

***Ambiguous Welcomings:
The Identity Construction of Asylum Seekers in Turin ,Italy.***

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Based on fieldwork carried out in Turin, Italy between 2009 and 2011, this article focuses on welcoming systems for asylum seekers. In political discourses, refugees are usually described as passive victims or even as a ‘social problem’. Local institutions often make an exploitative use of this category. Welcoming projects and plans are in fact increasingly conveying policies based on a charitable approach instead of fostering and enhancing individual empowerment. This influences public opinion and political discourse concerning forced migration. Unequal power relations between asylum seekers and their caretakers help to shape the reception of refugees, and humanitarian associations concur in strengthening this idea. As a consequence of these factors, the right to asylum becomes a mere right to basic services that local institutions should provide. In these terms, the welcoming system for refugees loses its main aim and becomes guided by economic and budgetary concerns.

Keywords: Asylum seekers, Refugees, Welcoming system, Displacement, Migration.

Introduction

In every social context we can find particular philosophies and expressions of welcoming. Strangers and travelers are part of everyday life even in places that are far from the global flow of symbols and people. Welcoming practices are usually very complex. They have different aims and strategies in every context. To ‘welcome’ a person could mean, according to Latin etymology,¹ to try to bridge the distance to create a relationship. This definition may indicate the potential for welcoming to be an important tool for recognizing and accepting cultural diversity. This reception can also lead to cultural enrichment through the adoption of heteronomic practices and symbols. In spite of this, in a world where the circulation of information is perceived as a fundamental process in support of every social development, the circulation of people is generally not seen in this way.

The common public perception of political refugees and asylum seekers seems to be a clear example of this refusal to see the circulation of people positively. Emblematic of this is how the concept of welcoming changes in relation to refugees and asylum seekers and loses this connotation of receptivity. It no longer involves establishing a dialog with alterity. The concept of welcoming, through a complex process of re-signification, becomes completely

¹ From the Latin ‘colligere’, to ‘collect’ with a demonstration of attachment. In the Middle English, alteration (influenced by *wel* well) of *wilcume*, from Old English *wilcuma*, *wilcume*, from *wilcuma* desirable guest akin to Old High German *willicomo* desirable guest; probably both from a prehistoric West Germanic compound.

transformed in this case. New meanings are strictly related to the language of bureaucracy (Fergusson 1994) and efficiency (Castoriadis 1975), thus assuming a mere functional dimension. Welcoming has become an 'operation', the aim of which is to contain and isolate cultural diversity. Welcoming projects created by governmental and non-governmental institutions are guided by economic considerations, to guarantee their efficiency. This is the first step toward reducing people to an 'essentialist' representation, usually based on laws and numbers, which normally establish limits such as quotas and budgets. The construction of the categories of political refugee and asylum seeker is founded on these processes.

This article is based on fieldwork carried out in Turin, Italy between 2009 and 2011, during the so called 'North Africa Emergency'. This was a particular case within the history of the Italian asylum system because when newcomers from Libya arrived in Italy they were automatically channeled into the asylum request procedure. Instead of having the choice of choosing whether to apply or not, they were compelled to enter the asylum procedure. In this sense, asylum seekers became victims of a system that they had not chosen.

Turin had, and still has, an important role in managing the immigration flow in Italy: according to the official data, an average of 22% of welcoming requests in Italy are submitted to the Central Services agency in Turin (Sprar 2011). We are referring here to official data, however, official reports offer a quite confused picture of asylum requests. It was first reported that in 2009, 419 asylum requests were made, mainly by Nigerians, Bangladeshis and Moroccans according to the Osservatorio Interistituzionale sugli Stranieri in Provincia di Torino, *Rapporto* (2009). But this report, said that 518 asylum requests were made at the local police office (Questura) in the same year. It is not clear whether these include some of those 419 asylum requests or not. The same ambiguity is found in the official 2010 report, which first states that 483 asylum requests were made to the local police office, and later reports that 525 asylum requests were made for political reasons. Because of these unclear data, it is very difficult to have a precise picture of the presence of asylum seekers in the city. Thus, in this article we refer to more delimited but more detailed data, namely those emerging from fieldwork.

