

## CHAPTER 1

# An Embedded Bureaography



This chapter presents the theoretical and methodological foundations of my research.<sup>1</sup> I describe how I developed an approach to the UNHCR that allowed me to grasp the significance of the organisation's activity worldwide during the 2000s, through a study of its internal functioning. I propose the term 'bureaography' to describe my research process. This term articulates the way in which I conceptualised the UNHCR as a bureaucratic structure operating on a planetary scale, constructed this international organisation as an object of analysis, studied it ethnographically and located it in a political configuration broader than the system of interstate relations.

My approach was informed by the reflections of Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). However, while these authors argue that the activity of international organisations can be understood by thinking of them as bureaucracies, I consider the bureaucracy of the UNHCR from a more empirical point of view, as concrete material that can form a basis for ethnographic analysis. Unlike states, whose machinery is not comprised solely of bureaucratic bodies and that govern large territories, international organisations are materialised primarily through their offices and their staff. Apart from its Executive Committee, which meets once a year in the Palace of Nations in Geneva in the presence of representatives of member states, at the time of my study the UNHCR consisted concretely of a body of around 7,000 employees and some 300 offices spread over 110 countries. The offices, in effect, constitute the UNHCR's 'territory', being the only spaces the organisation is free to shape at its discretion.

While it underscores the centrality of bureaucracy in my approach, the term 'bureaography' also states a position: a UN bureaucracy can be the subject of ethnographic study just as much as a community or a tribe. The term thus

highlights a specific theoretical approach in political anthropology: treating different forms of organisation and exercise of power in the same way and on an equal footing, whether they are centred on relationships between individuals or organised around offices dominated by computers and stacks of files. While several authors have already demonstrated the pertinence of an ethnographic approach to bureaucratic institutions (Abélès 1992; Latour 2010; Weller 2018), the use of the term *bureaography* rather than *ethnography* articulates the theoretical regeneration of anthropology, as it reorients a method initially developed to study remote ethnic groups towards familiar institutions.

Following an introductory discussion of the renewal of international organisation studies, I present my own research process in four stages.<sup>2</sup> I first explain how I ‘uninstituted’ the UNHCR and constituted its dispersed bureaucratic structure as a field. I then show how I defined the limits of my field and describe the process whereby I moved from localised observation to reflect on the organisation as a whole. Finally, I describe the essential process of epistemological distancing that enabled me to produce anthropological, rather than expert knowledge on the UNHCR.

## **The Regeneration and the Challenges of International Organisation Studies**

International organisation studies has been revitalised in recent years, at the level of both methods and themes. While international relations studies is certainly a rich field, from the point of view of a social scientist, it tends to be overly positivist and state-centred.<sup>3</sup> There is now a growing body of literature documenting the internal operation and forms of authority of international organisations, based on empirical research, discourse analysis and archive studies. Four issues of the journal *Critique Internationale*<sup>4</sup> testify to this trend, which arises in the context of a broader theoretical shift in the social sciences, with the development of tools to grasp international and large-scale objects of study (Burawoy 2000; Siméant-Germanos 2012).

These studies have helped to open the ‘black box’ of international organisations by situating them in a context more complex than the system of states. They reveal the actors who interact within them (officers, diplomats, experts, etc.), their careers (Ambrosetti and Buchet de Neuilly 2009; Pouliot 2006), and the practices and routines underpinning their operation (Abélès 2011; Bendix 2012). While historians shed light on the processes of institutionalisation (Karatani 2005; Kott 2011), sociologists reveal an open and porous institutional space, situated at the crossroads between national and international arenas, traversed by transnational circulations of ideas, norms and knowledges, a site of negotiation between diverse understandings and interests (Abélès

1995; Cling et al. 2011; Decorzant 2011; Kott 2011). International organisations are true bureaucratic entrepreneurs, and also modify their repertoires so as to establish their authority in response to changes in their environment (Fouilleux 2009; Nay 2012; Nay and Petiteville 2011). Focusing on the activity of these institutions, a number of studies emphasise the work of constructing public problems and large-scale dissemination of paradigms and codes of conduct (Andrijasevic and Walters 2010; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Fresia 2010; Lavenex 2016; Merlingen 2003; Revet 2009), and also consider how these norms are articulated in local contexts (Merry 2006; Murray Li 2007). Many studies emphasise the production of expert knowledge, as a source of legitimacy and intellectual influence (Boome and Seabrooke 2012; Littoz-Monnet 2017; Nay 2014) and of mechanisms of depoliticisation (Ferguson 1994; Müller 2013; Pécoud 2015).

