15 (Un)Deserving refugees

Contested access to the ‘community of value’ in Italy

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Introduction

September 2018, the new Government in Italy has been in office for a few months. Matteo Salvini, the Minister of Internal Affairs and a representative of the populist and racist Lega Party, is drafting his Immigration and Security Decree. Meanwhile, in the rich and Catholic city of Bergamo, the center-left administration inaugurates the Integration Academy. Strongly promoted by the Major and the local Caritas, and managed by social cooperatives already involved in reception activities, the Academy hosts 30 asylum seekers who voluntarily enter a strict ‘military’ program: wake-up calls at 6:30, no cell phones during the day, no Wi-Fi after 11 pm, and blue uniforms inscribed with ‘Integration Academy. Thanks Bergamo!’ Volunteer work, such as collecting garbage around the city, is compulsory: at least 20 hours per week. Social relations outside the Academy are strictly limited: participants cannot visit a mosque, browse markets, or meet friends. Violators of the rules are punished, for example, with weekend detention at the center, while well-behaved cadets are rewarded with insignia on their uniforms, or even internships with the Academy’s local business partners.

December 2018, Salvini’s Immigration and Security Decree has already been converted into Law 132/2018. Despite endorsement from the Bergamo City Council and the Italian Association of Municipalities (ANCI), the Government and Parliament have blocked a proposal to introduce a ‘rewarding permit’ for individuals holding an A2 Italian certificate, who have performed at least 100 hours of volunteer work, and who are completing an internship or are employed. Humanitarian protection is definitively cancelled. The ordinary reception system is dismantled. The 30 asylum seekers of Bergamo, however, continue to live at the Academy. They work diligently to integrate into the Italian system and to show that they deserve to stay. Their strict training does not guarantee an advantage when facing the Commission responsible for refugee determination, however. By the program’s end, the asylum seekers will likely receive only an Academy-issued certificate and not full refugee status, apart from the few individuals deemed worthy.

What happens when a regime of rights is substituted by a regime of deservingness? What do Italian institutions expect from migrants and vice versa? How do social workers mediate these possibly conflicting expectations? Though it descends from a strong rights-based approach, the asylum system claims to uphold a meritocracy, follows the stair-case model, and embodies the logic of a declining welfare, with its moral economy of what is 'good' and what is 'bad.' Together, asylum seekers and social workers occupy the nexus where models based on rights, deservingness, and control struggle for recognition as the way to deal with Others. All this happens as 'refugees' are increasingly considered to be allegedly 'irregular economic migrants' and must demonstrate that they are not.

Who deserves to be protected?

Forced migration policies and studies have often evoked the polarity between deservingness and undeservingness. By the 1990s, public debates and practical policy in the UK distinguished between the 'deserving' refugee and the 'undeserving' asylum seeker. Mainstream political debates centered on the notion that the majority of asylum seekers are 'bogus' and therefore undeserving of entry to Britain, and of social support (Sales 2002: 456). While the government has claimed to favor measures encouraging the 'social inclusion' of refugees (Home Office 1999: 3) it has enforced a punitive regime upon their arrival. As Sales writes, 'Official thinking was that 'genuine' refugees would be prepared to undergo a temporary period of hardship since the process would weed out 'bogus' claimants, thus making their own position morally stronger' (Sales 2002: 466).

This politics of suspicion corresponds to the juridical frames introduced during that time, such as those regarding manifestly unfounded and/or fraudulent applications. In a position dated 1992, UNHCR affirmed that 'national procedures for [the] determination of refugee status may usefully provide for dealing in an accelerated procedure with manifestly unfounded applications for refugee status or asylum,' stating that 'clearly fraudulent' situations reasonably includes those where the applicant deliberately attempts to deceive the authorities determining refugee status (UNHCR 1992). In the same year, the Council of the European Union adopted the London Resolution on manifestly unfounded applications (European Union 1992). Both developments demonstrate a specific understanding of deservingness, or that deservingness is: 1) connected to the reality of life in the applicant's country of origin (the determination procedure seeks to verify that individual accounts of persecution correspond with stipulations made by refugee definitions), and 2) related to the reliability and credibility of the applicant. Trusting the asylum seeker becomes a matter not only of juridical assessment, but also of moral judgment. The obstacle course of asylum procedure (the 'period of hardship' mentioned by Sales) is thus a kind of test: because mistrust is the prevailing attitude (Valentine Daniel & Knudsen 1995), confidence must be earned on the ground.

