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The recent tragedies in the Strait of Sicily – the body of water that separates Italy from the North African coast – and the daily arrival of refugees on Italian southern shores, have captured international media attention. Though Italy has become a strategic operational point for the study of forced migration and in discussions on the ambiguities of European protection systems, the spectacularization of the refugees’ arrival eclipses the experiences endured by women and men seeking safety and protection. In particular, institutional silence shrouds what happens after the landing on Italian shores, and the courses asylum seekers follow within the bureaucratic and assistance apparatuses are overshadowed by official data and state regulations.

This article sheds light on some aspects of the protection and assistance system in Italy, documenting the experiences of asylum seekers from a range of African countries who reach Italy after crossing the Mediterranean from Libya, and now live in camps run by the Italian government for the detention and control of undocumented migrants. Although these women and men experienced abuses on their journey to Europe, once in Italy, and in particular within the camps, they are subjected to harsh forms of surveillance, as well as to enforced moral and ethical regimes.

Recent ethnographic researchers on asylum in Europe have focused on repressive policies towards refugees/ asylum seekers and on the ‘camp’ as a political dispositif to control and manage migration for asylum. Invoking Agamben (1995, 2009), they identify the camp (see Hansen & Stepputat 2005; Turner 2005) as a temporary and confined space characterized by the suspension of rights, designed to control and contain asylum seekers through harsh and restrictive measures. Undocumented migrants living within the camp are acknowledged only in terms of ‘bare life’ (as zoe: a body, or a mere human being to be controlled, cured and assisted rather than a political and social subjectivity). ‘Bare life’, which Agamben terms homo sacer, is the ideal type for the excluded human being whose life in the camp is devoid of value. These considerations are useful in recognizing the camp as a system ‘composed of a whole range of techniques of power’ (Whyte 2011a: 19, 2011b; Foucault 1975) aimed at regulating the life of the refugee population. In this article, I follow Agamben in using ‘camp’ to designate a political form of segregation and control, and ‘reception centres’ to indicate the way in which the ‘camp’ is realized in order to contain and govern forced migration.

However, from an ethnographic standpoint, some important dynamics need to be considered. Firstly, the refugees’ point of view, or rather the social meaning they give to their identities and to their experiences before and after migration. This representation does not often coincide with the institutional imaginary circulating within the camp. Secondly, the close connection between the humanitarian and the political dimension. Surveillance and the intent to control is strictly related to the moral and disciplinary project implemented by the humanitarian agencies that run the camps (Agier 2008a, 2008b; Fassin 2005).

By referring to research carried out in 2012/2013 in the reception centres for asylum seekers (CARA – Centri di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo) in western Sicily where men, women and children are held after their arrival on Italy’s southern coast, I will show how the protection and assistance system does not limit itself to recognizing refugees as ‘victims’ or ‘bare life’. Rather, it pursues a more ambitious project in which moral and disciplinary regimes overlap in a systematic, long-term process of subjection.

The overlap of care, control and discipline emphasizes the close connection between the humanitarian apparatus and technologies of control. On the one hand, the political intent to control can be traced within the practices of care and assistance, and on the other hand it is precisely this contiguity that makes control and surveillance an effective system. The efficacy of this pervasive disciplinary regime is further strengthened by its blurriness, which creates confusion, uncertainty and distress in the asylum seekers, who perceive a strong ambiguity in the roles played by the humanitarian agencies’ staff working in the camps.

In 2010, the year of the author’s fieldwork, Italy registered 14,042 requests for asylum. Of these 2,994 were granted refugee status, 1,789 protection and 3,675 a one-year temporary humanitarian protection permit.

In 2014, migrants arriving on Italy’s southern coast by sea route alone increased by more than tenfold, namely 169,072, of whom 64,886 applied for asylum. These are presently being processed. The UNHCR estimates that 3,500 died in 2014 trying to cross the Mediterranean.

Refugee arrivals increased towards the end of 2013, to which the Italian navy responded with the Mare Nostrum Operation, a humanitarian search and rescue operation in the Mediterranean Sea. With this operation now having stood down, the human toll for 2015 may end up even worse.


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MORAL CONTROL AND SURVEILLANCE IN ITALY’S ASYLUM SEEKER CAMPS

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Camps in Italy

In Italy, the asylum application procedure and the protection/assistance system are regulated by Law no. 189/2002 and by several subsequent implementation regulations. Immediately after landing, the police take migrants’ fingerprints and lead them to the police headquarters where, using a form known as C3, they can apply for asylum. Migrants have their asylum claim assessed by one of the Territorial Commissions for Asylum (Commissioni Territoriali per l’Asilo Polistico) scattered throughout the national territory, theoretically within 30 days from submission. However, this almost always takes longer than the period established by law, and it is currently estimated that decisions take about 18 months.

Migrants who are considered eligible to apply for asylum are moved to one of 12 reception centres for asylum seekers known as CARA. Established by the Italian Ministry of the Interior with Decree no. 25/2008, these centres are run by NGOs (non-governmental organizations) or Catholic institutions. They are located throughout the national territory, mainly in the poorer southern regions, at the margins of urban areas or very far from them. Within these structures, social workers, international agency personnel (Save the Children, the International Organization for Migration, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees), lawyers, psychologists, psychiatrists and police officers, work to establish assistance and control relations with asylum seekers. Both of these experiences of ‘prolonged spatial confinement and social segregation’ (Szczepanikova 2012: 130) and help/control relations, deeply affect the asylum seekers’ subjectivities and their social life.