These studies open up numerous avenues of research, but present three challenges to an empirical understanding of the activity of an international organisation. The first difficulty is to develop an understanding of the institution as both a singular, integrated entity and an arena, a complex space traversed by social, political and professional relations. Most studies are forced to choose between these two approaches – the institution-actor or the institution-arena. The second challenge is to define the field: how to design a study capable of examining bodies that operate on a planetary scale, whose activities have impact at many different levels? Is it possible to go beyond the choice between case study and comparison? A few ethnographic studies manage to achieve an encompassing vision of the organisation or its activity, working from strategic sites of power or circulating within the organisation (Atlani-Duhault 2005; Fresia 2018; Mosse 2005). A third challenge is to avoid falling under the intellectual sway of the organisation. International organisations produce particularly influential discourses and norms, and the researcher's proximity often goes hand in hand with a desire to influence the organisation's activity, and therefore to formulate more or less explicit recommendations or criticisms.

### **The UNHCR as an Object of Study: Uninstituting the Organisation**

Many studies of the UNHCR and refugee policy are conducted from within a state-centred and normative perspective. The two myths of state sovereignty (the absolute and final power that states are deemed to have within their jurisdiction) and of national and international law (as both a lens of understanding and a regulator of reality) ultimately structure their analytical frameworks. These studies naturalise, essentialise and reify the interstate system and international institutions, creating an implicit hypothesis from the existing order.

The UNHCR is thus seen as a homogeneous and monolithic actor, with defined outlines, and possessing its own rationality and coherence. The organisation ‘does’, ‘says’, ‘decides’, etc., as if it were reduced to its status as a moral person. Relatively disembodied, abstracted from any context, it seems to act like a *deus ex machina* from above, somewhere ‘up there’, over the top of states. The interstate character of the UNHCR forms the foundation for analysis of the way in which it works, and the 1951 Refugee Convention with its principle of nonrefoulement appears sufficient for explaining its activity. Internal operation is governed by the organisation’s statutes, administrative regulations, and hierarchical and operational relations between officers and offices.

Guglielmo Verdirame and Barbara Harrell-Bond’s assessment that ‘the rights of refugees have been violated by the UNHCR’ (2005: 332) is typical of this approach. It incorporates the assumption of the UNHCR as monolithic in its action (violating a person’s rights), which also essentialises ‘refugees’ as discernible persons who exist outside of the UNHCR’s activity and the application of law, and conceives of the law as a higher norm to which behaviours and phenomena should conform. As another example, a number of authors who have analysed the repatriation programmes managed by the UNHCR ask whether people’s return was *really voluntary* (see, for example, Barnett 2004). Here too, the ‘voluntary nature of return’ emerges as a sacred, universally valid principle to which programmes should conform, and a criterion on which to judge the substance of the UNHCR’s action.

From the outset of my field study, I found it difficult to reconcile this normative and positivist approach with what I was observing within the institution. As an organisation, the UNHCR only existed in the form of multiple offices and officers, among whom tensions regularly arose. These often derived from different understandings of the organisation’s priorities, and of how the principles of international law were to be interpreted and realised. How, then, was the institution UNHCR to be constructed as an empirically ‘studiable’ object?

