Social Construction of the "Good Refugee" and the Resistances of Asylum Seekers in Italy between Marginalization and Autonomous Crossing of Urban Spaces

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ABSTRACT   Recent research and studies have undermined the idea that borders are not only a demarcation between an inside and an outside, but a performative space around which unexpected interactions, power relations, economic value, conflicts and new spatialities are produced. Inside and around the structures organized for the reception of asylum seekers, we are witnessing a constantly evolving process of production of new social relations and new micro-spatialities that tend to progressively change the territorial features. This paper, based on observations and materials collected during a long ethnographic study carried out between Padua and Venice, investigates the controversial relations between asylum seekers and such urban spaces and suburbs, with attention given to migrants who relate to the territory just as a point of transit. We analyze the widespread phenomena of segregation these individuals, who have often left the reception system, are subjected to in their daily routine of using public space in certain urban areas. Moreover, through a perspective and a positioning that allowed us to live some protests and phenomena of resistance "from within", we focus on the ways in which the streets and the squares of the provincial towns and urban centers have presented themselves as "borderscapes".

KEYWORDS   bordering, urban segregation, resistance, contested spaces, battleground

Introduction

Since 2014, the issue of receiving asylum seekers has unquestionably gained prominence in migration studies, as well as in media and political discourse in Italy. Numerous studies and a great deal of empirical research have highlighted how, within reception centers, the rights and self-determination of the individuals concerned are frequently compromised, giving way to a complex interplay of social segregation, "infantilization", and victimization. In many instances, the day-to-day management of these facilities has revealed instances of discipline and "subordination" facilitated by the normalization of emergency protocols. Furthermore, the administration of these reception spaces often exhibits control practices that are in constant tension with the resilience and resistance put in action by the beneficiaries of asylum services.

This scenario is punctuated by negotiations, conflicts, and ongoing negotiations among the various stakeholders (Sorgoni 2011; Manocchi 2014; Campesi 2014; Pinelli 2017; Guida 2017; Firouzi Tabar 2019). Building upon classical studies exploring the intersection of humanitarianism and security politics in asylum policy management, as well as power dynamics and subordination within camps (Malkki 1996; Agier 2005; Fassen 2012), there has been a growing emphasis on the daily operations and living conditions within reception centers in Italy. This heightened attention coincides with a systematic acknowledgment of issues involving discrimination, segregation dynamics, and widespread critiques pertaining to social and healthcare support, legal assistance, and more.

In recent years, prompted by a "double emergency" faced by asylum seekers during the pandemic, as well as a broader increase in exclusion from reception measures and a heightened trend toward the criminalization of migrants and solidarity groups, the concept of "securitization" within Italian migration policies has gained traction (Pitzalis 2020; Sanò and Firouzi Tabar 2021). An inclination toward treating migrants as potentially "expendable" (Firouzi Tabar and Fabini 2023), particularly those who are newly arrived, has become apparent, indicating a significant tightening of criteria and conditions regarding the social and territorial integration of asylum seekers. The material and symbolic barriers of reception, however, are becoming more porous.

Many asylum seekers, either by force or voluntarily, depart from their host facilities and end up residing in Italian cities under precarious socio-legal circumstances. Consequently, it is of growing significance to advance critical studies and research that delve into the role played by this "presence" within urban settings. This exploration should encompass aspects such as processes of discrimination and oppression, as well as asylum seekers' capacity to reshape and perpetuate the city and its spaces through their individual decisions. Moreover, it should encompass the emancipatory dynamics that influence them.

In this article, our aim is to explore the positioning and collocation of asylum seekers within specific urban settings in Italy. This investigation will encompass individuals considered "transitory" as well as migrants who are seeking to establish a long-term life perspective within the local territory. We will particularly emphasize the counter-conducts and forms of resistance that these individuals, whether individually or collectively, employ. To begin, we will contextualize our work within the framework of significant scholarly references, encompassing both sociological and anthropological studies on migration. Additionally, we will draw from insightful analyses that delve into migrant subjectivity through the lens of critical urban studies (Brenner 2009). Subsequently, we will present empirical insights derived from an ethnographic study conducted in the city of Padua, situated in northern Italy. Additionally, we will draw upon empirical research conducted by other authors within various territorial contexts across Italy.