Refugees' loss of credibility directly connects to the changing phenomenology of forced migrations, which began after the end of the Cold War and with the start of new wars in the 1990s. The decade saw a substantial increase in mass displacement, humanitarian intervention, and the number of civil victims (Duffield 2001). The representative shift from the political refugee, enshrined in the Geneva convention, to the humanitarian victim and apolitical subject – or the 'speechless emissary,' in the words of Liisa Malkki (1996) – raises questions about forced and economic migration. That is:

The refugee as traumatized victim, having lost a heroic political status, is no longer as distinct from the illegal immigrant and is seen as alien to the political community and an alien social burden. Accordingly, we have the rise of the reviled figure of the bogus asylum-seeker.

(Pupavac 2006: 14)

Only 'real' refugees deserve protection, as well as social and political consideration, because only they may sufficiently prove that they are worthy of trust and rights.

The polarity between deservingness and undeservingness has another component, as well. In contemporary democracies, 'communities of value' – a fundamental part of modern state narratives – are imagined and socially constructed as communities populated by 'good citizens, law-abiding and hardworking members of stable and respectable families' (Anderson 2013: 3). Unlike Others, these ideal citizens share values and patterns of behaviors, form 'the legitimate us,' and may therefore receive rights:

It is valuable, in the sense of holding values and having virtue and in this sense, it is priceless, but the virtue of its members is also manifest in economic value. The community of value is comprised of law abiding, hardworking, independent people living in responsible families, unchallenged by gender and class relations, but potentially victimized by immigrants, criminals and others. [...] Terms like 'immigrant,' 'foreigner,' and 'asylum seeker' are often not simply descriptive of legal status but are value laden and negative.

(Anderson 2012: 4–5)

In this light, asylum seekers must prove not only that they are 'real refugees,' but also that they are or can train to become 'good citizens.' As Aihwa Ong explains in her seminal study on Cambodian refugees in the US: to 'become 'good enough' citizens, newcomers must negotiate among different forms of regulation and be taught a new way of being cared for, and of caring for themselves in their new world' (Ong 2003: XVII). This process, however, is incredibly difficult. The good citizen faces two related antagonists: the 'migrant' (or the non-citizen) and the 'failed citizen.' Both represent the undeserving poor (the first of global origin and the second, national or

European¹) and are social constructs that distinguish the community of value from its outsiders. If not actively acknowledged and addressed as a social construct, the directive to be part of the community of value tends to exacerbate societal conflicts, especially among lower socioeconomic groups: 'good,' 'hardworking,' 'legal,' and 'taxpaying immigrants,' for instance, begin to distance themselves from their 'bad,' 'lazy,' 'illegal,' and 'welfare dependent' peers (Oliveri 2014).

Similarities between migrants and failed citizens grow even more evident when considering how welfare works in many neoliberal democracies, where responsibility for structural inequalities is ascribed to the individual and where poverty is interpreted as a result of bad morals and behavior rather than structures, and institutional practices (Rose 1999; Dhaliwal & Forkert 2016). Neoliberal policies continue to employ a 'staircase of transition' approach in response to homelessness, despite growing evidence that the staircase model fails to reduce homelessness and even diminishes the prospect of housing for homeless people:

Today, social authorities customarily structure their various types of shelter, supported housing, training flats, etc. like a 'staircase,' which homeless people are supposed to ascend step by step from the streets to a regular dwelling of their own via low-standard shelters, category housing (i.e. houses for specific categories, such as homeless male alcoholics), training flats and transitional flats. The higher they climb, the better their conditions in terms of physical standard and space, integrity, freedom, and security of tenure.

(Sahlin 2005: 117; see also Olsson 2008)

Traditionally social democratic countries, such as Sweden or Finland, use this model and it has been historically predominant in the US, where the 'continuum of care' essentially entails 'progressing' homeless people through a series of separate residential services – typically emergency shelter programs, transitional housing, and supportive housing (Johnsen & Teixeira 2010).