It was in Michel Foucault’s theory of power that I found the tools to ‘blow apart’ the institution and work on the basis of what remained: the operation of its bureaucratic infrastructure. Foucault exhorts us to dejuridicise and deinstitutionalise our approach to politics (Foucault 1979; Abélès 2008):

It is this image that we must break free of, that is, of the theoretical privilege of law and sovereignty, if we wish to analyze power within the concrete historical framework of its operation. (Foucault 1979: 90)

The viewpoint is thus reversed: it is the state and its laws that are to be explained in terms of relations of power, not the other way around. The state and its laws are a ‘terminal form’ (Foucault 1979: 94) in which relations of power are crystallised. In this sense, compared with normative and state-centred ap-

proaches, the Foucauldian approach inverts the relationship between norms and practices: it is not the norm that determines or explains practices, but practices that make, unmake and modify the norm. Foucault contrasts the juridical view of politics with a conception of power as a ‘mode of action upon actions’, and with an analysis of positive mechanisms as they are played out and produced in the relations that run through societies and institutions. He invites us to grasp ‘the most immediate, most local power relations that are at work’ (1979: 97) by way of an ‘ascending’ process, starting from detailed analysis of the most infinitesimal mechanisms of power.

If power traverses institutions rather than being embodied in them, then the ethnographer is in a position to offer valuable insight, since they have the tools to go beyond official documents, and hence beyond the image of order and coherence that the organisation presents. Overturning the myths of state and law paves the way for uninstituting and disassembling the organisation. It then becomes possible to approach it in its actual form, that is, as a translocal bureaucracy that operates through offices, officers and procedures linked by clusters of practices and relations that can be observed locally. Indeed the UNHCR’s activity takes shape and acquires meaning in the density of relations (meetings, discussions, professional relationships, friendships and rivalries) and in the materiality of offices (meeting rooms, workspaces and corridors), texts (writing occupies much of employees’ time, whatever their role) and institutional procedures (for example, circulation of staff). The growing number of recent social science works that base their study of state institutions on observation of bureaucratic procedures, such as the production of documents (Dubois 2012; Hull 2012; Mosse 2005; Sharma and Gupta 2006; Shore and Wright 1997; Weller 2018), encouraged me to take this approach.

### **Fieldwork within a Dispersed Bureaucracy**

Once the UNHCR is constructed as an object open to ethnographic analysis, the question arises as to what kind of fieldwork can be contemplated within this dispersed bureaucracy. Challenges to the assumption of territory/culture isomorphism that long held sway in anthropology have shaken up the binary oppositions that underpinned the perception of the field (here/there, self/other). The question facing ethnographers today is the relevance and the heuristic potential of ethnographic research – a method based on prolonged immersion that calls for close-up observation – when the research context is not territorially circumscribed, and the increasingly interconnected world often constitutes the background of the phenomenon being studied (cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1997b). How, then, are large-scale phenomena, or processes and institutions with a scant territorial base, to be studied?

In response to these questions, George Marcus (1995) suggests multiplying sites of investigation in order to follow flows, objects and histories; others have shown that a well-organised localised study can be used to approach and examine large-scale phenomena. Michael Burawoy (2000, 2001), for example, proposes that globalisation can be grasped ethnographically by finding ways to observe, at the local level, connections (or disconnections) between global-level actors and processes. This enables him to portray globalisation as a phenomenon that is more contingent and less inexorable than is commonly imagined, emerging out of conflictual processes negotiated within a 'global chain' and between its 'nodes'.

My methodology draws from these two approaches and involves three phases.<sup>5</sup> The first was the entry into an institutional space, defined by features such as a professional habitus, specific frames of understanding of the world and an esprit de corps. Becoming integrated into this space required a phase of apprenticeship. I had, for example, to rapidly learn the meaning of acronyms: widely used, they form a language closed to anyone not integrated into the space of shared professional knowledge. The second phase was that of circulating within the institution. My main shift was the transfer from headquarters in Geneva to the Kabul office. As I spent the longest time there and was able to participate more fully in the institution's activities, this experience forms the core of my research. An internship in the Rome office prior to beginning my research, visits to Sub-Offices in Bamyan and Jalalabad and UNHCR project sites in Afghanistan, participating in meetings with other bodies, and more broadly my stay in Kabul as well as my periods of leave, when I lived and travelled as an 'expat', all form part of my fieldwork. This ended when I left the UNHCR, which constitutes the third and last phase.