Methodological Notes

This article contains some empirical contributions that emerged during an ethnographic research project involving extensive periods of participant observation as well as direct and active engagement in various protests and mobilizations, where asylum seekers

advocated for their rights within reception facilities and dignified forms of social inclusion within the local territory. Although it will not be articulated in this contribution, it is important to mention that the topic of positioning in the research field, discussed in more detail on another occasion with reference to this ethnographic research (Firouzi Tabar 2021), and the consequent need for a continuous self-reflexive process, has played and still plays a central role in this ethnographic research.

The research, initiated in 2015, is structured into three distinct temporal and spatial segments although the contacts and interactions with some migrants was long-lasting and went through all stages of the search.

In the initial two parts, we examined the organization of reception facilities and the conditions prevailing within them, followed by an exploration of the social ramifications brought about by the pandemic on the lives of asylum seekers. At this stage, the meeting with asylum seekers and the building of bonds and connections with them took place through a few difficult visits inside the reception camps, but above all through daily frequenting of the neighboring areas where migrants spent time to escape from the overcrowded structures that housed them.

The ongoing third part of the study involves a shift in focus beyond these facilities, concentrating on the circumstances and life trajectories of certain asylum seekers who have been excluded from reception measures. Particular emphasis is placed on those individuals who have chosen or been compelled to reside within informal settlements.

During this phase, our presence in the research field and the interactions have been facilitated both by the multifaceted relationships established during the preceding stages of the study and by the fact that the informal settlement emerged in the same square where I am engaged as an activist within a social and cultural space called STRIA. Within STRIA, a legal support desk for migrants operates, which further aids in fostering interactions and insights.

Beyond the "Social Trap" of Reception Centers

The focus on rights violations and the ongoing resistances within and surrounding reception facilities has been complemented by scholarly exploration of the interactions between asylum seekers and the territory, including its spaces. This connection closely echoes the concept of a "social trap" as proposed by Armando Cutolo and Pietro Saitta (2017: 201–202), which they define with great significance:

> An apparatus in which the migratory paths of the new postcolonial generations fleeing the repressive social orders of the countries of origin are immobilized, where they have not been annihilated by the crossing of Libya or shipwrecked in the Mediterranean. In the reception centers, the attempts at emancipation – infrapolitical and cosmopolitan at the same time – of a generation that affirms its right to escape (Mezzadra 2006) not only and not so much from wars, dictatorships and economic crises, but above all from space subordinates who assigns it the current "national order of things". (Malkki 1995)

The concept of the "good refugee" shaped by the management of asylum policies, has resulted in more than just the creation of "infantilizing" living conditions within host facilities, characterized by rules, prohibitions, and disciplinary mechanisms, as well as a pronounced inclination toward free, poorly compensated, and precarious employment (Dines and Rigo 2015; Mellino 2019; Di Cecco 2019). Within the repressive framework instigated by the reception system, we also identify a dual approach: on one hand, a deliberate detachment between asylum seekers and the broader territory – its public spaces, streets, squares, gathering spots, social agents, socio-cultural services, institutions, and more – and on the other hand, a distinct spatial and temporal positioning within the surrounding social fabric.

This internal practice of bordering, which we interpret as a form of subaltern inclusion (Ambrosini 1995) or differential inclusion (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), manifests as a diffuse and nuanced urban segregation. This subaltern positioning can be pragmatically understood by considering two primary factors, among others. Firstly, across Italian territories, it's not the social, cultural, or political facets of local institutions that engage with the lives of asylum seekers, but rather the Prefectures. These institutions, by their very definition and inherent operational framework, tend to perceive and address individuals through the lens of control and security.

As a consequence, the relocation of asylum seekers within Italy, particularly those arriving via the Mediterranean, adheres to a dispersal strategy. This strategy often involves establishing reception facilities in peripheral, isolated, and at times hard-to-reach locations. Consequently, a notable reliance on these facilities is instilled, curbing the freedom of movement within urban areas and hindering autonomous access to the myriad opportunities presented by the territory (Pitzalis 2021). This peripheralization also hinders interaction with extra-institutional social networks in the territory, which, in the absence of inclusive institutional policies, are often a fundamental resource for asylum seekers, especially for those outside the reception system (Pasian, Storato, and Toffanin 2020).

At the same time, however, it has been noted, as a further demonstration of the ambivalences that mark migratory movements and their governance, that "dispersal produced the conditions within which such opposition to government policy could be fostered, and alliances of interest between activists, local authorities, and asylum seekers could be forged" (Darling 2021: 907).