In this moral economy, recipients of aid and welfare are perceived not as subject to forces beyond their control and as possessing the will to be independent but as making inadequate efforts to improve their situations (Yoo 2008). Though the suffering body and the traumatized victim evoke humanitarian reactions, neoliberalism suddenly calls the subject to do their part to enter the community of value (Fassin 2005). They cannot be passive, expectant, or trust in a regime of rights for an extended period. Within the framework of abstract liberalism, meritocracy, and individualism prevail: 'by framing race-related issues in the language of liberalism, whites can appear 'reasonable' and even 'moral,' while opposing almost all practical approaches to deal with de facto racial inequality' (Bonilla-Silva 2006: 28). Like homeless people, asylum seekers actively engage in paths towards autonomy

and integration. Their career is ‘put into effect by offering moves ‘upwards’ as a reward for good behavior and achievement,’ while they are punished with ‘eviction or dislocation to a lower step...for rule breaking or a relapse to problematic behavior’ (Sahlin 2005: 118).

Who, then, deserves protection? It seems that any answer is inextricable from moral considerations. Deservingness is based on the individual’s ability to legitimize their experienced persecution or fear of it in their country of origin (or to prove they are a ‘real refugee’) and to demonstrate their willingness to fully integrate into their receiving country’s community of value (or to prove they can become a ‘good citizen’). What happens, however, as the asylum seeker is increasingly portrayed as a bogus, fraudulent migrant, as well as an economic burden, incapable and/or unwilling to quickly ascend the steps of autonomy?

Italian asylum system during and after the European ‘refugee crisis’

Since its inception, the asylum system in Italy has been disorganized and focused on emergencies, pressured by contradictory needs both to control irregular migration and to protect refugees. Compared to other European countries, Italy’s number of asylum seekers has remained objectively low over the past two decades (Italy received only 276,851 applications between 1990 and 2009; see Ministry of the Interior 2019). The reception system’s capacity has long been undersized, too, even when including the collective detention centers and the System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers, and Refugees (*Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati, Sprar*). Institutionalized in 2002 and inspired by initiatives during the Balkan Wars, the System operates on the holistic idea of embedding reception and social integration through engagement with local communities (Marchetti 2016: 128).

Generally speaking, Italy faced the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ with a fragile, fragmented reception infrastructure and a prolonged determination procedure. Between 2014 and 2016, several factors had contributed to the perception that a crisis was underway – or rather, that Italy was in crisis regarding its inability to cope with the arrival of massive unscheduled flows. First, the increase of unplanned arrivals in the Central Mediterranean intensified until the end of 2016. Over the three-year period, 505,378 migrants disembarked in Italy, almost double the number of all migrants who had arrived by sea during the previous decade (from 2004–2013 there were 248,859 migrants). Second, due to the Dublin Regulation and the European Agenda on Migration,² Italy had become a kind of ‘trap.’ Between 2014 and 2015, many migrants who had arrived in Italy later applied for asylum in other EU countries without having been identified and fingerprinted upon their disembarkation (Fontanari 2018). Following the implementation of the European Agenda and the hotspot approach in mid-2015, however, almost all the migrants who arrived in Italy were fingerprinted and thereby assigned

to Italy. Refusing to adopt a strict, expulsive regime, Italy continued to consider the migrants as potential refugees rather than irregular economic migrants, facilitating their access to an international protection procedure. The number of asylum seekers in Italy subsequently soared from 241,752 between 2005 and 2014 to 340,323 between 2015 and 2017.³ Thirdly, this surge, combined with Italy's legal obligation to meet quality standards (Directive 2013/33/EU, implemented in Italy by Legislative Decree No. 142 of 2015), prompted Italy to substantially expand the overall capacity of its reception system from about 22 thousand facilities in 2013 to over 190 thousand by 2017. Established after the Mare Nostrum Operation in 2013,⁴ emergency spaces within centers for asylum seekers accounted for much of this growth.

These developments greatly influenced the collective imagination's construction of a crisis, as did the greater visibility of migrants in many municipalities, and the misperception that reception costs diminished funding for other policies (in truth, a distribution plan made possible a fair, widespread distribution of migrants across all municipalities and only one in four municipalities was affected by reception-related projects).⁵ Additionally, many migrants who arrived in Italy during the three-year period did not originate from countries traditionally considered to be 'refugee producing,' such as: Nigeria, Guinea, the Ivory Coast, Mali, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Many applications were thus labelled as manifestly unfounded (e.g. Tunisian) and/or received a rather low overall recognition rate: over the past three years, the aforementioned nationalities have obtained international protection at an average of between 2% and 16%, even though the same nationalities have been recognized as needing humanitarian protection in 15% to 27% of cases (Ministry of the Interior 2019).