Using participant observation and in-depth interviews, we have analyzed the reception of asylum seekers, focusing on the issue of housing, currently one of the most important Italian reception measures. In the first part of the research we looked at the collaboration between citizens and asylum seekers that arose as a response to the insufficient institutional support given to the latter. At the time of our field work in Turin, empty buildings were squatted to give asylum seekers a place to stay. Inhabitants of the city actively helped and offered support in different ways, from gathering household utensils to offering free language courses.

To sketch the relations between formal and informal reception of asylum seekers in Turin, we interviewed both institutional and civil society actors, namely one representative indicated by the municipal government, one supervisor from the province, four caregivers from associations that offered material and psychological support to newly arrived migrants, and one activist from a community center. Throughout the research we also had many conversations with migrants (Vailati 2011). The second part of the study is based on fieldwork that focused on

the arrival of 160 asylum seekers fleeing from Libya and their stay at a reception centre run by the Italian Red Cross in 2011. The newcomers were included within the framework of the so called ‘Emergenza Nord Africa 2011’ (North Africa Emergency 2011), a specific national reception plan developed by the Italian government and implemented by the ‘Protezione Civile’ (Civil Protection) agency, which is responsible for managing emergency situations in Italy. As we will show, there is an enormous discrepancy between the system as it was planned, and the effective reception measures. We will first focus on the different levels upon which the social construction of asylum seekers and refugees is built, questioning the definition of forced migrants as passive victims. We consider asylum seekers and refugees as individuals who embody a representation of North-South relationships shaped by international migration (Mezzadra 2006; Massey, Jess 1995). Analytically, we assume that the social construction process is based on three main perspectives: the external, which shows the effects of laws that define and create the legal status of refugee; the internal, which is related to how laws shape individuals, their identities and their subjectivities and the public discourse to grasp aspects of the collective imagination and public representation of the phenomenon. Our intent here is to show how categories of asylum seekers and refugees are socially constructed (Berger, Luckman 1966; Goffman 1961). The process of identity construction, seen through the deconstructive lens used in this article, clearly appears to be a complex process that is based on political, economic and social imaginaries.

Intertwining Levels of Identity Construction

The categories of asylum seeker and refugee are historically built. Through legal discourses, the application of the Geneva Convention’s² principles created a political and social category. Spatial and temporal aspects also contribute to this construction process.

There are, in fact, specific places for refugees and asylum seekers. They are specifically organized for the category of forced migrants and have special characteristics, such as being *temporary places*. Places of detention are one example. In the collective imagination, built on media narratives, refugees and asylum seekers are associated with such places. Moreover, media discourses usually link these migrants with marginalized categories such as the homeless or criminals. However, refugees do not naturally belong to these places. They are just ‘put’ there. This statement might appear obvious. Nonetheless it is important to emphasize its implications.

The institutional definition of *refugees* is in fact related to specific spatial features, in particular to borders and transitory places. Spatially speaking, refugees cross national borders, and once they arrive in a European country they are hosted in specific places. In Italy, these involve different kinds of structures according to the different steps in the evaluation of a permit of stay request and include: reception centers, welcoming centers for asylum seekers, centers of identification and expulsion, police stations and commissions that decide on the outcomes of the request. Another space is the national protection system (SPRAR, Sistema di

² 1951, United Nations Conference of Plenipotentiaries on the Status of Refugees and Stateless Persons

Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati), which, as we will see, should provide housing facilities and integration programs, but only for a small percentage of asylum seekers. The broader space to which asylum seekers and refugees are related to is the national territory whose borders they are not allowed to cross.

Not only places play a relevant role in constructing the category. The image of refugees is also related to a specific temporal structure. In fact, it is difficult to find a category of identity that is as time dependent as asylum seekers, while they are on the complex path that involves complying with bureaucratic and legal proceedings. During this time, practices and social policies related to social inclusion often intensify stigmatization and discrimination. In the Italian reception system, as we will show, one example of this is the introduction of a system in which refugees and asylum seekers must use vouchers instead of cash to make purchases in retail stores. This makes them more visible to society in a stigmatizing way. It also increases their dependency on the national welfare system.