My research took place in a situation of intense personal involvement that can be described as embedded ethnography. Following a degree in international relations, the UNHCR seemed a potential career prospect, since I saw UN and humanitarian values as close to my own. On the other hand, I also found the virulent criticism the organisation had been subject to since the 1990s troubling. My research project emerged out of a desire to understand the reach of the UNHCR's activity, on the basis of my own experience as an apprentice officer. Thus, during my fieldwork, the roles of apprentice UN officer and ethnologist merged, as the two projects (professional work experience and research study) developed in parallel, with true interest in each of them.

My status as an embedded observer enabled me to conduct a long ethnography within the institution without having constantly to negotiate access. The period of one year, traditionally recommended in anthropology handbooks, proved particularly apposite for studying the UNHCR, as its internal rhythm is determined by the financial year, and its programmes in Afghanistan are strongly influenced by changes of season. My superiors were very open to

the world of research and, as I was myself fully dedicated to my work, this dual status posed no problem for my colleagues. At the same time, it enabled me to produce a remarkable wealth of data: in addition to my field journals, where I recorded each evening what had happened during the day, I accumulated a number of work notebooks that enabled me to retrace my activities with precision, as well as all the documents I had worked on (applications for funding, reports, newsletters and pamphlets), most of them public documents whose history I knew in precise detail. Institutional activity in general leaves enormous numbers of written traces: emails, reports, statistics, certificates, etc. While I was unable to use some of these for reasons of confidentiality, they nevertheless enabled me to reconstruct key sequences, to retrace the positions of the various people involved, and always to retain a sense of the heterogeneity of the simultaneous activities that constitute the existence of the institution.

The counterpoint to this wealth of data was the limited control I had over the trajectory of my fieldwork. Given that I had had no choice in my posting to Kabul and that my working hours were taken up by the work, it was my role in the institution that determined the situations I was able to observe. I thus had to 'give myself over' to the institution and let go of planning my field study, formulating hypotheses in advance, regularly reviewing the data I had gathered and so on. This was manifested in a 'loose' observation that required subsequent lengthy and substantial cutting and weeding of the data. It was only once my fieldwork was over that I was able to define the precise boundaries of my research by selecting my data in such a way as to maximise their heuristic power. I did not conduct any formal, in-depth interviews. However, my presentation of myself as a young colleague planning doctoral research on the Afghan refugee regime regularly sparked discussions and debate with one or more colleagues in off-duty moments such as dinner or tea breaks. I would ask Afghan colleagues, for example, about their views on their work, on expatriates and on the UN, or expatriates what they thought about the UNHCR strategy in Afghanistan, the limits of the UNHCR activities, or the pleasures and challenges of being a UNHCR officer. In addition, occasional discussions with the senior managers of the Afghan Operation allowed me to keep track of the progress of the innovative strategy.

There were two aspects of my study that enabled me to make best use of the data gathered in Geneva and Kabul, and to link them together. First, the Desk in Geneva and the Kabul office were both pivotal to the work of the UNHCR at the time of my study, in the strategic planning and implementation of a flagship programme. In the mid-2000s, Afghans were still the largest group of refugees in the world, as they had been since the late 1970s.<sup>6</sup> Following the NATO intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, the 'Afghan operation' had become the largest in terms of both staff and budget, owing to its strategic importance. The Desk in Geneva linked offices in the field with all departments at headquarters, and

thus offered me an overview of all the internal actors involved in managing the project, from operations managers in the field to the Protection, Operations and Administrative Officers and the office of the High Commissioner. The Kabul office was the nerve centre of the intervention for the whole region, the crossover point in a high-volume circulation of personnel. I thus met a large number of officers posted to Sub-Offices, to neighbouring countries or at Headquarters, some of whom stayed in the building where I was living. As well as this access to the organisation, working in these two offices gave me an insider's view of the organisation's strategic thinking, thanks to my proximity with senior staff. I was thus able to follow internal debates in the two offices closely, as well as their relationships with the external actors with whom they were in contact.

