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Title: Into the Emergency Maze: Injuries of Refuge in an Impoverished Sicilian Town

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It was a sunny and warm day in February 2015, in the midst of an otherwise atypically rainy and cold Sicilian winter. Awate and Drissa\(^1\) sat next to one other on the edge of the covered balcony at the small reception center for asylum seekers where they lived. Both wore headphones but their bodies moved out of sync as they followed the different rhythms that pumped into their ears. Driving together past the center\(^2\) with his car window down, Roberto commented as I sat next to him: “They always seem so relaxed, with their headphones and flashy shoes. They are taken care of. I wish someone would think about me, too.” Roberto is an unemployed graduate in his mid-twenties, who was born in Sicily and lives with his parents just a couple of blocks away from the center. Roughly the same age as Roberto, Awate escaped indefinite forced military service in Eritrea, and Drissa fled abuses of both armed groups and state security forces in Mali. They both reached Sicily in 2014 after surviving a sea journey along the deadly central Mediterranean route departing from Libya.\(^3\) Unlike many migrants who arrive in and quickly leave Sicily, Awate and Drissa decided not to embark on another uncertain journey towards a Northern European destination, and instead entered the institutional maze of Sicilian reception centers for asylum seekers. Awate was forcibly fingerprinted and thus obliged to apply for asylum in Italy according to the Dublin Regulation.\(^4\) Drissa felt exhausted after years on the move and a particularly traumatic sea experience—the boat he was on capsized and he was
rescued by the Italian Navy just when he thought he had no strength left to stay afloat. His plan was to stay put and try to find what he called “peace and stability” in Italy. However, what Awate, Drissa, and many other asylum seekers have mainly found so far is a widespread climate of suspicion and resentment. The comment made by Roberto, their new Sicilian neighbor, is just a small sign of such tension.

**Refugees as Targets of Resentment and Exploitation in Marginalized Peripheries**

Since its opening in 2014, the small reception center has hosted about 30 male asylum seekers, most of them in their twenties and coming from Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. It has contributed to the local economy, but resentment from local residents has exposed migrants to abuse and exploitation. The center has created new jobs for the residents of the impoverished Sicilian town, hiring six staff members in roles such as social worker, educator, and language teacher. Most of those hired have little professional background, were previously unemployed, and obtained the jobs through family connections. Yet working conditions are tough as payment is often delayed for months at a time and professional training is practically non-existent. In addition to employment, the center has indirectly contributed to the municipal budget. In a town starved for resources and stricken by debt, the municipality has silently but repeatedly redirected the funding sent by the Ministry of Interior to support the center toward long overdue payment of public employees, especially when they have threatened to strike.⁵

Local residents know little about the center’s contribution to the economy, and instead view the center as an institution that, as one resident put it, “takes care of migrants,” whereas they, as citizens, feel neglected by the Italian state. Inaccurate information about reception centers—for example the widespread rumor that asylum seekers receive 35 Euros per day—
cements residents’ belief that they are experiencing institutional betrayal by a government that is against citizens and in favor of migrants. In reality, the 35 Euros per day go toward the overall workings of the center, including services such as food, housing, and clothing. Asylum seekers themselves only receive about 1.50 Euros per day as pocket money. Residents accuse migrants of being privileged by the state, an accusation that fits with a longstanding local routine of complaining about state abandonment and disregard. Yet it is asylum seekers who arguably find themselves at the bottom of the local socioeconomic order. For example, although they are legally entitled to work six months after they claim asylum, they are exposed to highly exploitative working conditions, especially in the many greenhouses surrounding the town and, in the summer months, in the restaurants and bars at nearby seaside tourist locations.