Different political parties and representatives of the last two Governments have employed these factors to promote a more restrictive, expulsive approach to Italian migration and asylum policies. This shift grew from both the need to fight international criminal networks of smugglers and traffickers and the assumption that Italy had become the primary destination for 'mixed migration,' attracting an inordinate number of economic migrants (Sharpe 2018). The legitimacy of the rescue policy – introduced after the tragic shipwrecks in the Channel of Sicily in 2013 – became precarious. Cooperation with Libya and Niger improved, as envisaged by the 2017 Memorandum of Understanding, which apportioned Italian aid for local border management capacities in areas surrounding the primary passageway used by Sub-Saharan migrants traveling to Italy through Libya. Simultaneously, the Minniti-Orlando Decree enacted more asylum restrictions, such as the openly discriminatory abolition of a degree of judgment in the asylum procedure. Despite these developments, wider protection – including international protection in terms of refugee status and subsidiary protection, as well as humanitarian protection – was preserved, allowing more than 100,000 asylum seekers to remain in Italy with a permit (Ministry of the Interior 2019) and to access the System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees.

In 2018, Salvini's Immigration and Security Decree further marginalized migrants by portraying potential asylum seekers as illegal aliens and abolishing humanitarian protection.⁶ Until then, migrants granted international and humanitarian protection could enter the System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees and by then, had accounted for 30 percent of the system's beneficiaries. As a consequence of the abolition, Italy is now witnessing an increase in irregular migration and social marginality, as well as more general security problems. Between June 2018 and January 2019, having been denied any form of protection, around 45 thousand migrants became irregular, of which only five thousand were repatriated (contrary to the demagogic slogans of the Minister of the Interior, irregular migrants cannot be all forcibly repatriated to their countries of origin, particularly since Italy has no repatriation agreements with most of these countries).

Law 132/18 ultimately incapacitated the System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees. Asylum seekers are now assigned to and isolated within extraordinary reception centers, where they receive minimal welfare services and no integration or language services. For asylum seekers, the collapse of the open reception and protection system drastically restricted the services available to them on their path of protection and social inclusion, exacerbating their growing vulnerability. The paradigm shift is thus almost complete: migrants traveling to Italy are no longer considered potential refugees but irregular migrants to be summarily rejected. The few asylum seekers who do arrive (numbering only 1,561 in the first five months of 2019, compared to 13,430, and 60,228 in the same period of 2018 and 2017 respectively) are not entitled to a wide set of rights accessed under ordinary reception. Instead, they are confined in extraordinary centers and subject to a regime of control and containment.

Who is *valuable* in the Italian refugee regime?

Building on this context, this paper uses the concepts of deservingness and the community of value to analyze the social construction of the un/worthy refugee. This paper draws on fieldwork conducted between October 2013 (with the beginning of the Mare Nostrum operation) and May 2019, both as a sociologist pursuing numerous qualitative research projects, and as a social worker directly involved in protection and reception activities in the city of Parma, as well as trainer for social workers across Italy. Ultimately, this paper aims to interrogate the policies meant to govern irregular migrants and asylum seekers, as well as the constructions of Italy's 'real refugees' and 'good citizens.'

The regime of rights: Citizenship First

Asylum policy in Italy transformed between 2013 and 2016. As mentioned above, migrants had previously enjoyed institutional and social openness.⁷

The State's Legislative Decree 142/2015 renounced the staircase model and provided asylum seekers – including those with a suspended legal status – with access to the formal System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees. Even though asylum seekers had to wait for their applications to be processed and to be fully acknowledged as 'real refugees,' they were not preemptively mistrusted by the government.