The national and local institutional actors who govern the "reception chain" tend not to favor adequate ways of accessing the city, often not even considering the right to live in the city and the right to social inclusion as a right.[1] Therefore, "the tendency to consider forced migrants as a temporary population" (Caroselli and Semprebon 2021: 176), and to represent them as "others" from the ordinary life of the city seems to be consolidating: a limbic figure constantly put to the test according to the criteria of the "perfect victim",

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[1] Emblematic from this point of view is the Decree Law 132/2018 (Salvini Decree), which provides for a cut in the resources provided for the reception system and for the exclusion of asylum seekers from the ordinary and public reception facilities – the only to provide for specific requirements in terms of social inclusion.

constantly waiting to somehow enter society and therefore often and for a long time placed in segregate spaces and precarious and indeterminate temporalities (Tazzioli 2018; Jacobsen, Karlsen, and Khosravi 2021).

The walls of reception, however, are particularly porous, and its "revolving doors" in fact provide for a constant "turn-over" between inside and outside, sometimes forcedly, sometimes voluntarily (Firouzi Tabar 2020). This characteristic is enhanced by a recent tendency to exclude many migrants, who would be legitimately entitled to it, from the reception system, transforming them into homeless asylum seekers (Osservatorio Diritti 2023; A.S.G.I. 2023). It was pointed out that this exclusion mainly affects migrants arriving by land via the Balkan route (Caroselli and Semprebon 2021).

However, it's worth noting that in certain instances, reception facilities are forsaken due to a sense of open hostility to the "infantilization" mechanisms. Migrants perceive their stay "in these places as equal to living in a prison because of the prohibition to invite friends, to cook by themselves, and the obligation to exit and enter the center at certain times" (Belloni 2016: 11). Consequently, it has become increasingly imperative to consider the circumstances and life paths of numerous applicants who, having departed from the institutional reception system, reside within the city. These individuals face exposure to profound social neglect, repressive actions by law enforcement, and intimidation marked by coercive dynamics rooted in the concept of "deportability" (De Genova 2002).

Simultaneously, particularly concerning migrants' housing strategies, the "informal" presence and movement across the territory, exhibited by both transitory individuals and those seeking a more permanent stay, must be observed within a framework that acknowledges the interplay between exclusion and social marginalization, as well as autonomy and self-determination (Belloni, Fravega, and Giudici 2020).

Homeless asylum seekers do not merely passively succumb to the processes of urban segregation. Instead, they often leverage the city by creating and inhabiting specific interstitial spaces (Fontanari and Ambrosini 2018) to gather resources for their continued journey or to establish fresh forms of inclusion. This is achieved through interactions and connections with the local social networks and low-threshold services that are available:

> The (in)visibility and the emptiness that characterise these interstitial spaces make them a source of autonomy. Due to their ambivalent nature, both invisibility and emptiness turn out to be crucial elements in the study of interstitial urban spaces, representing the coefficients through which the emergence of creativity and potential within these spaces can be grasped. On the one hand, the interstices reveal the "will of the State" in not recognising, both legally and socially, homeless and undocumented people; on the other hand, they enable individuals to exercise creativity and practices of resistance in their constant "struggle for survival" (Simone 2004; Brivio 2013; Mitchell 2013). (Sanò, Storato, and Della Puppa 2021: 3)

The control framework imposed on asylum seekers encounters unforeseen events and strikes initiated by the migrants themselves. In various forms and for multiple reasons, migrants often engage in informal and occasionally illegal ways of occupying metropolitan, urban, and rural spaces. They become active participants in subjective processes of conflict and negotiation, contributing to the shaping of the territory. Their active presence enables

them to engage in the governance of urban space (Darling 2017; Kreichauf and Mayer 2021) and the "transforming [of] the locations and the material spaces they occupy, and the functions, purposes and meanings of these places" (Kreichauf and Glorious 2021: 880). This act of "making spaces" (Colucci and Gallo 2016) by migrants outside the reception system becomes evident through the study of informal settlements "addressing the study of the informality of asylum seekers and refugees mostly in terms of research on their experiences of dwelling" (Degli Uberti 2021: 7).