The highly mediatised scandals of corruption that engulf the institutional system of reception for asylum seekers deepen the climate of suspicion within and around the center. This is particularly true for the so-called “Capital Mafia” (Mafia Capitale) scandal. As part of the investigation into this scandal, a conversation between a public administrator and the head of an organization managing reception centers was recorded, in which they refer to these centers as more lucrative than anything else, including drugs. The transcripts of this conversation were widely circulated on national and international news. Against the backdrop of this negative media coverage, the Sicilian reception center’s staff and asylum seekers throw additional accusations of dishonesty and manipulation at one another. The former accuse some of the asylum seekers of using the center or the state as “a cow to milk” (una mucca da mangere). Migrants accuse the staff and, more generally, “the Italians” of making a profit out of their presence, saying things like, “They eat all the money” (loro mangiano tutti i soldi). Local residents resent everyone involved in the reception system, including “the corrupt politicians” in
the distant seats of national power, the many organizations involved in managing centers of reception, and the migrants who in their view are “waited on, hand and foot” (*serviti e riveriti*). All are viewed with suspicion.

**Protracted and Dispersed Emergencies**

Suspicion and resentment are reproduced by a migration emergency policy discourse that, despite Italy’s now well-established status as a destination country, continues to frame migrant mobilities as threatening but temporary “invasions” and to manage them through emergency devices. While most undocumented migrants in Italy are those who overstayed student or work visas, the arrival of migrants by boat has been central to official “emergency” talks and the resulting public moral panic about “migration invasions” since 1991, when boats arrived from Albania to the shores of Puglia, a southern region. So-called emergency measures have punctuated Italy’s approach to migrant mobility at an accelerated pace in the last five years, including the 2011 North African emergency plan to deal with the arrival by boat of about 30,000 Tunisians in the aftermath of the Tunisian revolution in 2011; the 2014 Mare Nostrum (“Our Sea”) rescue operation in response to the increasing number of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean; and the still developing project of European Union-sponsored hotspots in Southern Italy (and Greece) to fingerprint and process arriving migrants.

Italy’s definition of emergency does not stop at rescue operations at sea or processing procedures at arrival points. Rather, it suffuses the entire Italian reception system for asylum seekers. This system patches together different institutions, including thousands of temporary structures for immediate support; a dozen large centers of reception (CARA) concentrating hundreds or at times thousands of asylum seekers, often in southern rural areas and urban
and hundreds of smaller centers (SPRAR), which, compared to CARA centers, are supposedly more attentive to asylum seekers’ individual needs and more oriented toward life after the institutional reception system. The center that was opened in Roberto’s hometown is one of the 430 small SPRAR centers dispersed throughout Italy.\textsuperscript{12} Established in 2002, the SPRAR system was, for over a decade, a very small program catering to only 3000 asylum seekers per year. In 2014 the state decided to expand it to over 20,000 centers, sending a growing number of asylum seekers directly to them rather than to the corrupt and abuse scandal ridden CARA centers.\textsuperscript{13} The ongoing expansion of the SPRAR system has meant that, over the course of two years, hundreds of new SPRAR centers have been established, many of them in Sicily and other southern regions.\textsuperscript{14} While some of the SPRAR centers remain true to the initial role of acting as a bridge towards the broader society, informing asylum seekers of their rights and listening to their needs, many other SPRAR centers, especially those hastily opened under the pressure of the recent expansion, arguably resemble the larger centers in their opportunistic, controlling, and inward looking approach to the management of asylum seekers. These centers effectively impose on the asylum seekers they host what, in his analysis of “total institutions,” sociologist Erving Goffman describes as “an enclosed, formally administered round of life.” This institutionalized “round of life,”\textsuperscript{15} which is limited to six months and renewable for another six months, is oriented inward, toward the preservation of order through practices of scrutiny and control\textsuperscript{16} rather than toward life after the center. Thus, life after the center is often marked by abandonment and abjection.

\textbf{An Enclosed Institutional Life under Scrutiny}
Scrutiny and control are central to the operation of the center that houses Awate and Drissa and 28 other asylum seekers. Threaded within the fabric of its institutional life is a process by which staff members attempt to identify what they conceive of as trustful and grateful personalities, and encourage or even forcibly move out of the center (and the town) those refugees with the “wrong” types of personalities. This process is visible and vocalized in discussions during staff meetings, and it also spills over into everyday interactions between staff and asylum seekers, especially at times of tension and disagreement.