The System directly involved the local administrations that had the capacity to integrate refugee services into their local welfare systems and to supplement their services (particularly universal services like health) for the benefit of the entire community, regardless of migrant status. Moreover, the System followed a model that considered not only the material conditions of reception, but also the accelerated integration of migrants who would remain in Italy. Departing from the containment approach, this model affirms that asylum seekers are not fraudulent economic migrants until proven otherwise and that they ought to be treated as future citizens entitled to the rights and social opportunities of any other citizen as soon as possible (Ager & Strang 2008). Promoting a sense of security and stability in local communities, the System encouraged refugees' participation in their local community, as well as the development of integrated social networks among nationals, locals, and migrants (Catarci 2011).

Even if undersized, the System aspired to overcome the risks and avoid the distortions of an emergency approach, where asylum seekers were differentiated from refugees, and where only the most deserving could hope to settle. The System began enlarging its capacity for migrants, which grew from 3,000 in 2013 to around 24,000 by the end of 2016. According to a national allocation plan, first issued in July 2014 and updated in October 2016,⁸ all 8,000 Italian municipalities shared reception responsibilities based on established quotas (2.5 migrants per thousand in general; 1.5 in metropolitan areas). Furthermore, while it was decided not to make the System for the protection mandatory for all local authorities, the updated plan laid out a strategy to increase quotas for municipalities facing higher migrant populations.

This regime of rights echoes the Housing First model for homeless populations as applied in Canada or New York, which offers chronically homeless people immediate access to scattered-site permanent apartments without sobriety or treatment prerequisites (Johnsen & Teixeira 2010). In the context of asylum seekers, the concept of Citizenship First might be introduced. Here, it is not just a matter of housing, but one of fundamental rights. It is a matter of whether people must demonstrate that they are 'good' enough to deserve them.

The regime of deservingness: disciplining access to the community of value

As mentioned earlier, the regime of rights did not become the rule, despite institutional support. The wave of humanitarian compassion following the October 2013 shipwrecks quickly dissipated and a different regime emerged

between 2015 and 2016. Though irregular migrants were still considered potential refugees and therefore afforded standard asylum procedure and reception, their moral status became more precarious. The regime of rights evolved into one of deservingness, increasingly demanding that migrants justify their presence in Italy and take responsibility for the alleged burden they placed on the economy and welfare system. On both national and local levels, reception began emphasizing how asylum seekers ought to behave for greater acceptance and integration. The persecution they faced in their countries of origin grew less relevant than the events and attitudes in the receiving country. The number of asylum seekers who received international protection declined and, while a significant number of migrants continued to receive humanitarian protection, they did so with greater juridical, moral, and social limitations.

Under these conditions, volunteering projects involving asylum seekers became more common as a way to: demonstrate the migrants' willingness to join the community of value, express their gratitude towards Italian society and institutions, and reciprocate for their reception and assistance. Though the 2017 Minniti-Orlando Decree explicitly invited Prefectures to promote 'any useful initiative to implement the use of asylum seekers, on a voluntary basis, in activities of social utility,'⁹ (Testo coordinato del decreto-legge 2017) this trend had already begun two years prior. Before its application to asylum seekers, such community service programs had been mandated by courts as an alternative to prison for minor offenders or offered by municipal social services to help unemployed individuals build skills. The pressure on asylum seekers to participate in these programs grew so strong that, in many situations, it became difficult to discern whether their participation was voluntary or compulsory. Moreover, in many cases, the services migrants were called to perform included collecting garbage in city parks and streets, maintaining public green areas, and even cemeteries. Not only were such jobs highly visible, but they were jobs that traditionally entailed remuneration. The aggressive, large-scale promotion of these activities – to potentially all of the 150,000 asylum seekers present in Italy during this time – threatened a very delicate balance in the already fragile and precarious labor market, worsening the conflict between 'failed citizens' (Italians) and 'non-citizens' (migrants).

Social expectations for asylum seekers included their spontaneous and sincere commitment to these programs. Failure to meet these expectations prompted moral judgment and disapproval. For example, in the province of Piacenza, asylum seekers were dancing with social workers at a party. The province's mayor responded: 'if they have time to have fun, they also have it to keep to their commitment' (Redazione 2018) or to keep the voluntary pact they signed with the municipality.¹⁰ Despite other criticism, as well, it was revealed that asylum seekers later broke their agreements only after signing work contracts that prevented them from upholding them (I richiedenti asilo 2019). Another mayor of a small city in the province of Brescia

publicly noted the absence of asylum seekers in these ‘voluntary’ programs, telling the local newspaper: ‘everyone has duties, as well as rights. It is necessary that in the cooperatives managing their reception, someone explains to them that something must be done to repay the hospitality they receive’ (Di Stefano 2018). For local asylum seekers, however, their refusal to cooperate stemmed from issues like the absence of hot water or internet access in their accommodations. When some migrants accused the mayor of making insufficient efforts to ameliorate such problems, the mayor replied that despite his efforts, ‘the commission decided based on the possession or lack of certain requirements’ (ibid.).