Using the City: To Stay, to Accumulate Resources, to Leave Again

Migration, in its diverse phases and stages, does not follow a linear trajectory or a fixed plan. It remains continually exposed to evolving structural and subjective factors. Asylum seekers' choices and perspectives are highly mutable and can shift along their migratory journey. Given this intricate complexity, involving multiple variables, it can be postulated that a clear demarcation doesn't exist between the desire to settle and attain resources for dignified inclusion within cities, and the objective of accumulating economic and social capital for transitional purposes.

As highlighted earlier, the control mechanism embodied by the reception system sometimes serves to disengage and even exclude beneficiaries from the opportunities and resources offered by the territory and its spaces. In contrast, in other instances, this control apparatus permits a subordinate territorial integration, influenced by stereotypes constructed around the asylum seekers' identity. This identity is often marked by the stigma of victimization, coupled with the notion of hospitality and the right to asylum as concessions that must be earned.

The choice of various asylum seekers in the city of Padua to wear visible orange shirts and to work toward cleaning the sidewalks of some neighborhoods to gain integration seems to us emblematic of this condition of subordination which marks the presence and visibility in the urban space. It is not difficult to think of a connection between the almsgiving to which the cartel refers and the charitable approaches found in the reception facilities.

Picture 1: "Dears, I wish to integrate honestly into your city without asking for alms. From today I will keep your street clean, I only ask you for a contribution for my work" (translation by the author)

Simultaneously, visibility on the streets can serve as a valuable instrument, embodying resistance and the tensions of emancipation. This visibility can be oriented toward both achieving dignified forms of settlement and inclusion within the territories, and accumulating social capital that aids in facilitating continued intra-national and intra-European mobility trajectories.

As showed elsewhere through certain statistics (Firouzi Tabar 2020), the reception barriers are permeable due to consistent leaks and forays beyond their physical and symbolic confines. This is facilitated by migrants' deliberate choice to become visible within urban spaces and establish novel interactive methods with the resources, services, and a multitude of actors present within the urban context.

Such urban tension has led Chiara Marchetti to speak of "cities of exclusion" where – in a complex plan of control, selection and management that intertwines economic aims, propaganda, defense of cultural identities, etc. – "arguments for refusing asylum seekers and refugees can be more explicitly aggressive and nationalistic, or more hidden and ambiguous, recalling even paternalistic reasons" (Marchetti 2020: 23).

Recently, this political and institutional adversity to the active presence of asylum seekers within the urban landscape has received explicit validation, exacerbated by a strong populist sentiment prevailing in Italy and much of Europe. Specifically, this trend was exemplified by the substantial exclusion of these individuals from exceptional care and support measures during the pandemic, as well as the establishment of highly precarious routes to services and the creation of discriminatory channels of "parallel welfare" (Semperbon 2021).

The urban space evolving beyond reception facilities transforms into a contested arena, characterized by conflicts and negotiations. It serves as an unstable battleground where on one side, individuals assert and practice their right to inclusion and mobility, while on the other side, migration governance frameworks come into play. The spaces of the city, especially some specific areas such as the railway station, become battlegrounds marked by changing power relations "for the physical and symbolic production, occupation and appropriation of (public) space" (Cancellieri 2015: 10). This "spatial agency" that Cancellieri leads back to "the struggle for public space" can be a condition and a prelude to further forms of socio-political protagonism in urban contexts. If it is true that the intertwining of "care, cure and control" (Agier 2005) has recently seen the element of control gradually prevailing, the possibility for asylum seekers to take up spaces of visibility and portions of autonomy in the urban space can be conditioned by the ability and the possibility of building new alliances and cooperation with extra-institutional social actors. In this sense, it seems correct to argue that "the management of asylum at a local level is the output of conflict and cooperation, of alternative views and political actions, of official policies and practical help, of formal statement and informal practices" (Ambrosini 2021: 2).

The strategic utilization of territorial networks established by asylum seekers beyond reception areas, to accumulate relational assets that enhance their agency, significantly underscores the importance of their relationship with local antiracist activists. While this context is not conducive to an in-depth exploration of this matter, it is crucial to emphasize

that this relationship – sometimes directly aligned with practices aimed at reclaiming deserted spaces and establishing new informal settlements – is intricate and ambivalent.

