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On marginal inclusion: refugees at the fringes of citizenship in Portugal

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INTRODUCTION: ON BORDERS AND CRISES

According to data provided by the EASO (European Asylum Support Office), almost 2,700,000 asylum applications were lodged in the EU+ in 2015 and 2016.1 Although the debate on whether this figure portrays an unprecedented, and unexpected, "humanitarian crisis" is still open, it is certainly a number of people in motion that Europe has not witnessed since the Second World War. However, assuming that the European countries have been simply surprised by a phenomenon of unexpected magnitude would seriously downsize the role of the EU in contributing to this outcome, particularly through its border policy and its general attitude towards asylum seekers. Although the effects in terms of human displacement produced by war and instability in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Nigeria, Eritrea - to name just the most representative cases were highly predictable, the EU countries relentlessly refused to establish a common policy of reception, one which would allow regular travel to Europe in search of temporary or permanent protection. As a result, hundreds of thousands of people moved en masse through makeshift means, spending all their savings and putting their lives at risk in order to reach countries where, paradoxically enough, the majority of them were entitled to receive asylum. The most dramatic effect of this choice consists of thousands of deaths in the Mediterranean Sea (almost 15,000 in the last four years)² and unprecedented pressure from illegalised people at the Eastern EU border. A terrible series of tragedies unfolded in the Mediterranean Sea between 2013 and 2016. Each one, culminating in the disappearance of probably 900 people in a shipwreck in the Sicilian Channel on 18th April 2015, set a new record of casualties and was invariably labelled as "the worst tragedy of the Mediterranean" (Vacchiano 2015). The manufactured massification of migrants' despair, as various authors have claimed,3 serves the aim of conveying images of emergency and invasion that end up justifying more surveillance and, ultimately, more borders.

An emblematic case here is that of the European Agenda on Migration, a set of measures showcased as the EU solution to the ongoing "refugee crisis". Presented as a way of warding off further casualties, the Agenda is largely aimed at preventing new arrivals of asylum seekers and other migrants, mainly

- 1 EU Member States plus Norway, Switzerland, Iceland and Lichtenstein.
- 2 https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean.
- 3 See the notion of "border spectacle" in De Genova (2013). See also Casas-Cortes et al. (2015).

through cooperation with transit countries (Carrera, Gros and Guild 2015; Vacchiano 2015). Beyond these deterrents, the Agenda includes an initiative of "burden sharing" based on a scheme to relocate 40,000 people hosted in Italy and Greece into other Member States (a number later increased to 98,000) and, as the only concrete measure to facilitate reception, a programme to resettle up to 22,000 refugees recognised by UNHCR from outside the EU.⁴ Not differently from previous EU initiatives, the Agenda is conceived in conformity with the rationale that human flows must (and can) be channelled into directions that are "useful" and "productive" for the destination countries (van Houtum and Pijpers 2008; Ambrosini 2008; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). This way of engineering human mobility is based on the assumption that people are willing to accept the primacy of governmental priorities over their perceived needs and expectations. As we will see, this is one of the most significant factors explaining the failure of many reception and social inclusion programmes.

In fact, the strongest opposition to the Agenda, and particularly to the relocation plan contained in it, came from a number of EU countries (the UK, Ireland, France, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland) that resolutely refused to comply with it. Owing to pressures exerted by the EU Commission, the initial resistance was mainly overcome, except for the UK, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. Whereas the inception of the Brexit process suspended de facto any UK commitment to the Agenda, the other three countries became the target of an infringement procedure launched by the EU Commission in June 2017. In a completely different move, the Portuguese government strongly supported the initiative and expressed the intention to host 4,775 people. In a later meeting in Brussels, held in February 2016, the Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa expanded this offer further by opening up to 10,400 people through a scheme of bilateral agreements. According to his declarations, they would be employed in areas affected by shortage of manpower, like agriculture and forestation and, if the situation arose, allowed to study at Portuguese universities (Gomes Ferreira 2016). Eventually, the final number agreed in Brussels was 2,951 people, to be relocated from Italy and Greece across two years.

⁴ European Commission – Press release, European Agenda on Migration: Consolidating progress made, Brussels, 15th November 2017, Annex 6: relocation (http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-4484_en.htm, accessed 12th April 2018).