The Brescia episode illustrates several points. Local administrations and social workers often view community service as a way for asylum seekers to reciprocate for their reception and assistance. In contrast, asylum seekers understand that their good behavior and engagement in voluntary projects deserve compensation, if not with a salary, then with greater protection. In partial response, the Commissions and Courts issued humanitarian protection based not on migrants’ persecution in their countries of origin, but on their ‘successful integration’ into Italy, as demonstrated by employment or a history of performing voluntary activities.¹¹ Mario Morcone, the then-chief of the Civil Liberties and Immigration Department proposed in 2016 to introduce a reward mechanism: ‘who shows good will and ability to fit into our social context could get more attention. Humanitarian protection, which is currently given for reasons of vulnerability to minors and vulnerable people, could be used in this sense’ (Il prefetto Morcone 2016). This is the same reward mechanism proposed by the Mayor of Bergamo for the aforementioned Integration Academy’s asylum seekers. This connection between behavior and status, as well as the regime of ‘deservingness’ usurpation of the regime of rights is a relatively recent development towards an adoption of the staircase model.

The urge to adopt a scalar, reward-and-punishment model to better discipline individuals and educate them on the community of value had been observed in reception proceedings even before the ‘refugee crisis.’ Social workers tended to ‘punish’ asylum seekers who refused to participate in their suggested activities and to ‘reward’ those who agreed to it, granting them more housing and employment opportunities. One social worker describes these implicit codes of conduct in the following way:

The ways in which we decided, for example, who to offer the possibility of a work placement were based on a reward logic.... The criteria we decided on were: the degree of participation in domestic life and the attitude within the center; the reliability of the guest; the level of knowledge of the Italian language, also measured by the frequency of the Italian course that some guests attended outside of the structure; previous professional skills and aspirations declared during individual interviews.

(Biffi 2017:148–9)

Writing specifically on women asylum seekers in a Sicilian reception center, another researcher explains:

Within the centers, the control of women takes the form of a series of practices and techniques that aim, in fact, to educate them towards behaviors considered 'just,' concerning their being women capable of caring for themselves and for children.... Maaza [an Ethiopian asylum seeker, AN] bathed her baby every morning under the watchful eye of social workers in a room set up specifically for these activities. She also received binding suggestions regarding the methods of care: how much and how to breastfeed, how to treat and keep clean her own body and that of the child.

(Pinelli 2011: 170)

The regime of deservingness emphasizes that discipline, education, and rules for behavior contribute not only to successful social integration and acceptance, but also to greater access to scarce opportunities. After 2016 the expectation that these scarce resources could also include a juridical reward (namely humanitarian protection) became more and more widespread among asylum seekers and social workers, and added emphasis on the disciplining impact of the deservingness regime.

The regime of containment: dispossession without protection

But what happens when good behavior is disentangled from welfare and juridical rewards? As explained earlier, since 2017, migrants' access to asylum procedure and protection have been significantly limited. Though treated with suspicion and mistrust, migrants are still expected to behave well and demonstrate their respect for Italian institutions and people, without any hope for a possible reward. The abolition of humanitarian protection affirms their despair. In 2017, the overall recognition rate of migrants was 41%, with 25% among them receiving humanitarian protection; in 2018, these numbers lowered to an average of 33% and 21% respectively (overall recognition rate and humanitarian protection). Following the Immigration and Security Decree (October-December 2018), however, the recognition rate has fallen to 20% and 3% respectively (Ministry of the Interior 2019).

Yet, disciplinary pressures on migrants have not diminished but instead increased. The regime of deservingness has given way to one of containment. The regime of containment concerns itself with more than just surveillance and tracking: 'the Hotspot System contributes to enforce forms of containment through mobility that consists in controlling migration by obstructing, decelerating, and troubling migrants' geographies – more than in fully blocking them' (Tazzioli 2017: 2764).