Here we can imagine the existence of a certain difference between solidarity networks that manage to focus on the self-determination of the migrants and favor a rupture and discontinuity with respect to the logic of control and subjection that they suffer, and situations where there is a strong risk to reproduce the same paternalistic dynamics that they wish to destabilize (Belloni 2016; Zamponi 2017; Dadusc and Mudu 2020)

Streaking the Spaces, Occupying the Squares, Crossing the Streets

When examining the interactions between reception beneficiaries and urban spaces beyond the confines of the facilities, it becomes evident that informal settlements – located along riverbanks, beneath bridges, and in the vicinity of railway stations – as well as housing occupations, stand out as the most prevalent practices.

In the accounts of these acts of reclamation, we can discern a distinct focus on the subjects' capacity for action (agency), which resolutely contradicts the infantilizing and victimizing rhetoric often dominant in mainstream media and political discussions.

Somewhat distinct is the situation involving the NGO "Medici Senza Frontiere" (Doctors Without Borders). In their publication of a significant survey on informal settlements of asylum seekers in Italy (2016), the emphasis tended to lean more toward the social and health challenges characterizing these environments, along with the social and spatial segregation experienced by the individuals in question. Consequently, the survey assigns less prominence to the resilience and emancipatory nature of the choices made by asylum seekers.

Among the cities that were mapped, the case of Padua stands out as particularly intriguing.

The time is December 2013, approximately two years after the initiation of the so-called "North African Emergency". Around 50 migrants, individuals possessing humanitarian protection status, make the decision to occupy a living space situated not far from the train station, with the support of the Razzismo Stop Association. This occupation emerges as a direct response to an immediate necessity – that of housing – as existing institutional solutions remain absent. Consequently, the space swiftly evolves into an experimental arena for the collective administration of a territory. Here, migrants and local solidarity groups collaborate to test techniques for shared spatial management and the handling of internal tensions and conflicts.

Since 2015, this settlement has been impacted by the implications of nationwide developments in the context of a new phase of migration control. The space witnesses a steady influx of asylum seekers, often individuals escaping from large reception camps, as well as an increasing turn-over that progressively reshapes it into a transit hub. These ongoing processes have altered the initial purpose of the space and its internal organization to such an extent that the management of the settlement faces a crisis. This crisis arises from the challenge of striking a balance between its original role as housing and its new function as a transit point.

> We entered here with a united group, now there are almost none of the first brothers. There are applicants who come and go. You won't believe it, sometimes they come from co-ops and dump people here 50 meters away. And those who have revoked their welcome also come, perhaps because they protested. There are always quarrels and clashes between brothers of different nationalities, no one thinks about taking care of the place, they stay so little and they leave. (Moussa, original occupants group[2])

Another housing occupation, that of the buildings of the ex-Moi in Turin, which since 2013 has seen several thousand migrants living in or passing through those places, shows us how asylum seekers, autonomously conquering spaces of usability and visibility, "reproduce the material conditions and intangible subsistence / permanence / continuation of one's social and geographical mobility" (Stopani and Pampuro 2017: 56). One of the factors noted by these researchers – in this complex process of reproduction of new spatialities and relationships that concerns issues such as employment, the relationship with solidarity groups in the city, and obtaining regular residence documents – strongly recalls the case of Padua and concerns "the social dynamics that develop between mobility and local integration overcoming the opposition of these two conditions" (Stopani and Pampuro 2017: 72).

In fact, the ex-Moi, in addition to representing a dignified housing solution for many migrants, also becomes an extremely important space for the production and reproduction of information, knowledge, skills and relationships that become a common heritage of logistic tools constantly put into circulation in favor of the trajectories of mobility of migrants in transit:

> The Ex Moi appears to be a node that is simultaneously an arrival point and a starting point, a refuge to reach but also a place in which to gather information in order to leave again. It is precisely this ability to be updated and continuously new that makes it a resource: the information here is always reactivated and reworked by newcomers and the strong turnover of people who pass through this space makes it continuously alive and different every day. (Stopani and Pampuro 2017: 69)

Regarding this ambivalence and multi-functionality of informal settlements, it is important to report a recent study by Irene Peano, conducted through participant, engaged research in several agro-industrial districts and migration hubs in Italy, especially at the slum-camps in the districts of Foggia and of the Plain of Gioia Tauro. In order to analyze the characteristics and functions of these settlements, Peano focuses on the concept of differential inclusion (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), adopting an interpretative lens that sees the logistics of migration – dotted with violent elements of subjection and exploitation where "the price of becoming an asylum seeker is presumed to involve a sort of forfeiture of migrants' autonomy" (De Genova, Garelli and Tazzioli 2018: 254) – constantly in tension with expressions of "counter-logistic". This multiple universe of resistances takes shape also thanks to attempts by migrants to use these places of marginalization "as places of refuge and transit, and as points of connection for the organization of the next leg of trans-national and trans-continental journeys" (Peano 2021: 9).