As elsewhere, the permanence of asylum seekers' in Italy is strongly influenced by spatial practices in time. Both dimensions are imposed on them: their space is often limited to camps or detention centres; and the time it will take for authorities to examine an asylum request is unpredictable. Structural elements are hence very relevant; however, the only room for manoeuvre for these migrants to make decisions about their own future is in the occasional loopholes of the asylum system bureaucracy.

In public discourse in Italy, and in the dominant humanitarian discourse, the social definition of the condition of refugees is also shaped by rhetoric. As Vacchiano (2011) points out, refugees or asylum seekers undergo a series of bureaucratic procedures in which they are described and also treated as helpless victims, as individuals who need assistance and the state's protection. The reception system in which they are placed reproduces these stereotypes. It is organized upon the difference between care-givers and care-takers.

'The dominant view of refugees as subjects who are considered "weak and in need of help" is accompanied by an expectation of passivity and gratitude. This is expressed by the refugees in their ability to recognize the indulgent effort that the professional care givers are offering in the name of the hosting society.(...) The idea of humanitarian charity turns rights into concessions, highlighting a representation in which beneficiaries are dependent individuals, and institutions are indulgent actors'. (Vacchiano 2011: 173)

There is an implicit understanding that the refugee will be passive (Van Aken 2005). In many European contexts we can find a correspondence between the rhetoric of the humanitarian discourse that treats asylum seekers with pity, and the way that reception procedures are organized. An example is the construction of their image as victims to present themselves as suitable candidates for an asylum request. The consequences of this representation strongly influence the role of the reception system, which constantly reproduces the image of the refugees as beneficiaries of social services. Connected to this approach, in

particular in Italy, what emerges is the contradiction of a system unable to enhance asylum seekers' autonomy. In fact, the reception system impedes the achievement of autonomy, by placing individuals in a situation of dependency. A refugee cannot decide to leave the system without renouncing the opportunity to receive a permit to stay. Moreover, the impediments to the individuals' autonomy are partly due to the fact that the Italian reception system is overcrowded because of the limited amount of space in refugee shelters.

In the last three years, the limited number of places available in the national welcoming system 'sistema di Protezione per rifugiati e richiedenti asilo' (SPRAR), only 3,000 per year, excluded many people from any support. One care-giver emphasized in an interview in 2009.

'Right now, after two years, the situation has changed completely, mainly because the time available for the integration process has been reduced to half of the previous amount of time. While a few years ago asylum seekers could stay in the welcoming system for a year or longer, they are now only allowed to stay for six months, which is too short a time to complete the integration process. This is due to an increase in the number of applicants: while a few years ago there were 10 people waiting; we now have a waiting list of 300'.

(Interview with a member of ARCI, an Italian association that is contracted by SPRAR to provide services to refugees 31/03/2009).

This statement shows the complexity of a system in which the lack of structure clashes with the number of requests and highlights the limits of the welcoming system. It is emblematic that rhetoric about the dis-functionality of the system does not emphasize the lack of facilities, but the number of migrants' that apply for protection. The migrant is perceived as a number on a waiting list. His or her autonomy and agency are not mentioned.

The Global Context and the Organization of the Welcoming System for Asylum Seekers in Italy

There is an ongoing debate in the migration literature about the concept of the state as an interpretative category for society. We will only address this question here briefly to introduce the role of the nation-state and its laws in asylum rights related issues. Transnationalist scholars have criticized so called 'methodological nationalism' (Glick Schiller, Çağlar 2011). From this perspective, the analysis of migration phenomena, including what has been arguably 'forced migration', should not be confined to nation states as the unit that contains societies, but rather by 'looking to the multiple ties and interactions that link people or institutions across the borders of nation-states' (Vertovec 1999: 447).

