

Internment Greece: Postcolonial Legacies and EU Migration Governance

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Greece, a state positioned as Europe's frontier and an enforcer of its borders, constitutes a critical site for analyzing how closed centres for migrants, with varied titles that cloud the partial and/or complete detention and deprivation of liberty, are situated within older logics of internment and racialization. The state systematically subjects displaced persons to internment, refoulement, and various forms of systemic violence in an effort to deter migration. This paper argues that, while Greece was not a traditional colonial power, it nonetheless reproduces and embodies colonial structures, functioning as a “crypto-colonial” project, a semi-periphery of the European Union, and an implementing frontier for the EU’s migration necropolitics. The evolution of these practices is particularly evident in the systematic expansion of internment. Since 2012, the construction and filling of detention centres have been funded by the EU. This was followed by the 2016 EU-Turkey joint statement and the subsequent geographical restriction of asylum seekers on the Eastern Aegean islands. Today, these practices culminate in the 2025 deprivation of liberty and the legislative denial of access to asylum, starting in Crete, which constitutes a direct violation of international law, including EU law itself. This progression illustrates how the legal and physical infrastructure of migration control has solidified, reflecting a persistent application of colonial methodologies in a contemporary European context.

This analysis is part of a broader post-doctoral research project that explores the connection between refugee policies and tourism, examining their mutual influence on a social, political, and public discourse level. The methodology involves ethnography, utilizing non-participant observation and interviews with experts in both the refugee sector and tourism in Crete. Additionally, it includes an analysis of legal texts and political rhetoric in a national and international context. Crete serves as a significant hub for this study due to its role as a crossroads for migration from Libya and as one of the most popular tourist destinations, with substantial migrant populations working in the primary, secondary, and tourism sectors.

From the pushbacks in the Aegean and Libyan seas to detention in makeshift camps and high-tech open prisons on Greek islands, the Greek state’s practices are a case study in the contemporary application of colonial methodologies and ideological structures. The legal measures and dehumanizing discourses of deservingness and “othering” reflect a fundamental disregard for human rights, echoing historical systems of power. By applying the theoretical

frameworks of Agier's "undesirables" (Agier, 2011), Mbembe's necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003), Herzfeld's crypto-colonialism (Herzfeld, 2002), and Quijano's coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000), this paper will demonstrate how a state at the margins of the EU can become a nexus for the reproduction of Western coloniality, revealing the deep-seated and enduring nature of these power structures in the twenty-first century.

Michael Herzfeld, concerning the historical connections of Greece with anthropological and historical inquiry, defines "cryptocolonialism" as the "curious" combination of national sovereignty and economic dependence with aggressive national culture (2002, p. 900), reinforcing binaries of othering. This crypto-colonial dynamic is most evident in Greece's relationship with the European Union. As a member state, Greece is nominally sovereign, yet its economic policies are dictated by powerful northern European partners and institutions, such as the European Central Bank. This economic dependence forces Greece to act as the EU's warden, implementing migration policies—including the very internment morphologies discussed in this paper—that are designed to protect the "European core" at the expense of its own moral and legal obligations. The aggressive nationalism that has accompanied this process, often articulated in discourses of "saving" Greece from outsiders, serves as a performative shield for this underlying dependence, making the state a living paradox of formal independence and effective subordination.

In his seminal 2004 essay, "Europe as Borderland," Étienne Balibar provides a vital framework for understanding the European Union as a system of "borderlands," that are a product of neocolonial practices. This paper will specifically apply this framework to the Greek space to argue that the Greek border is not merely a geographic line but a site where these processes are made manifest and where the EU's migration policies are enacted. The analysis of this "borderland" will reveal how the externalization of EU migration control transforms Greece into a political and social space defined by confinement and the control of mobility. Balibar argues that the "sacralization" and "absolutization" of the border transform it into a property of the state, making its protection a matter of national security (p.193). This perspective is particularly relevant to the paradoxical nature of the European project, where some borders are reinforced (the external ones, against migration and trafficking), while others are weakened (internal borders, through the Schengen Agreement).