Though Tazzioli's ethnography focuses on the circumstances around Europe's external borders, it also sheds light on the situation in Italy.

Containment seems less about mobility and more about ‘training’ asylum seekers for a life of displacement, as they likely will fail to obtain protection and will not return to their country of origin. The containment regime thus dispossesses asylum seekers of their subjectivity.

The Prefect of Florence’s 2018 memos to managers of local reception centers demonstrate the containment regime’s operations. In addition to introducing strict curfews (between 8pm and 8am), the memos instructed social workers to open any deliveries of goods purchased online ‘both for security reasons and to verify that the purchases are compatible with the economic situation declared by the guest’ (Simoni 2018). Even bicycles have become objects of control: if an asylum seeker’s bicycle is not one supplied by the reception center, social workers must clarify with the individual how their bicycle was procured. As at Bergamo’s Integration Academy, the prefectural instructions do not distinguish between weekdays and holidays and do little to encourage social networking: ‘in the absence of any reasoning that explains such a restrictive approach, those who drafted the text inevitably take on the burden of proving that ... ‘guests’ must not be part of the night life of the city’ (Simoni 2018).

Under the regime of containment, such restrictions are the norm. Furthermore, following the Immigration and Security Decree, budget cuts have led to the reduction of professional workers involved in reception and assistance. On average, one social worker assumes responsibility for 50 asylum seekers:

The operator may follow each guest for ten minutes a day, including signatures, goods distribution, food, pocket money, linguistic, and cultural mediation. Individual assessment with social workers corresponds to ten hours per week for every 50 people: it means 1.7 minutes a day. Transportation? The logic of the tenders is that people do not need to move: 12 annual journeys of a maximum of 30 kilometers each.

(Accoglienza 2019)

Large centers give asylum seekers no opportunities to go out in the evening, to explore the city, or to even attend an Italian language course. With fewer social workers, the regime has assumed even tighter control, further limiting integration efforts. In fact, with this politics of suspicion, there seems little need to invest in integration: there is no longer any ladder, or any ‘staircase of transition,’ to climb.

Conclusions Social workers and asylum seekers as actors of contentious politics

I am very worried about the future of those who have accepted to be part of the Academy. The last time I saw the guys who joined, they seemed more closed and alone. They suffer because they can no longer attend the mosque

and the markets, nor call home more frequently. But they hold on. They are afraid of expressing their unease because they fear being excluded from the project, especially now that the Salvini propaganda is terrifying.

(D'Aprile 2018)

The above passage was shared by an insider at the Integration Academy, who describes the asylum seekers' feelings of isolation and fear amidst a radically changed and increasingly xenophobic socio-political context. This fraught climate affects social workers, as well, as they fear losing employment. Under the new asylum system, an estimated 18,000 will be fired. Moreover, regardless of their present employment status, social perceptions have turned against them. In addition to social workers, volunteers, activists, cooperatives, solidarity movements, and NGOs are represented as internal enemies to the movement of 'Italians first' (Fontanari & Borri 2017; Zamponi 2017).

In Italy, the role of civil society in asylum and reception policy has always been peculiar. Civil society led the organization of 'welfare from below' (Belloni 2016) and the institutionalization of a multi-level national asylum system (Marchetti 2016; Campomori & Caponio 2017). It was also a key player in enhancing the principles of horizontal subsidiarity. Throughout these processes, social workers were conflated with volunteers and activists. Only in recent years has professionalization occurred, allowing workers to better acquire professional skills and roles comparable to those in other sectors of welfare. Yet, with professionalization also come the power structures and asymmetrical dynamics endemic to social work (Harrell-Bond 1986).

The negative turn of the definition of refugee, which increasingly echoes the definition of irregular economic migrant, has had a number of detrimental effects. At the same time, however, it opens the field for new forms of contentious politics, where 'adopting a contentious politics perspective [can] focus attention on interactions among protesters, claim makers and their objects, governments' (Ilker et al. 2016: 536). Furthermore, critical citizenship studies have drawn attention to processes of claiming rights. Isin (2008), for example, explains how feminist and other civil rights movements transformed subjects into legitimate claimants of rights through various acts – demonstrations, protests, occupations, and performances – that were symbolically and materially constitutive of citizenship.