We share this understanding, and this paper is an attempt to apply it to the categories of refugees and asylum seekers, which are by definition dependent on the state's protection and welfare. Indeed, to deconstruct the image of refugees and asylum seekers as victims, we need to emphasize the link between state territory and personal identity. Although mobility in the global north is usually represented in public discourse as positive, movements from the global

south are described as unnatural or anomalous. We think that this distinction is being challenged by the increasing entanglement of reasons for migration and the growing complexity of migration phenomena. Migration exists in the global South as well as in the global North. The fundamental difference is the right to have access to countries, based on a system of visas and the length of stay allowed.

In this article, we focus on the relevance of state actors in the reception of refugees and asylum seekers, since they are the ones who provide migrants the access to social welfare and reception infrastructure.

The state, through laws and rules that are implemented at various territorial levels, usually defines who is part of it and who is excluded. These processes of exclusion and inclusion are fundamental to the analysis of the experience of asylum seekers. As the definitions *economic migrants* and *forced migrants* differentiate migrants based on the reasons that induce migration, they clearly assume that migrants travel voluntarily for economic reasons, or to the contrary, that the only reasons for migration are socio-political and that individuals have no control over their situation and must flee. From an anthropological point of view, this dichotomy appears to be rigid because in many cases the reasons for emigration are based on a combination of economic and sociopolitical causes (Hansen, Sorensen 2013). However, this distinction is still the basis for the definition of legal status: these two forms of migration among the EU's member states occur through different channels, that is through the labor market or an institutional protection system.

The right to asylum allows a person who is persecuted for political opinions or religious beliefs in his or her own country to request protection from another sovereign authority. According to this principle, asylum seekers are granted a permit to stay based on the socio-political context of their home country. The Italian Constitution (Article 10, paragraph 3) states: 'The foreigner who is denied in his own country the real exercise of the democratic liberties guaranteed by the Italian Constitution, has the right of asylum in the territory of the Republic, in accordance with the conditions established by law'.

An asylum seeker is a person who is waiting to obtain refugee status. From a legal point of view, asylum seekers are in a transition phase: they are allowed to stay in the country until the authorities that regulate asylum make a decision. In Italy, if they obtain refugee status or another form of international protection they will be allowed to stay in the country for a certain amount of time (from 1 to 5 years). If the right to asylum is denied, the person will be required to leave the country.

In this liminal phase, as we noticed during our participant observation, refugees and asylum seekers regularly confront discrimination and stigmatization. The use of public transportation is emblematic. In Turin, care-givers working for the Red Cross had to make agreements with the local transportation system to allow refugees to use buses for free. Usually, they must show their Red Cross identification document. Payment through vouchers has been introduced and adopted for all people who came from Libya asking for protection after the outbreak of the revolts in January 2011.

SPRAR (SPRAR 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011) is the official Italian organization that coordinates the welcoming practices.³ National and European funds are distributed to local public administrations and private associations to ensure an effective reception system for asylum seekers and refugees. From 2008 to 2013, Italy received around 21 million euros from the European Refugee Fund (FER) as a co-funding contribution for welcoming activities.

At a local level, the integrated reception activities include lodging, meals, and complementary activities such as the provision of information and assistance, through the creation of customized pathways to socio-economic inclusion. Mainly based on the work of civil society and Catholic associations, the Italian national reception program is organized to provide funding to these associations. Locally, the associations also cooperate with other institutions, private and public, to facilitate access to the job market.

The response to the 'North Africa Emergency 2011' (ENA) was managed by Italian civil protection agencies (Protezione Civile). The Italian government, in cooperation with the *Unione Province Italiane* (Union of Italian Provinces, a local administrative division), the *Associazione Nazionale Comuni Italiani* (Association of Italian Municipalities) and *Protezione Civile*, established a plan to receive 50,000 people. This plan operated alongside the national SPRAR program.

In this way, the flow of asylum seekers entering Italy from Libya has been differentiated from all other asylum claims. The Italian government abused the right to asylum in the management of migration movements: many of the asylum seekers or refugees that we have met during our fieldwork told us that the procedure for asylum request had been imposed as a standard measure by authorities especially after the war in Libya. Every person was compelled to sign the document of asylum request upon arrival.