Second, my transfer from Geneva to Kabul coincided with that of two staff members who had developed an innovative project. I was thus able to follow them from their posting in Geneva, where they created the strategy in 2003, to their appointment at the Kabul office, where they directed the 'Afghan operation' from 2007 to 2009. I decided to take this project as the central focus of my work. The project's originality lay in its recognition of mobility as an indispensable element of Afghans' subsistence, and an irreversible phenomenon. At a time when the UNHCR's 'traditional solutions' invariably involved sedentarisation, this strategy proposed integrating mobility into such solutions (UNHCR 2003a). To return to Marcus' suggestions, my study therefore follows at the same time persons (the two who created the strategy), an idea (the project itself) and a history (the trajectory of an innovative idea within the institution).

Tracking the design and implementation of this project enabled me first to organise my observations in such a way as to describe and analyse the UNHCR's bureaucracy at work: the powerful standardisation procedures (against which this tailor-made project had to forge its path), for example, or the perennial negotiation between the different perspectives that coexist within the organisation (which explain, among other things, the support and the resistance that the strategy encountered). Second, the project enabled me to consider the paradigms underlying the institution. Indeed, the obstacles that ultimately prevented this project from shifting the UNHCR's state-centred and nation-based view of the world helped me to reflect on how the organisation is integrated into the interstate system, preventing it from thinking, and thinking of itself, outside of this system.

## **From Localised Observation to an Encompassing Reflection**

Many studies of the UNHCR and refugee policy focus on a particular site (a camp, a reception counter, a border, a multilateral forum), on a national context and/or on a binary relationship (UNHCR/state(s), UNHCR/refugees,



state(s)/refugees). While this approach often produces detailed and insightful studies, the risk is that it overlooks the view of the whole and passes over the ways in which these sites, relationships and structures are articulated.

Some recent studies have endeavoured to develop a broader perspective, in order to give an account of the interactions between the multiple actors and political intentions that shape refugee policy. Some authors take a historical approach, revealing how particular UNHCR procedures have evolved over time and in space (Chimni 2004; Glasman 2017). Alexander Betts (2010b) reflects on the complexity of the international refugee regime through an analysis of how it overlaps with other international regimes, while a number of monographs written from within the context of a UNHCR intervention reveal the articulations between the UNHCR and other nonstate legal systems (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 1999; Fresia 2009a; Turner 2010). Other studies, based on multisite analysis of the UNHCR's interventions in different locations throughout the world, have revealed domination on a massive scale, particularly in terms of confining people in camps and containment (Agier 2011; Duffield 2008; Scheel and Ratfisch 2014; Valluy 2009). Marion Fresia (2018) also draws on her series of studies of the UNHCR to build up an efficient portrait of the organisation.

Getting a view of the whole was a central concern for me during both the gathering and the analysis of my data. I saw my fieldwork as a lens through which I might grasp a phenomenon that operates on a planetary scale (the bureaucratic structure of the UNHCR and how it functions) and examine its effects (effects that include, but are not limited to, those on displaced populations). The studies cited above strengthened my determination to consider the links between procedures implemented in different spaces, and to take into account the UNHCR's interactions with nonstate actors.

Michel Foucault's theory of power once again proved pertinent. The strength of this theory lies in its invitation to grasp power relations on the basis of the smallest details, while at the same time bearing in mind the need to develop a global perspective by setting local power relations in the context of broader strategic configurations. The aim is to trace the distribution of discrete elements in order to detect their 'economy', the 'order' in which they arise. Thus Foucault invites us to examine relations of power 'on the two levels of their tactical productivity ... and their strategical integration' (Foucault 1979: 102). The point is to consider the 'series of sequences' through which a 'local centre' of power is set within an 'over-all strategy' that generates 'comprehensive effects' (1979: 98–99). The concept of the apparatus is one of Foucault's significant contributions. To offer a somewhat schematic definition, the apparatus is a historical formation arising out of a heterogeneous set of elements (discourses, institutions, laws, knowledges, etc.) that play into and around one another in such a way as to generate comprehensive effects (Foucault 1994: 299–300). This conceptualisation is very apt for the bureaucracy of the UNHCR.