As a consequence, an issue that had gone almost unnoticed in the country (Portugal registered only 477 asylum requests in 2014), took centre stage and turned into a matter of intense public debate. Seminars and other public initiatives that previously would have hardly attracted more than a handful of onlookers, cropped up everywhere and went sold out. Detractors and defenders went repeatedly on air in heated debates, while old and new experts gleaned their appropriate share of attention. Opponents remarked that country-nationals, severely impoverished by the economic crisis, should be prioritised, while a number of local organisations and NGOs responded with an extraordinary mobilisation, creating networks of solidarity and setting up resources for the expected newcomers. Although some groups envisaged the possibility of gaining visibility and State commissions, the majority were moved by ideals of solidarity that cannot simply be reduced to self-interest and profit. Collective involvement and a generally benign attitude owed largely to the images of death and despair coming from Syria, Turkey, Greece and Eastern Europe. And yet, the wish to alleviate human suffering was a motive for ethical engagement according to which a minoritarian, although not negligible, portion of society felt compelled to do its part. As a result, under the initiative of members linked to the Jesuit Refugee Service, a wide platform of volunteers was established, including public and private bodies, banks, companies and universities. Through a large use of voluntary work, this network was meant to support the forthcoming reception process.

On the side of the government, a "Working Group for the European Agenda on Migration" was constituted. The unit is coordinated by the "Immigration and Border Service" of the State Police (SEF) and works with representatives of the Ministries of the Interior, of Education, of Health, the National Institute for Employment and Vocational Training (IFPPT), the National Institute for Social Security, and the High Commissioner on Migration (ACM). Its role is to coordinate reception on a national level by setting up a system of local programmes based on public-private partnership. Among the requirements defined for such programmes, there are the principles of "giving value to the reception potential of territories of middle and low density, preventing the concentration of people" and "ensuring the gradual acquisition of autonomy by refugees". Reception programmes are to provide housing, language tuition,

⁵ Working Group for the European Agenda on Migration, Principles of reception proposals: http://www.refugiados.acm.gov.pt/instituicoes/, accessed 17th April 2018.

vocational training, legal counselling, and accompaniment for medical needs and psychological support. They last 18 months, during which beneficiaries are supported by a monthly allowance of 150 euros and are required to make the necessary steps to live independently in Portugal. As we will see below, reality is much more complex: services are often unavailable, 18 months is barely enough to find one's bearings in a new society and the monthly stipend is little more than pocket money.

By late 2015, the Working Group was in place, the platform of volunteers was ready to work, and a number of other institutions were willing to do their part. Everything seemed impeccably set up for Portugal to be like the other EU countries. Except for one detail: refugees were not coming... Indeed, as time went on, it became clear that refugees, and particularly the awaited Syrians, were not keen on arriving at all. Greek and Italian authorities were occasionally blamed for their supposed organisational faults, while some dared insinuate that people might not want to come to Portugal. Some Portuguese NGOs had even carried out missions to Greece so as to meet asylum seekers and convince them of the many advantages of choosing Portugal, although with poor results. In December 2015, a group of people who were supposedly ready to leave Greece escaped from the reception centre and disappeared rather than heading to Portugal. Something similar happened again in February 2016 (Cruz 2016). And yet, starting from March, asylum seekers finally began to flow in and, according to the last available official data, the country received 1,507 "relocated" and 122 "resettled" people until November 2017.6 Eritreans, Syrians and Iraqis constitute a significant part of the share. They have been hosted in facilities provided by municipalities, NGOs and other local organisations, with a very diverse set of outcomes.

While I write, almost half of the people who arrived through the EU relocation programme have already left the country (Dias Cordeiro 2017). They have preferred to turn down their right to protection and the provisions made available in Portugal to live as irregularized migrants elsewhere. In compliance with the rules established to implement the European Agenda on Migration,⁷

- 6 Source: European Commission, Report "Relocation: EU solidarity between member states. November 2017" (https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-m igration/20171114_relocation_eu_solidarity_between_member_states_en.pdf, accessed 24th Nov 2017).
- 7 See in particular the "Council Decision 2015/1601 of 22nd September 2015 establishing provisional measures in the area of international protection for the benefit of Italy and Greece" (https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32015D1601, accessed 12th April 2018).

some of them have been intercepted and identified in other European countries and a growing number of them are being deported back to Portugal. For them, the specific category of *retomado* ("retaken") was coined. And yet, a systematic analysis of the reception process and its results has not been undertaken in Portugal so far and, in general, relatively few contributions are available on the topic of asylum in the country.⁸

