humanitarian crisis of 2015 since it began (Ahonen, 2018; Stone, 2018).
5. Both of us have an important experience of conducting empirical research in France. Putting together observations from our field work made us discover how differently the reception of refugees was organised in France at different historical moments which motivated us to go further in the historical comparison within the French case.
6. During the same period, France received about 8000 Syrian resettlement refugees between 2014 and 2018 (UNHCR, 2019).
7. France Terre d’Asile (FTDA) is an association that still supports asylum seekers to this day.
8. This exception should not lead to the conclusion that their asylum applications were unfounded. For a description of their reasons for seeking asylum, see Condominas and Pottier (1984).
9. For more detail on these measures, see Meslin (2017).

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