Refugees' Self-representations

The construction of self-representation is strongly influenced by the spaces in which it occurs. In this section our analysis is based on fieldwork observation at two different forms of housing for refugees in Turin. The first was conducted at illegally occupied buildings in which migrants were living. Although migrants have squatted in the past, and city policies have previously recognized *multiculturalism* and *diversity*, the squatting of abandoned buildings by asylum seekers was a significant urban phenomenon between 2008 and 2010 in Turin. Additional fieldwork was conducted at a reception center managed by the Italian Red Cross that has been hosting asylum seekers since 2008 and is located in the suburbs of Turin.

The field-work was undoubtedly influenced by our position as white, young and European researchers. Whereas in the beginning we noticed that our interactions were marked by distance, over time we built a trustworthy relationship introducing some asylum seekers to our friends and sharing other social activities such as visiting art exhibitions.

We met a large number of refugees and asylum seekers during the years of research. They can be differentiated by country of origin, age, education, professional background,

ambitions and expectations. Their experiences in terms of getting acquainted with the local societies and in coping with the constraints that they had to face were also very diverse depending on their previous experiences, personal skills and competencies not only in professional but also in social terms.

Some important moments of transition can be identified in the asylum seekers' path. The first is the moment in which subjectivity begins to be shaped. This happens when a person applies for asylum. The asylum procedure begins with an identification procedure: a photograph and the finger prints of each individual are taken. A new identity is shaped according to rules of national belonging. As in many other migrations, applicants are often called by a different name: misunderstandings of language and pronunciation upon arrival in a new country commonly lead to a person using a new name. As noticed during the fieldwork, in the places where these procedures are carried out, the border is intrinsically present. Identity is shaped by the duality of belonging-not belonging, which is also made evident in the way these spaces are configured.

Secondly, it is important to examine not only how governments manage large influxes of refugees, but also how immigration policies or their absence help or hinder the process of social inclusion from the point of view of the refugees themselves. According to Korac (2003) the lack of a state-organized attempt to meet the refugees' needs forced them to rely on their personal skills and resources to find their way into new societies. They need to form networks to build an alternative self-help system.

Despite the considerable problems experienced by refugees in Italy, including a sense of insecurity in planning their future and the difficulties in achieving minimal financial security, refugees have a certain degree of agency in the Italian context, due to the nature of the ties they are able to develop with local inhabitants

For people living for a long time in welcoming facilities in Turin, the possibility of creating networks with other inhabitants arises and unfolds to the extent to which people are free to move within the city. Through such networks they then start basic income-earning activities such as bicycle repairing, or gathering metal that they can sell in city markets.

As Putnam states, 'The perception that the native and the new culture are not set in opposition strengthened the adaptability of refugees to the new environment, because it encouraged their openness to differences between the cultures and people. It enabled their openness and willingness to invest in building "bridging social capital", that requires that we "transcend our social and political and professional identities to connect with people unlike ourselves"' (Putnam, 2000: 411, in Korac 2003:14)

This 'bridging social capital' tends to compensate, to some extent, for their dissatisfaction with the quality of their functional integration. This attempt is important and could be considered an interconnection, based on basic needs, between local societies and asylum seekers (Feldman Bianco 2009; Glick Schiller, Çağlar 2011). But, due to their invisibility, these processes still remain insignificant.

According to Harrell-Bond (1999) the way in which refugees are 'helped' may itself undermine their personal coping strategies. This may threaten not only their individual life

prospects, but also their ability to use the potential they bring to receiving societies. For example, the characterization of asylum seekers and refugees as helpless and unaware is confirmed by statements from government workers and other caregivers. They define asylum seekers as ‘applicants’, ‘in need of help’, as ‘hopeless’. A supposedly low cultural and educational level is usually the main element in the caregiver’s imagination. In the words of one caregiver, ‘What I have noticed in the interviews we made and in everything that we did for them (refugees) is that they all have very little experience (in terms of education). Very little education, they can barely write or read. Maybe it is also the culturally limited context that they come from that makes them behave that way ...’ (Interview with a Red Cross caregiver 15/06/2011). During the same interview, this interviewee also gave indications of the imbalanced power relations between asylum seekers and care givers saying, ‘If you want to stay here you simply have to do what we tell you. Otherwise, if you do not want to stay here, you see where the door is, and you can just leave’.