Based on my ethnographic research in the field of migration and asylum in Portugal, this chapter will analyse the experience of some asylum claimants within the reception programmes already established in order to show how their expectations and possibilities are thwarted by a number of obstacles which, well beyond intentions and declarations, foster frustration and sense of failure. I argue that asylum seekers and refugees, not too differently from other immigrants, are the object of procedures of hierarchical inclusion operating through a specific bureaucracy of citizenship. While bureaucracy, as an effect of modernity, is the form in which the State manages the organisation of social relations, for asylum seekers it turns into a tool generating specific forms of experience, some in which people's priorities and time are appropriated by the receiving institutions in order to produce social assignment and geographical immobilisation. The meaning of "re-localisation" seems here to take on the value of a concept-metaphor (Moore 2004): a telling representation of an impossible move from the assigned position in time and space.

ON RE-LOCALISATION

I met Redwan in late 2016, in the small provincial town where he was hosted. He was sharing a house, made available by a local NGO, with his father Samir, aged almost 90, and three other people, two Syrians and a Portuguese ex-detainee, a beneficiary of another programme run by the same organisation. On his way to a safer place, Redwan had left his pregnant wife and three children in Istanbul with the intention of providing his father with better treatment in Europe and paving the way for the arrival of the rest of the household.

⁸ See Malheiros (1995); Barra da Costa (1996); Gomes de Sousa (1999); Santinho (2010); Santinho (2013); Santinho (2015); Costa and Sousa (2016). Vacchiano and Santinho (forthcoming) have recently proposed the first comprehensive analysis of the Portuguese reception system.

⁹ Names and details have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Understandably, he was anxiously waiting for an answer to his asylum claim, which would allow him to to give course to the process of family reunification and see again his wife, children and, for the fist time, his new-born daughter. He recalls how, in Greece, they were requested to fill in a paper with eight preferences for relocation. Needless to say, nobody chose Portugal. Still, EASO officers insisted that Portugal was a welcoming country, people were friendly and a job, they guaranteed, was easily available.

They had been waiting in the small town for eight months and no improvement was in sight. In that rural area, no work was available except for petty jobs in agriculture and his prospects were futher narrowed by his poor proficiency in Portuguese. In fact, the receiving organisation was unable to provide a teacher on a steady basis and Redwan had only attended to a handful of language classes. During my visit, I found myself acting as interpreter in a long-awaited meeting between him and the social staff, in which I was asked to help dealing with a number of issues. In particular, Redwan was upset by learning he was supposed to use his scarce monthly allowance, which he largely employed to maintain his family in Istanbul, to pay the costly translation required to have his Syrian driving licence recognised. Although this need corresponds to an important step on the way to finding a job in Portugal, the NGO staff admitted they had no provisions to address it. Similarly, they had no additional funds to pay for transport, the only way to meet compatriots, and for the maintenance of the house, the conditions of which were seriously questionable according to any standard.

When I met them again, one year later, their situation had even worsened. Eighteen months after their arrival, when the reception programme was about to come to an end, they had their asylum claim accepted. Unable to find a decent job, Redwan had insisted on being relocated with his father to Lisbon, where they were hosted in some shared rooms at the NGO headquarters. Redwan was alone in taking care of his father, as no support was offered to improve his language skills or in looking for a job. He was also alone in dealing with the complex administrative procedure to reunite his family, who were still living in Istanbul. In December 2017, almost two years after their arrival and when their future was still uncertain, Samir passed away due to a heart attack. For Redwan, "he died of sadness" in a grey periphery of the Europe of unfulfilled promises. Redwan concedes that he must wait and let time pass for lack of alternatives. Differently from many of his compatriots who have fled Portugal, he is determined to stay, knowing that elsewhere he should start

from scratch and this would slow down the reunification of his family further. For him, the idea of being together again one day – finally meeting his newborn daughter – enables him to face adversities and administrative obstacles.