Understanding the UNHCR as a complex assemblage of heterogeneous elements drove me to locate the relations and practices I observed within the UNHCR apparatus, and, indeed, to use these relations and practices as a basis for examining the interplay between the heterogeneous elements of which it is composed. This interplay is not just a matter of hierarchical relations; it also takes place through the circulation of agents and knowledges, for example, and reveals major differences between offices and members of staff. In practical terms, I built this overview through a continuous process of placing my data in perspective (by cross-referencing them with one another and with those of other studies of the UNHCR) and comparing them (picking out, for example, the diversity of relations the UNHCR may have with a given interlocutor depending on the context, or how an officer's view changes in relation to their postings).

In this way, by comparing the Kabul, Tehran, Islamabad and Rome offices, which all have the same administrative status but very different structures, activities and views of the organisation's priorities, I came to understand that the UNHCR is shaped internally by the multiple contexts in which it operates: each office is immersed in a particular arena, within which it must establish the organisation's legitimacy and reputation, and ensure its activity is relevant and viable. It was by bringing to light the regional scale, and hence the selective application, of the new strategy – recognising the importance of mobility for Afghans, but only in Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan – that I was able to show to what extent this strategy was in fact consistent with the containment of asylum seekers that European countries – the UNHCR's main donors – were aiming for. Similarly, while many studies place the emphasis on refugee camps, I was able to recognise placement in camps as one among the wide range of procedures (including the award of refugee status and administrative surveillance of migrants) implemented by refugee policies.

While the concept of the apparatus enabled me to construct an encompassing understanding and analysis of the UNHCR's bureaucratic machinery, I drew on recent writings in political anthropology to also set the UNHCR apparatus in a context more complex than the system of relations between states. Rather than a quantitative conception of power, in which power is measured as if it were something homogeneous and quantifiable held by one or other actor, in a zero-sum game, these studies argue that the plurality of political authorities and modes of exercising power should be seen as a continuum (Bayart 2004; Fresia 2009b; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Hansen and Stepputat 2005; Hibou 1998; Randeria 2007; Sharma and Gupta 2006). Hansen and Stepputat define the set of heterogeneous forms of political organisation and holders of power that coexist in the world as 'overlapping sovereignties' (Hansen and Stepputat 2005). In doing so, they consider 'sovereign' power as a prerogative of all political authorities. Marc Abélès' detailed comparison (1995) of an Ethiopian

ethnic group, a French *département*<sup>7</sup> and the European Commission enables him to develop an anthropology of institutions that places the phenomenon of the state in perspective. The political space thus emerges as a composite, fragmented landscape, shaped by a constellation of actors involved in governing populations and territories; the point is then to reconstruct its topography. Taking this encompassing approach to power, the issue is not to understand who wields power (or who governs), but rather to grasp the modalities by which power is exercised within diverse configurations. These studies strive to grasp the articulations between projects and political authorities, in order to identify 'configurations of political authority' (Abélès 1995: 3) or 'processes of governance' (Sending and Neumann 2006).

I therefore strove systematically to situate the UNHCR in a broader political landscape. My aim was to identify the organisation's position within this landscape, to distinguish its particular mode of exerting its authority, and to understand the scope of its activity and how it is diffused, while at the same time making sense of its proper proportions. More specifically, I sought to think all the political authorities, governance projects and legal systems involved in the governance of Afghan migration together as a whole (states, of course, but also smugglers, NGOs, the Taliban, etc.). I wanted to analyse the particular way in which the UNHCR participates in this governance, and how its project articulates (or does not articulate) with those of the other actors involved. Do these actors further, facilitate, sidestep or resist the work of the UNHCR? This approach is far from self-evident, for the *shura* (Afghan local councils) and international organisations, the Taliban and NGOs are often studied by different disciplines, or in isolation, as if they belonged to different worlds.