In Sicily, CARA reception centres host men, women, children and families mostly from the Horn of Africa and West Africa. Although each biography represents a particular migration story, these refugees share the experience of long and violent journeys, the transit from Libya and the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea.

One such CARA reception centre where I carried out my research is a camp for 260 asylum seekers (but can hold up to 350 in ‘emergency situations’) located in a very poor Sicilian agricultural settlement of 800 inhabitants. Many reports have denounced the ‘unacceptable living conditions’ in this camp (e.g. mattresses are scattered on the floor, there is no hot water, and no tables or chairs). Furthermore, in contrast with other Italian and EU (European Union) reception centres, this structure includes a military and a police station, a health centre and, above all, a Territorial Commission for Asylum. As a result, the entire asylum application procedure takes place within the camp. In particular, it is in the daily rules and practices performed by the personnel running the camp and aimed at governing the intimate and social life of women asylum seekers that the overlap between moral project and techniques of control becomes evident.

Daily control, moral regimes

Selam, an Eritrean woman who had been living in Sudan since 2004, reached the coast of Sicily in 2010, with her four children aged from 5 to 14. In 2008, having paid 1700 dollars for the passage, she crossed the desert to get to Libya on a Land Rover together with another 40 people. Telling her story, Selam said that she ‘had been really lucky’ not to be sent to a detention camp. Together with her children, she spent 18 months in Libya in very cramped conditions, and she earned 30 euros for three to four hours per a day. After her arrival at the camp, Selam managed to find a job as an off-the-books housemaid, thanks to other women living at the centre, and she earned 30 euros for three to four hours, three times a week. She was immediately reprimanded by her employers and the camp psychologist for ‘her lack of responsibility and commitment to mothering’, claiming that her job would prevent her from looking after her children. Selam felt all the responsibility of migration: she often said ‘I have only myself to rely on’ and felt this was the first step in rebuilding her future, and her children’s.

Temporary permits, social segregation and isolation from urban areas mean that the irregular labour market is the only chance of access to work. Even if it is often...
entangled with forms of exploitation, for asylum seekers it is a tool for managing marginality and the first step in reconstructing their life after fleeing their country of origin. Furthermore, they are not entitled to an allowance or receive a laughable sum (75 euros per month). Despite these conditions, the camp staff often engage in a struggle with new arrivals, and men and women are rebuked and urged to wait for documents, or for a better job.

Social operators and psychologists also judge their past, and previous behaviour. Assistance operators stressed that ‘Italy is not like Libya or like their countries of origin’: here, women like Selam or Maaza can and should be completely responsible mothers and are more independent than they had been in their countries of origin. So far, I have described the pervasive and daily control practices that intrude into the intimate life of asylum seekers. A second discussion point concerns the ambiguity of control and the role played by humanitarian agency personnel as ‘delegates of surveillance’. In other words, the efficacy of control is guaranteed by the confusion and opacity generated by this system of surveillance/care.

The security and police forces running the camp rarely carry out their functions of control. The asylum seekers’ every movement inside and outside the camp is closely monitored by social workers: any temporary absence from the centre requires permission to be granted and must be reported; if guests work, they have to declare what kind of job they do and the name and address of their employer; permission for any visit must be requested from social workers, and it is not always granted; if asylum seekers fail to attend any activities organized inside the camp (language courses, meetings or visits with psychologists), they are reprimanded or accused of cynicism and ingratitude; and personal mail is always opened and checked by the director of the NGO that runs the camp before being delivered to the addressee.

Furthermore, personnel note any behaviour or activity by asylum seekers and gather information on their migration journeys for the Commission for Asylum. The commission office and that of the director of the NGO are physically located side by side. The belief that they exchange information or judgements on asylum seekers produces distrust and strengthens the idea that ‘respecting the rules’ will guarantee the positive outcome of their asylum claim.

From the asylum seekers’ point of view, the NGOs managing the camp, administrative officers and security forces are ‘the same thing’. This perception arises from the deep ambiguity in the role actually played by assistance agencies, and the blurring of responsibilities, which produces unclear care and surveillance roles.

**Conclusion**

These camps are characterized by a protracted segregation and a system of surveillance and assistance that aims to control the flow of the daily lives of asylum seekers. The disciplinary regimes and imaginaries constructed around these camps do not engage or yield to camp residents’ own experiences and sensibilities, their stories, desires and expectations. Their spatial and social segregation, the suspension of citizenship rights and the recognition of them as subjects to be controlled and educated, rather than as subjectivities shaped by a multitude of personal experiences and identities, foster a sense of vulnerability among refugees.

Although the practices enacted by refugees – by women in this case – and their desires, have to be adapted to their social positioning, this does not mean that their movements and expectations remain completely confined within the institutional boundaries. In general, forced migration should be understood as a process that does not end when refugees reach the host country and are granted leave to stay. They continue over time, due to the concrete efforts of men and women engaged in a daily struggle against their own marginality.

Finally, the opacity of control is actually implemented through the ambiguous gaze of assistance that surveils and conceives empty spaces of freedom. For instance, camps are ‘open’, and refugees can come and go. But, where could they go? Prolonged poverty, the lack or insignificance of benefits, extreme difficulty in finding work long after their arrival, lengthy delays in obtaining documents, and the imaginary of the culture of assistance that perceives refugees mainly as subjects devoid of any agency, are the conditions that must be considered to understand the burden of the life within the camps. A careful observer must look beyond the apparent freedoms and concessions, and the imaginary of humanitarian regimes in order to grasp the ambiguous, pervasive and harsh forms through which the surveillance apparatus works.