It is certainly true that refugees need some help after arrival, and the welcoming system should provide them some benefits. However, it is the paternalistic approach to their needs that we are questioning. The fact that they are given vouchers instead of cash, the fact that they are being assisted by the national protection system, transforms them into beneficiaries of services provided by care givers and institutions. In Turin, during their stay in reception centers or in other lodgings, they usually establish contacts with politically engaged associations that work for the rights of refugees and migrants. This is likely to happen because these associations have been working at the local level for many years gathering important knowledge about actors, places and institutions involved in the reception of asylum seekers. In this way, individuals gain awareness as political and social actors who defend their rights and start claiming these rights. The most common strategies for speaking out are organized demonstrations in the city and at the reception centers. The refugees step out of their role of helpless people and act as individuals who are entitled to claim rights. However, in some cases, the paternalist approach plays an important role, as we can see in the words of a person interviewed who spoke about a strike that had been organized at the reception center: ‘Four people came to me and woke me up at midnight, saying “we are going to strike tomorrow”. I said “things will not be better just because you strike. It’s better to speak to the director first, it’s better to tell him what we need. He will understand everything!”’ (Interview with an asylum seeker in the reception center 30/06/2011).

Here the role of hierarchies inside the center is underlined. They become aware of their situation and start organizing strikes and protests, although they live under constant pressure and fear. An asylum seeker at the reception center said, ‘You get me? When we have a problem, you know we have to be united. When somebody has a problem we have a meeting among us, to solve the problem but there is no need to fight. It’s not necessary. All right! Because when we came here, the chief told us that if there is any fight here, if anybody fights here he will kick that person out. And then when he sends you out, you do not know where to go. You do not know what is going to happen. So you have to be quiet and ... calm down so that you can understand each other and you know. It’s working’. (23/06/2011)

At this stage, for refugees and asylum seekers it is still difficult to understand the complexity of the reception system. It appears to them as a black box. However, they are aware of their precarious situation and, in some cases, they start raising their voices to claim their rights. It can be said that at the beginning the asylum seeker and refugee perceives him or herself primarily as a migrant, a person travelling. Schengen borders are no different from other previously crossed borders.

However, there is a difference in the way migrants perceive entering the EU region and other regions. Europe is usually represented as a rich and 'advanced' region. Consequently, in the European peoples' imaginary, refugees usually flee from their country towards some country of the global North to improve their life. However, evidence shows that in most cases their migratory path has been long and consists of several intermediate stages, and that Italy or Europe are not final destinations. This shows that they are not inexperienced migrants, but people who already have a history of mobility.

The self-representation construction process is obviously related to the possibility to seek asylum and get support and acceptance in a European country. The asylum seekers we interviewed perceived of themselves as people allowed to have access to the 'socially advanced' Western societies. For some, this new status is accompanied by a perception of being saved, or of being in a much easier condition than that experienced in their home country or during the trip to Europe. The feeling of being saved has been particularly evident in our fieldwork, because of the fact that the reception center was run by the Red Cross, which uses a charitable approach. This certainly implied that the self-representation of the care givers, and the rhetoric used was often based on the concepts of *need* and *help*. The position as *saviors* with which the professional caregivers identify themselves is related to the public image of the Red Cross in general. During a period of humanitarian emergency, they see themselves in the role of the *helpful* towards the *helpless*. In fact, the attitude expressed by those who have the institutional role of caregivers is that they are *saviors* who provide care services to people in need, using the static image of the refugee as a disoriented and desperate castaway.