In order to reconstruct this topography, I drew on all the interactions I was able to observe between UNHCR officers and external interlocutors; I also examined UNHCR documents and the discourse of UNHCR staff, paying attention to the understandings of actors who have a significant role in the governance of Afghan mobility. Through a range of experiences, some fortuitous and some sought-out, I was offered a number of viewpoints from outside the organisation, which helped me to frame it and the effects of its activity, and locate them within this complex context.<sup>8</sup>

Incorporating nonbureaucratic forms of power into the analysis confirms the major role that bureaucracy plays in the UNHCR's exercise of its power. But, more than this, it enables an understanding of the regime of which the UNHCR is the hub, and makes it possible to see how it is integrated into the interstate system. UNHCR officers see states as primary interlocutors, and state sovereignty as the absolute power with which the organisation's actions must comply. In addition to states, there are also nonstate actors involved in the international refugee regime: NGOs and experts, for example, who recognise

the UNHCR's authority (as either donor and/or expert) and help to further its activities (by implementing aid programmes or producing knowledge). By contrast, other nonstate actors remain external to the regime. Afghan local councils and tribal authorities, for example, are not treated as political interlocutors in their own right by the UNHCR staff, despite the fact that they play a major role in the subsistence and mobility of Afghans, and influence the effects of UNHCR programmes on the populations concerned, as key channels in the delivery of these programmes. Smuggling networks do not interact with the UNHCR bureaucracy and are rarely mentioned within the organisation. When they are, it is through the lens of national legal systems, as criminals who exploit displaced populations – despite the fact that during the 2000s, it was mainly these networks, rather than states, that enabled Afghans to be mobile.

### **The Embedded Ethnographer and the Institutional Episteme**

My status as a UNHCR employee resulted in intense social and intellectual immersion, leading to deep absorption of the institution's episteme. As a Reporting Officer, I was required to produce texts for external publication. I therefore had to learn to speak, write and think like a UNHCR official and in the name of the organisation. In addition, the UNHCR exerts a powerful intellectual hold over its staff, which goes hand in hand with socialisation and socioprofessional identity. This is particularly evident in 'hardship duty stations' such as the postings in Afghanistan, where the UNHCR expatriate staff remained enclosed in their own space throughout their time there. In this context, the organisation becomes the main social and affective referent. The UNHCR's conceptions and categories, their rationale and their terminology, thus acted on me like a magnet, paralysing analysis of the institution for a time.

How does the researcher detach themselves from a discursive space that is itself their subject? For example, I needed descriptive terms to help me analyse how the UNHCR understood the phenomenon of migration, and developed and applied labels such as 'refugee' and 'migrant'. But when I myself was referring to migratory flows, it was difficult, terminologically, to avoid these same labels. Putting the strategic reflection that takes place within the institution in perspective was also difficult. Initially, I was inclined to praise the innovative strategy I was studying, thus expressing a value judgement on this policy.<sup>9</sup>

While my profound absorption of the UNHCR worldview was partly due to my limited connection with academic contexts at the time of my fieldwork, detached assessment of the institutional episteme is an essential and often uncomfortable step in the process for any researcher embedded in an international organisation. Michael Barnett and David Mosse's reflections on their ethnographic studies (within the US mission at the UN and the British International

Development Agency respectively) show that for the insider-researcher, the production of sociological knowledge proceeds through recognition of the socially situated nature of their own ideas and professional practices – what Pierre Bourdieu called ‘participant objectivation’ (Bourdieu 2003). Barnett (1997) offers a retrospective description of the process that made him into a bureaucrat, and ultimately led him to take the reputation of the institution as the fundamental criterion for judging the UN’s interventions. Mosse (2006) recounts the social cost of the break with the epistemic community of which he was part, when the epistemological shift he made was seen as a threat by those who defended the institution’s thinking.

More generally, it is essential for any researcher studying international organisations or similar subjects to avoid intellectual co-optation, given the influence of the power-knowledge fields over which these organisations hold sway. This influence is due partly to the scale of the organisations’ intervention, and the fact that their cognitive frameworks are often embedded in hegemonic ones.<sup>10</sup> Studies of refugees and asylum policies demonstrate that such distancing is neither comfortable nor automatic.