Like Redwan, many other "relocated" people face daily hardships in finding a way through dull bureaucracy and lack of resources. Yasir is a young Iraqi man who was relocated from Greece to Portugal in spring 2017. I was introduced to him by a mutual acquaintance, who was helping him find a solution to his longstanding toothache. Yasir had turned to emergency units several times, receiving analgesic remedies but no permanent solutions. As was explained to him, he had to approach the local health service in order to make a formal appointment for specialised treatment, a step requiring a good deal of skills, both in terms of language and familiarity with procedures. Yasir was hosted in a shared apartment made available by the reception programme. However, his contact with the hosting institution was sporadic and he was mainly left alone in dealing with everyday tasks. Several months after his arrival, his communication skills were still poor and he had still not been registered in a language class. After several attempts to arrange an appointment at the health centre, he turned to the university dental health unit, a low-cost service usually provided by students in dentistry. As Yasir claims, something went wrong during the operation and his tooth suffered further damage. No other solution was available but seeking help from a private dentist, who demanded 500 euros to fix the tooth, a sum greatly exceeding his monthly allowance. The toothache was steady and acute, but even more unbearable was the sense of humiliation for his condition of poverty and solitude. In the waiting room of my dentist, he recalls his happiness when his request for relocation was accepted by the Portuguese authorities, a feeling that, as he observes, is at odds with the certainty he has been somehow swindled by a false promise of help and solidarity.

Solidarity was at the core of the idea leading to the foundation of the *Plataforma de Apoio aos Refugiados* (Platform for Supporting Refugees) in summer 2015. The initiative, promoted by the Portuguese section of the Jesuit Refugee Service, brings together volunteers and institutions in order to receive "relocated" people within their network. Volunteers who adhere to the Platform share generally – although not exclusively – a Catholic background and take an active role in asylum seeker reception as a form of ethical commitment. The Al-Akbari family escaped from Iraq and was

relocated from Greece into Portugal in April 2017, being received by a group of volunteers pertaining to the Platform. The situation of the household, a couple with a son aged six, was considered potentially critical due to the state of pregnancy of the mother and an extended burn on the child's skin resulting from an accident occurred in Greece. Volunteers collected resources to rent an apartment at market price and mobilised an active network of people to face the needs of the newcomers, with health being a paramount concern. Particular care was given to accompany them to State offices, hospitals and health units, so as to provide help with translation and procedures. The birth of the new child, after some months, was welcomed by a supportive group of people, one that was able to convey a sense of community and conviviality to the household. And yet, the family had recurrently to face numerous obstacles disseminated on its way, often constituing inextricable chains of interwoven hurdles. A delay in the renewal of the residency permit triggered a chainreaction in which the Iraqi driving licence expired, preventing in turn the possibility to have it converted into a Portuguese one and apply for a job as a driver. Simultaneously, it caused the suspension of the right to exemption from hospital fees and the following debt with the administration for childbirth and successive consultations. Throughout these occurrences, volunteers softened the impact of the difficulties, providing comfort and alternative solutions. This was possible since their motivation allowed them to establish a bond which largely exceeded the common relationship between service providers and users. And nonetheless, the sense of loneliness commonly reported by refugees ended up being transferred to volunteers, who frequently complained about the lack of support from institutions and the many hindrances they had to help their interlocutors to establish a normal life as citizens.

ON AMBIGUOUS PROTECTION AND A "DECENT LIFE"

The discrepancy between the representations conveyed by the institutions (a generous society, a supportive welfare, a set of good practices) and the experiential narratives of beneficiaries, in which penury and deception predominate, is often due to a misconception of the notion of protection and to a way of imagining the person in need. As I have shown elsewhere (Vacchiano and Santinho, forthcoming), the Portuguese system of refugee "integration" is mainly based on four main mechanisms: (1) a process of

subordinate inclusion, based on mechanisms of social and geographical assignment; (2) a "revolving door" dynamic, in which re-emigration is a common outcome; (3) a strong reliance on volunteers and charities to obviate the shortage of public provisions; (4) a persistent rhetoric of "good practices", built on a one-way narrative of painless integration, high legal standards and goodwill. Additionally, not differently from what happens in other countries, refugees are considered as individual entities, with no relevant affiliations and no plausible responsibilities towards the kin: the latter, once left behind, are only marginally included by the idea of protection. This attitude uncovers one of the most problematic features of asylum, represented by the powerful performativity of the individual over the group. Redwan's grief has much to do with this.

Furthermore, in Portugal as in other countries, the "national order of things" (Malkki 1995) draws heavily on the humanitarian discourse on protection as an act of compassionate generosity and philanthropic benevolence, one to which the beneficiary is expected to respond with gratitude and acceptance. This attitude is underpinned by a powerful set of ideologies and practices revolving around the notion of "trauma" as the primary explanatory event for refugees' distress, with the effect of "relocating" pain and suffering from the receiving society to the country of origin and from the social to the individual body (Summerfield 1999; Vacchiano 2005; Fassin and Rechtman 2009). According to the resulting mindset, people are thought of as vulnerable and desperate enough to accept the left-overs (and the worst) of what remains of devastated welfare, chronically eroded by the succession of structural adjustments disguised under the concept of "crisis": a roof, flaked walls, a bed with a cover, and the minimal (and liminal) provisions for the poor. The paradox lies in the fact that the idea of a specific vulnus, contained in the very definition of asylum, concurs in producing the experience of vulnerability to which people are exposed. It is not by chance, therefore, that asylum seekers frequently complain more about what they encounter in Europe than what they have concretely suffered at home.