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[2]   These words are recorded in the ethnographic diary kept during the ethnographic research conducted in Padua we have mentioned above.

A similar focus on the interplay between the trajectories of asylum seekers' (im)mobility and their interactions with the city, along with the utilization of its spaces, infrastructures, and opportunities, is evident in a recent study by Giuliana Sanò and Francesco della Puppa (2021). In this study, migrants' decisions to either stay within a specific territory or move within intra-national or intra-European contexts are contextualized by prioritizing their connection with the territory's spaces and resources. It highlights the strategic manner in which migrants harness these resources to inform their choices.

The significance of the urban environment and the informal comprehension and utilization of its spaces becomes strikingly apparent through the numerous testimonies gathered in this research. This study was conducted between the city of Trento and the Gioia Tauro Plain in the northern and southern regions of Italy, respectively.

Beyond the reception facilities, which provide a haven from city life, it's the urban environment that morphs into a form of vast refuge – an expansive familial space ensuring a substantial degree of social accessibility. Sanò and Della Puppa perceive this urban landscape as an extensive open-air dwelling, offering unforeseen avenues for survival and emancipation. The experiences at the heart of this ethnographic research also affirm that pausing in a city and temporarily halting the migratory journey is not indicative of surrender or failure.

In fact, on the contrary, staying in a city can take on tactical value, which once again underlines the irreducibility of the subjects to the role of passive victims and demonstrates "the subject's ability to forge alliances and build relationships with local actors, to find stability and make space for itself" (Sanò and Della Puppa 2021: 11).

Picture 2: March from the reception centre of Cona

The significance of presence and visibility within the urban environment became evident during the initial stages of the ethnographic research I conducted on the organization of the reception system in Padua and the surrounding province. The setting is the spring of 2015, and the sudden establishment of a large first reception camp in the city center takes center stage in public discourse. In this camp, hundreds of individuals reside in tents under undignified social and health conditions. What captures the attention of local media and fuels political discussions is not, as one might anticipate, the violation of the applicants' rights

within the camp. Instead, the focus is on the perceived inappropriateness of their conspicuous presence in the camp's vicinity.

The headlines highlight the migrants' presence as undesirable in the squares and streets of the city center. Throughout the day, the asylum seekers continuously traverse these areas – often to fill the time unoccupied by any meaningful activities. The migrants themselves repeatedly stress that their aim is to gradually acquaint themselves with the city's spaces and its inhabitants. Downplaying the significance of the camp's location, various lawyers, researchers, activists, trade unions, and anti-racist organizations mobilized during that period to advocate for the camp's closure and the relocation of the migrants into dispersed small apartments throughout the province. However, in at least two instances, those directly affected opted to protest against the relocation – a move that local solidarity groups inaccurately interpreted as the asylum seekers' desire. Instead, these individuals insisted on returning to the camp, citing the reasons for this choice that centered on its urban placement.

A Nigerian man's words underline just how crucial and instrumental it is to remain within the urban environment and traverse its spaces as part of their migration trajectory. This is especially vital when confronted with the dynamics of socio-spatial marginalization and the "peripheralization" perpetuated by the reception structures:

> When we were told they moved us from the camp happy. Here (pointing to the walls of the camp) we slept in tents, the same food every day for months and we had to eat queuing up for an hour. Together with other Nigerian friends it is also necessary to think about leaving, but we preferred to wait. Then they moved us to a house in a small town. Everything was nothing, there was not even a bus around to go to Padua. At the camp he told me that sometimes you wait even a year for the Commission. What was I doing for a year in that isolated place? I was not happy to sleep in a Prandina tent, I was sick, but I prefer to stay in the city, here I can meet other people, maybe I find a job to earn or some money, or with other guys in the camp we try to go to another city in Germany. (Nigerian asylum seeker)

About two years later, in 2017, the streets of the city and the province become protagonists again of a new form of visibility of asylum seekers. Approximately 350 asylum seekers, out of a total of around 1300 accommodated in a reception camp nestled in the open countryside between the provinces of Padua and Venice, make the decision to embark on a march through the streets. Commencing their journey from the camp and endeavoring to reach the urban centers, their objective is to engage with institutions and demand the camp's closure and their own relocation.