As it stands, groups may be able to challenge Italy's asylum policy at the local level in a battleground (Ambrosini 2018) upon which different actors engage and pro-immigrant actors are a counterweight to xenophobic movements, supporting migrants' interests. Above all, however, social workers and civil society *together with* asylum seekers, refugees, and (irregular) migrants must cooperate in actions and claims from a place of symmetry and parity, emphasizing their similarities within a diverse set of intercultural political relations (Remotti 2019). Social workers must not only opt out the regime of containment and their associated positions of power but they must

also avoid perpetuating a regime of deservingness, along with its disciplinary, social, and moral practices to shape 'good' individuals. The battleground is open for citizenship struggles and the acknowledgement of both migrants' and social workers' subjectivity.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Lafleur and Mescoli, 2018 on Italian migrants in Belgium.
- 2 https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration_en (accessed: July 10, 2019).
- 3 In this case, the three-year period considered includes 2017 when, although the decline in arrivals began, the imposition of applying for asylum in Italy made the balance between the number of requests and the number of migrants landed positive (130,119 vs. 119,310).
- 4 The Mare Nostrum Operation was launched by the Italian Government on October 18, 2013, as a military and humanitarian operation aimed at tackling the humanitarian emergency in the Strait of Sicily, due to the dramatic increase in migration flows and deaths at sea. The Operation ended on October 31, 2014, coinciding with the start of the new operation called Triton (Frontex). Operation Mare Nostrum had the twofold purpose of safeguarding human life at sea, and bringing to justice human traffickers and migrant smugglers. Mare Nostrum carried out 421 missions, in which more than 100,250 migrants were rescued.
- 5 The expense for the operations of relief, health, reception, and education was estimated at 4.3 billion (0.25% of GDP) for 2017, net of EU contributions; the expenditure forecast to be incurred in 2018 was between 4.6 and 5 billion which, even after deducting the EU contributions, leads to an increase of between 0.02% and 0.04% of GDP compared to the 2017 expenditure (Ministry of Economy and Finance 2018: 55–6). From this point of view the figure showing that in 2017 foreign taxpayers paid taxes on personal income equal to 3.3 billion euro matters little. It added to other entry items attributable to foreign nationals which have ensured a revenue in the State coffers equal to 19.2 billion Euros. Compared with 17.5 billion of public spending dedicated to immigrants (2.1% of all national public expenditure), they create a surplus in the state budget between 1.7 and 3 billion euro (IDOS, Confronti 2018).
- 6 According to Art. 5 Par. 6 of the Consolidated Law 286/98 (which finally implemented the 'Constitutional asylum' provided for by Art. 10, Par. 3 of the Constitution, under which Italy must grant asylum to all those who in the countries of origin are not granted the fundamental rights and freedoms recognized by the Constitution), the Police could grant a residence permit for humanitarian reasons to foreign citizens, such as unaccompanied foreign minors strongly traumatized by the journey, women with children who suffered torture and/or detention in Libya, those whose human dignity was violated, or people fleeing emergencies such as conflicts, natural disasters or other particularly serious events in countries outside the European Union.
- 7 For example, episodes of social and institutional exclusion happened in different regions (see Marchetti *forthcoming*). Moreover, the model I'm describing here was practically limited by the capacity of the ordinary system, so that extraordinary reception centers – with a different approach – prevailed: in 2016 they offered 137,218 places compared to 23,822 in the System for the protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees (Ministry of Economy and Finance 2018: 70)
- 8 Ministry of the Interior Directive of October 11, 2016 'Regole per l'avvio di un sistema di ripartizione graduale e sostenibile dei richiedenti asilo e

- rifugiati sul territorio nazionale,' www.sprar.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ministrointerno11ottobre2016.pdf (accessed: July 10, 2019).
- 9 Testo coordinato del decreto-legge February 17, 2017, n. 1, www.sprar.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/immigrazione-il-testo-coordinato-del-decreto-minniti.pdf (accessed July 10, 2019).
- 10 All translations from Italian are mine.
- 11 See also the Judgment of the Civil Cassation n. 4455 of February 2018.

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