The engineering of asylum seekers' emplacement in space and time works in harmony with a wider project of re-localisation, one in which people are denied the access to one of the most relevant forms of self and social reproduction on a global scale today: mobility. By hindering people's autonomy, and particularly the autonomy to move, current European reception systems clash frontally against the expectations that motivate people to head

to Europe to look for a "decent" and "respectable" life. I draw such definitions from my fieldwork in North Africa, since they are used by many people, refugees included, to qualify their orientation towards the future and their migration projects as a possibility of self-realisation and collective fulfilment.¹⁰ A specific geography of power orient these aspirations, one in which Europe is not represented as a coherent whole (as it is not), but as a land of different opportunities: Europe is not Sicily, is not Andalusia, is not the Alentejo, is not agriculture and is not getting stuck serving as low-level manpower in a forgotten province. For Redwan, Europe is not there, but a place in which the future becomes thinkable, for him and his family.

As the cases I have mentioned testify, "asylum seeker" and "refugee" are administrative categories which reflect, and enforce, the rules of immigrants' conditional inclusion in our societies, shaping the niche they are expected to occupy in our national landscape of opportunities and citizenship. However, people are far from exempt from the set of expectations and aspirations which motivate mobility today: their experience simply reveals how "decency" and "respectability" are hindered not only by war and political violence (as the common notion of asylum prescribes), but by the impossibility of hoping for a better future, both in their country of origin and in that of arrival.

In an article of 2013, Katy Long argued that "in creating a special route for admission deliberately set apart from migration, the humanitarian discourse that protects refugees from harm actually prevents refugees from finding durable solutions, which depend upon securing an economic livelihood and not just receiving humanitarian assistance" (Long 2013). From an opposite stance, I contend that the assimilation of asylum to other means of controlling mobility and immigration transforms protection into a specific device for social assignment and hierarchical inclusion.

Mobility is a specific feature of power configuration on a global scale, one which reproduces class in the sharp divide between frequent fliers and boat people (Vacchiano 2016). The forms of "radical mobility" enacted by migrants in different ways today (and I include playing by the administrative rules as one of these forms) pose a challenge to the common notions of asylum and require new ways of thinking reception.¹¹ Strategies of national incorporation

For a discussion, see Vacchiano (2014, 2015) and the contributions contained in Graw and Schielke (2013).

¹¹ For a proposal along these lines, see Bhabha (2018).

based on immobilisation and localisation are bound to re-produce "bare life" at the fringes of our societies, with Portugal being no exception. Asylum seekers and refugees claim instead their right to a "decent life". Tackling this need seriously means establishing reception mechanisms that allow the newcomers to imagine a future in the new society, eliminating administrative barriers to family reunification, facilitating the recognition of competences and qualifications, promoting quality teaching of language and skills directed both at asylum seekers and professionals, providing accompaniment for daily tasks and adequate subsistence for the necessary time. It means empowering and training social and health professionals to work with new and different languages and needs, extending their capacity to deal with specific situations of fragility or vulnerability, lowering the threshold of access to public services, for the benefit of all, "foreigners" and "autochtonous".

All these measures entail a reformulation of the very notion of reception, turning it from a benevolent concession into an opportunity for rethinking the structural mechanisms of social stratification operating in the receiving society, investing in a common future in which citizenship is not a corollary of nationality but a project of radical inclusion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This contribution is the result of research carried out as an "Investigador FCT", funded by the Portuguese Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (IF/01002/2014/CP1239/CT0003).

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CITE THIS CHAPTER AS:

Vacchiano, F. 2018. "On marginal inclusion: refugees at the fringes of citizenship in Portugal". In *Changing Societies: Legacies and Challenges*. Vol. 1. *Ambiguous Inclusions: Inside Out, Inside In*, eds. S. Aboim, P. Granjo, A. Ramos. Lisbon: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, 99-112. https://doi.org/10.31447/ics9789726715030.04