This situation stands in stark contrast to the earlier scenario, partly due to the distinct role played by the strategic factor of proximity and interaction with the urban environment.

Despite mixed outcomes – with all the demonstrators being relocated to other facilities after the initial march, and the participants of the second march opting to return to the camp to evade significant disciplinary and administrative repercussions – these episodes highlighted the potential for migrants to view the presence, navigation, and occupation of streets and squares as a political instrument to substantively shape their emancipatory demands.

Through walks along provincial roads, riverbanks, and canals, coupled with the utilization of public spaces within the small villages traversed for overnight stays

(including parks, parking lots, municipal halls, schools, and parishes), as well as the strategic occupation of sites like the square in front of the Prefecture of Padua, the asylum seekers have exhibited a remarkable capacity for "strategic improvisation" in their interactions with the territory's spaces, infrastructure, and stakeholders. These subjects have vividly demonstrated what it means to tangibly exhibit agency and "shape spaces" along their migratory trajectory, striving to navigate around the social trap inherent in the reception system.

Picture 3: Piazza Gasparotto, Padua

But as pointed out earlier, invisibility can also be a resource available for the conquest of portions of freedom and autonomy (Sanò, Storato and Della Puppa 2021: 3).

The concluding phase of the ongoing ethnographic research initiated in Padua in 2015 was centered around, and often within, an informal settlement that materialized near the end of 2021. Throughout 2022, this encampment situated beneath the arcades of Piazza Gasparotto, very close to the Padua train station, became a home for numerous asylum seekers who had fled from reception facilities, alongside irregular migrants.

This location was chosen due to its complete visual seclusion from the surrounding areas and its strategically convenient placement – proximity to the railway station, popular

kitchens, and public showers. Throughout this phase, municipal authorities exhibited a mix of responses, oscillating between the provision of essential services – such as night shelters for migrants, including those without documentation, during colder months – and instances of abandonment, which were in part counteracted by the presence of solidarity associations.

These associations, primarily concentrating on legal support but extending their efforts further, aimed to create a network of care and assistance. Their involvement ranged from direct interventions to occasionally reporting significant challenges to the municipality's social services. Furthermore, they acted as a filter and a buffer against more overtly repressive and criminalizing tactics employed by law enforcement agencies.

It should be noted that at certain stages, the socio-sanitary conditions within the settlement were highly critical, accompanied by issues related to drug use and frequent episodes of conflict among its inhabitants. Nevertheless, the concealed and sheltered location of the settlement, along with its strategically advantageous positioning and the presence of social support networks and easily accessible services, facilitated in some cases a more dynamic and independent utilization of the opportunities offered by the urban environment.

As mentioned earlier, the relationships previously built with some of the settlement's inhabitants, but especially my participation as an activist, in the projects of STRIA, a cultural centre inaugurated in 2020 in that square, including the legal support desk I coordinated, ensured daily, trusting interaction with the migrants in the area.

In the final months of 2022, the interactions with the informal settlement's population were a daily occurrence. Through interviews, informal conversations, and consultations at the legal support desk, I gained the opportunity to discern the extent of diversity within the settlement and to realize how this diversity complicated efforts to establish an effective solidarity network around it.

Trying to indicate some categories, the migrants who in some way benefited from the settlement's presence were mainly those who, having found autonomous housing and in some cases work resources, had voluntarily abandoned the reception facilities. For them – both those intending to establish themselves in the city and transient migrants – Piazza Gasparotto served as a crucial point of reference for cultivating and implementing social and relational capital.

To a lesser degree, the square also played a functional role for certain young newcomers. Thanks to the constant presence of fellow migrants and supportive associations, these individuals could obtain valuable information and assistance during the asylum application process. Additionally, the square provided a place for them to spend a few nights while awaiting improved accommodations.