As the lively debates between researchers about their relations with asylum organisations show (see, for example, van Hear 2012), relations between the academic world and the UNHCR are close, complex and at times ambiguous. Since its expansion in the 1980s, the UNHCR has stepped up its collaboration with researchers. The emergence of the discipline of refugee studies, accompanied by the establishment of research centres (such as the Refugee Studies Centre in Oxford) and journals (such as the *Journal of Refugee Studies*, the *International Journal of Refugee Law* and the *Forced Migration Review*), which the UNHCR helps to fund, is indicative in this regard. This field of study has enshrined the figure of the ‘refugee’, established by international law and refugee policy, as an academic discipline in its own right.

Collaborating with researchers enables institutional actors to produce a knowledge that informs, and even legitimises, their policies, can sometimes neutralise and absorb criticism, and may also build external alliances in favour of reformative goals (Fresia 2018). Researchers themselves often undertake to produce studies that are more or less explicitly addressed to the organisation. This may derive from an ethical commitment, the desire to produce useful knowledge, to introduce new questions into public debate, to propose reforms, to destabilise dominant representations or indeed to gain access to institutional contexts that would otherwise be inaccessible.

While it has to be recognised that the influence is mutual, and the literature places more emphasis on the risk of subordination and co-optation of researchers (Black 2001; Chimni 1998) than on the institutional reforms they have helped to drive (Fresia 2018), these studies nevertheless testify to the influence of conceptualisations propagated by the UNHCR in the contemporary

world. The growth of a body of knowledge (consultancy reports, programme evaluations, strategic papers, academic articles, etc.), situated to varying degrees in the same cognitive framework as the international government of refugees, naturalises the UNHCR's view of the world and gives it more power. This work demonstrates that anthropology can give us the tools (reflexivity, theory) to put the UNHCR's 'regime of truth' into perspective, to avoid intellectual co-optation and to produce a knowledge incommensurable with that of the institution, which can thus open up a new frame of analysis.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this chapter was published in the French journal *Critique internationale* in 2020: 'Bureaugraphier le HCR : approche empirique et englobante d'une organisation internationale', 88(3), 153–72, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-critique-internationale-2020-3-page-153.htm> (retrieved 12 April 2022).
2. These four stages are presented in logical rather than chronological order in order to give a clear account of the tools I used to conduct an empirically grounded analysis of the UNHCR. The research process was not so linear.
3. For a critical review of international relations literature, see Ambrosetti and Buchet de Neuilly (2009) and Nay and Petiteville (2011). Wanda Vrasti (2008) also notes how international relations studies has become more open to social science methods.
4. 'L'anthropologie des organisations internationales' (no. 54), 'Le changement dans les organisations internationales' (no. 53), 'Une autre approche de la mondialisation : socio-histoire des organisations internationales' (no. 52) and 'La (dé)politisation des organisations internationales' (no. 76).
5. In some of the literature, the global political space is conceptualised in terms of a vertical spatiality (see, for example, Nader 1972). According to this approach, a field study in the UNHCR would involve 'going up'. I did not adopt this approach, in order to avoid naturalising the spatiality of the system of relations between nation-states.
6. At the time of my fieldwork, Afghan refugees represented one-tenth of the persons under the UNHCR's responsibility.
7. *Département* – the administrative regions into which mainland France and its overseas territories are divided (translation).
8. These consisted of two years volunteering with Cimade (a migrant and refugee support NGO) in France, several sessions observing hearings at the French National Court for Asylum Rights, a visit to an Afghan refugee camp near the port of Patras in Greece and a conference of the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration in Cyprus.
9. For a more detailed account of the process of distancing that accompanied my socio-professional transition, see Scalettari (2019).
10. Liisa Malkki (1992) in particular has shown how the international refugee regime is rooted in the nation-state system, which propagates a sedentary, territorialised view of identities and constructs mobility as a problem.