Building upon the analysis of Greece as a crypto-colonial borderland, Michel Agier's *Borderlands* (2016) complements the present ethnographic study, as the scholar expands the definition of the borderland, marking it as a prolonged space and time where individuals learn the "ways of the world and other people" (p. 9). Drawing on examples from Greece, France, Libya, and Italy, Agier argues that this borderland becomes a crucial point of reference for people on the move who do not find an immediate place within the societies or cities they wish to reach. For Agier, the borderland is more than a geographical location; it is a place of transition where populations deemed "undesirable" (2011) are subjected to specific morphologies of confinement. This process is a key aspect of how "humanitarian government" operates. While seemingly benevolent, this form of governance controls life by simultaneously offering aid and preparing people for a specific, subordinate role within a racialized and crypto-colonial hierarchy. The Greek

camp, therefore, is not merely a holding pen but a neocolonial training ground where the bodies and subjectivities of migrants are disciplined to fit the needs of the European core, revealing the underlying power structures that govern their lives and trajectories.

Beyond the physical structures and morphologies of confinement, the Greek border operates as a space of necropolitics, a concept developed by Achille Mbembe in his seminal 2003 essay “Necropolitics.” This power to decide who can live and who must die is applied at the border and reveals a stark hierarchy of human value. The camp, and the broader humanitarian border, are not just sites of control but of sovereign power’s ultimate expression: the right to let die. The recurrent drownings in the Aegean, the violent practice of pushbacks and the recent revocation of the right to asylum are not external failures of the system; they are its fundamental, necropolitical outcomes.

This logic, born from the legacy of the postcolony, is intricately tied to the paradox of the humanitarian border. As Pallister-Wilkins argues in her monograph, *Humanitarian Borders: Unequal Mobility and Saving Lives* (2022), the performance of “care” can precede or even mask a system of necropolitical abandonment. The provision of food and shelter in a camp, for instance, appears as humanitarian aid, yet it is a form of control that confines populations to a space where they remain vulnerable and exposed to harm. This “sovereign capture” transforms humanitarianism from a universal ethical practice into a tool of governance that determines which lives are grievable and which are not. By maintaining a state of precariousness and bare life, the humanitarian border becomes a death-world, where the very act of surviving is a constant struggle against a system designed to deter and dehumanize. This process is the very essence of cryptocolonialism in the European context, where a humanitarian façade conceals the violent, racialized governance of populations for the benefit of the core.

The paper, based on the early findings of the postdoctoral research argues that the theoretical frameworks of necropolitics and coloniality are not abstract concepts but are concretely manifested in the nexus between refugee policies and tourism on the island of Crete. Through an ethnographic methodology, including non-participant observation and interviews with professionals in both the refugee and tourism sectors, we analyze the on-the-ground realities shaped by legal frameworks and political rhetoric. Crete serves as a crucial case study due to its dual identity as both a transit hub for migration from Libya and a major tourist destination, with substantial migrant populations working in key economic sectors. Recent proposals for migrant detention centers on the island of Crete have been met with fierce local opposition, not on humanitarian grounds, but due to a perceived threat to the island's tourism-based economy. The research investigates the paradoxes inherent in this dynamic, namely the “logic of invisibility,” where local authorities express concern over potential impacts on tourism while simultaneously relying on migrant labor. This analysis demonstrates how the securitization of the Greek space, intended to project an image of safety for tourists, can create a reality of insecurity for migrants through detention in temporary holding facilities, legal hurdles to asylum access, and racist public narratives that inflame a purported “invasion”. Ultimately, this work argues that the coexistence of a “humanitarianism of rescue” with the violent practice of pushbacks (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022)

exemplifies how the overarching theoretical models of necropolitics and cryptocolonialism are embodied in the everyday practices of a borderland.

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