An important point is the interview, during which a decision is made whether a person is allowed to stay in the country or not. While awaiting the interview applicants usually live in temporary housing situations such as welcome centers or camps. This period usually lasts from six months to one and a half years, depending on the efficiency of the territorial commissions. Participant observation at a refugee reception center close to Turin has shown how the relation to people and places changes during their stay. At first, the applicant's aim in daily activities is to acquire familiarity with other residents, other applicants and professional caregivers. Most also spend time getting to know places such as the camp and the urban environment outside the camp. The need to be autonomous in managing their own spaces and activities increases. The need to redesign their experience and refocus their life goals in relation to the new condition also grows.

The applicants gradually become aware of the fact that the spaces of their actions are embedded in a complex organizational and legislative system. They rarely have the opportunity to understand the exact mechanisms that they are subject to. Our research highlighted various

causes: one is related to the poor foreign language skills of the caregivers, who spoke little English. Another is related to the lack of willingness of the caregivers to explain the complexity of the reception system's administration. This lack of clarity in defining the situation creates frustration in the interviewed refugees, a feeling of powerlessness as well as uncertainty. Somehow the situation is as if it was worse than being in prison. Their stay in the reception center is indefinite, even if it is temporary, and the reason for it is not clear. Applicants did not receive information about how to follow the bureaucratic procedures for receiving a residence permit, or about how long it will take to analyze. They are not provided with any detailed information about possible errors in their application, about what institutions are responsible for the process, and the implications of the legal procedures. Hence, given the lack of information about the functioning of the system as a whole, asylum seekers and refugees develop a growing perception of being treated as if they were children. One person living at the reception center told us: 'They treat us like children, but we are all grown-ups!' (Interview with an asylum seeker at the reception center, 15/06/2011). When we asked to explain, he said that the caregivers do not understand them when they speak, and vice versa, because they do not speak English very well. Moreover, the caregivers tell them what to do and what not to do, what is correct or incorrect behavior. The asylum seeker emphasizes it is much more pressure than a parent places on a child.

The complexity embedded in these relationships, combined with the need for caregivers to maintain control at the center, led to the adoption of the so called strategies of voice (Hirschman 1970). In this practice, strikes, demonstrations, and other expressions of dissent that are more or less violent, are the most common strategies. During the research at the reception center the asylum seekers conducted two strikes. The reason was the perception that they were being treated differently from other asylum seekers at a reception center nearby. The different treatment involved different amounts of money that they were given daily, and different food provisions. Communication among people at the two different centers was common. They originated from relations of friendship and solidarity that had developed over time, partly as a consequence of the frequent displacement of people from one reception center to the other carried out by the authorities managing the reception center. During the strikes, asylum seekers refused to show up at the usual mealtime, signaling a break in the everyday routine, and putting themselves in opposition to the rules established by the Red Cross staff. From an external point of view we could say that the applicant finds him or herself in a situation of structural violence (Galtung 1969). We use this term to refer to a form of violence in which some social structures or social institutions purportedly harm people by denying their basic needs. Hence, it is not an institutional violation of rights that establishes this kind of violence, but an entire system that controls and acts invisibly upon people. In particular, in the case study in Turin, this form of violence was evident to the extent that access to certain services was impeded or hindered. One example is that there were no agreements reached for the free use of public transportation, and that the asylum seekers could rarely choose where they wanted to stay: their assignments to and movements among reception structures were decided by higher authorities. In other words, structural violence becomes visible in the agency

of the authorities. In cases when there is no specific law or the possibility to broadly interpret the law, authorities and bureaucrats happen to have more power, which means that they can decide about practical aspects of procedural implementation. As a consequence, it is increasingly difficult for asylum seekers to clearly understand the functioning of the entire reception process.

Public Discourses: Villains or Victims?

As we have mentioned, the state actors and institutions that work at the national and regional level have a crucial role in the social construction of the refugee, both *de jure* and *de facto*, defining their legal status and the practices they must comply with. The state's policies and decisions about immigration and refugees are often highly influential on the media, and consequently on the public perception of refugees. The idea of an immigrant *invasion* created by right-wing political parties and spread by the mass media, is still a powerful discourse that highly influences the imaginary of citizens.