The situation was more critical, and attempts to activate supportive interventions much more complicated, for some migrants radically vulnerable after years of marginalized and segregated life within the reception system. In some cases drug users, in others those with psychiatric problems, sometimes criminalized and with prison experiences, many times involved in episodes of violence, sometimes gender-based violence. In these cases the informal settlement presented itself as yet another area of institutional confinement and neglect. In addition to these particularly problematic cases, another category experienced life in Piazza Gasparotto in an ambivalent manner. These are the asylum seekers forcibly

removed from reception, people who have been present in the territory for many years, trapped in the meshes of a reception process that has not created tools for autonomous inclusion, and who from one moment to the next have found themselves living under the arcades of the square without meaning to.

It seems emblematic that among those I met were some migrants in the protest marches that took place six years earlier, people who at that time expressed all the strength of those fighting for their rights and who today show all the rage and frustration toward an oppressive and discriminatory migration management system, of a reception that in cases like these shows its nature as a "social trap".

However, this trajectory was abruptly disrupted in early 2023 by the establishment of a police station in the square, leading to the subsequent dismantling of the informal settlement. Driven by the accounts of specific residents, the rationale of "security concerns" prevailed, erasing, within a few days, the endeavor to amalgamate the abilities and activities of various social actors. This attempt aimed to construct a supportive and mediating infrastructure capable of serving as a pivotal point, particularly in logistical terms, for the freedom and autonomy of migrants.

Concluding Remarks

The episodes described in this analysis confirm how the "battleground" is constantly crossed by conflicts and tensions and that – despite an alternation between advances and retreats of the subjectivities that claim rights and autonomy – it remains an open and not neutralized space. They also show us how, in this multiplicity of counter-conducts and resistances, the "constituent spaces that are opened up by migrants and refugees' movements and the diverse forms of their special disobedience" (De Genova, Garelli and Tazzioli 2018: 253).

We could see through some examples how this spatial disobedience, with which we can interpret in the concrete "the practices of autonomy that arise from within the constrictions of the marginal leeway in which migrant and refugees move" (De Genova, Garelli and Tazzioli 2018: 260), can show itself in a dynamic and "constituent" relationship with the metropolitan, urban and rural spaces, where the practices of use and production of new spatiality can at the same time take on multiple functions that hybridize settlement and transit. In this sense, it is naturally difficult to draw a clear boundary between the increasingly interconnected dimensions of mobility and immobility, visibility and invisibility, confirming all the complexity of migratory trajectories that the intertwining of structural constraints, unexpected events and subjective choices continually reconfigures:

> …Migrants' aspirations and imaginaries on future horizons of mobility (or immobility) and destinations (not necessary beyond Italian territory) are subject to change along the journey in relation to the transit context of living and just like the trajectories are triggered by casuality as well as fortuities. (Degli Uberti 2021: 11)

The ways of positioning in the territory and of using it in an emancipatory direction observed in this article clearly signal and confirm that irreducibility to the discipline that has been

pointed out many times and reinforce the functionality of key concepts such as the "right to escape" (Mezzadra 2005) in the study of migratory movements and their control.

This applies to migrants who have struggled to demand the recognition of their rights and freedom within the reception structures, but also to those who, having left or never entered the reception system, seek to occupy the space of the city in order to remain with dignity, to accumulate useful resources, or to leave again.

These spaces of tension, conflict and compromise tend to re-configure certain areas of the city, certain "contested neighbourhoods" (Mantovan and Ostanel 2015) where the interaction between homeless asylum seekers and irregular migrants and the police is often at the center of negotiation, or confrontation.

The ambivalent production of these multiple internal borders can result – in particular thanks to the tendency of a selective disapplication of the law and some standard control procedures by the police (Fabini 2023) – in the migrants' freedom to stay in the territory, to enjoy some basic services and to continue crossing it, in some cases defying the Dublin Regulation and moving to other European countries. Or have as a consequence forms of further stigmatization and criminalization, leading to the identification of irregular migrants and homeless asylum seekers within a single category, and leading in some cases to the former being repatriated or taken to the Centers of Permanence for Repatriation (CPR).

In this sense there is no intention to romanticize these types of contexts and processes or to underestimate or downplay the systemic and institutional violence inherent in the governance of recent migration. The battleground is framed by a structural dimension marked by discrimination, dynamics of oppression, exploitation, racism and segregation, and it is in relation to such forms of subjugation, sometimes extremely violent, that by struggling inside and outside the reception system and increasingly by opening and reconfiguring new urban interstices, migrants persist in materializing that "autonomy of asylum" to which Nicholas De Genova, Glenda Carelli and Martina Tazzioli (2018) have properly referred.

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