In the public discourse, the word *refugee* evokes ambiguous images often accompanied by a sentiment of compassion and hostility. The media provides incomplete news and inaccurate accounts. It often generates confusion in public opinion, making it difficult for people to distinguish the difference between categories of immigrants. Italian public discourse often muddles labels such as *immigrant*, *clandestine*, *irregular*, *illegal*, *refugee*, and *asylum seeker*. A similar confusion surrounds the places where refugees are housed: in the public discourse they are often vaguely called *camps*. There is no distinction made between the different kinds of reception structures that actually exist: reception structures and identification and expulsion camps for illegal immigrants are referred to with the same term.

In general, the portrayal of asylum seekers and refugees alternates the idea of victim with the idea of villain. The negative labels also include the notion of that *immigrants live at government expense*, which defines refugees and asylum seekers as exploiters of the state's economic and social assistance resources. According to the legal definition, an asylum seeker and refugee is a victim of conflicts and persecution in his own country, from which she is escaping. This makes them a victim in the eyes of those who perceive themselves as saviors. In the collective imaginary, refugees are victims because they are forced to leave their country, which was a safe place that turned unsafe after war, political persecution or climate changes.

The image of the refugee presented by the media as someone deserving pity is based on the fact that by law those granted asylum are victims, and as a consequence are treated as such by the welcoming system. In Turin, as in many other Italian cities, the welcoming system offers basic forms of social intervention in places that were planned for marginal categories of people and not exclusively for asylum seekers or refugees. These spaces are shared with the homeless, drug addicts, etc. The welcoming system also offers a first social and professional integration. This image sticks to the asylum seekers, identifying them as being responsible for deficits in the everyday life of the host society. Instead of being perceived as capable individuals, with agency and the capacity for interaction and integration, refugees are labeled by public discourse

as passive victims. While economics reduces those people to numbers, the public imaginary emphasizes their uselessness.

Conclusions

Throughout this article we have tried to provide an interpretation about how asylum seeker and refugee are socially constructed categories. The two levels have been kept distinct here to grasp the complexity of this phenomenon. External structures such as the legal system and public discourse contribute to the construction of migrants as *refugees* and how the latter perceive themselves. Individuals seem bounded within these discourses.

Process analysis has emphasized the dynamic nature of identity construction (Bohmer, Shuman 2007; McGhee 2006; Selm Thorburn, Van 1998; Vas Dev 2009). People labelled by a system develop tools to cope with the transitional phases established by bureaucracy, laws and funding. Migrants progressively define themselves as asylum seekers and then as refugees, while public discourse shapes an ambiguous image of refugees as victims or villains. The exploitation of the public discourse by humanitarian associations, local operators and by national policies contributes to spreading the idea of refugees as passive victims.

Although being victim of persecution is a prerequisite for obtaining refugee status or other forms of international and national protection, we have tried to show that there is a second victimization process that takes place in the societies of arrival: it is precisely this process that we are addressing and questioning when speaking about asylum seekers as 'passive victims'. Welcoming projects are in fact increasingly implementing policies that reinforce dependency instead of fostering and enhancing individual and group empowerment. This leads individuals that are already victims in their home societies to become victims once more, namely of bureaucratic mechanisms and a welcoming system that is not transparent enough to be fully understood and dealt with by newcomers.

This delicate situation is compounded by problems internal to the complex and not fully functioning welcoming system, which lacks suitable facilities and funding for the number of refugees it must accommodate (SPRAR 2009). Although European Union discourse emphasizes the importance of welcoming refugees (Herzfeld 1992), the work of the Italian government is not as effective as the situation requires. There is a clear contradiction between humanitarian aspirations and concrete efficiency. The notion of efficiency, which is also a category used by public institutions to justify their operations, appears here to be used as a ploy. Nominally, its function is to make it possible to care for a wider range of people, but practically it re-creates a stereotype functional to the contemporary neoliberal nation-state system.

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