Sitting on a bench in the main square of the town, Awate, who counts on the legal advice of the center to obtain his papers and then apply for reunification with his wife and young daughter waiting in a Sudanese camp, told me how it is important for him to avoid the reputation of being a troublemaker: “I am in the hands of the government. Everything they do is fine with me.” Then he added: “If it is not fine, it is still fine.” Personality matters: it can mean the difference between support and expulsion. The staff of the center rely on everyday interactions to categorize asylum seekers along personality traits such as “submissive” (servizievoli) and “willing” (volenterosi), versus “distrustful” (sospettosi). The enclosed institutional life of the center denies the complexity of migrants’ inner lifeworlds, especially when affected by forced displacement. Monica, a social worker at the center in her early thirties, expressed her self-confidence in detecting different personalities:

I get to know them individually, they are all different people, some are friendly, some are willing, some are distrustful…What I see every day tells me what this person is all about…it is not so difficult to understand if this person is a sincere person, a person that is really trying to do something good in their life…in the same way it is quite easy to understand if the person only knows how to complain,
if the person is not interested in understanding, in adapting...and unfortunately in these cases we are obliged to send them away.

The consequential effects of this everyday scrutiny are not lost on the asylum seekers. This is particularly the case for so-called distrustful dispositions. After a heated argument with a member of staff, a young refugee from Sudan named Suleyman worried about his reputation and pondered whether to try to mend the damaged relationship or, given that he had obtained his papers, prepare to leave the Sicilian town. The argument was about an apparently banal matter: where to keep the original copies of Suleyman’s documents. Suleyman had expressed his desire to keep the originals while the staff member had emphasized with increased impatience that established practice at the center is to keep the original copies in a locked cabinet accessible only to the staff. Keeping the documents in his room was a sign of control and independence, Suleyman explained to me after the altercation. Yet Suleyman’s preoccupation was warranted. Marco, the staff member who had eventually thrown the documents into Suleyman’s face telling him that he was a “pain in the butt” and that he “could leave,” later explained to me that the center does not tolerate expressions of distrust. He later added with evident disappointment, “Why doesn’t he trust us, that we keep the originals in good shape? I am sure he was thinking ‘my documents are safe only with me, with them who knows what they are doing with them.’”

Center employees look for welcome signs of gratefulness and goodwill toward the center and the broader hosting community. One way for asylum seekers to exhibit these appreciated traits is through their participation in volunteer activities. During staff meetings, social workers compile lists of asylum seekers they will ask to volunteer and those that they plan to exclude for various reasons, such as their employment commitments or their unwilling personalities. Those asked to join the activities face the dilemma of accepting or refusing. Such was the case for
Drissa one early April morning as he was standing a few meters behind Antonio’s car. Antonio, a staff member at the center in his late twenties, was locked in a game with Drissa for about 20 minutes. Antonio would shout at Drissa to get in the car but Drissa would not move. So Antonio would spin the car, signalling that he was going to drive away without Drissa. At that point, Drissa would shout for Antonio to wait for him while starting to walk slowly toward the car, but when Antonio would stop the car, Drissa too would stop walking. Antonio was half amused and half annoyed at Drissa’s behavior. He was playing with him but also trying to convince him to get in the car. He was also running out of time as he was supposed to drive Drissa and two other asylum seekers to clean a nearby beach, a volunteer activity that the center regularly co-organizes with a local environmental organization. This game between Antonio and Drissa seemed at first glance like an innocuous contest between old friends. Yet Antonio and Drissa were neither peers nor friends, and as Drissa sensed that Antonio’s irritation was growing he ran to get in the car and participate in the volunteer activity. This activity, which lasted about five hours, entailed the removal of cans, plastic bags, and other items of trash from the beach and ended with a series of photos of the refugee volunteers, which would later be featured on the website of the environmental organization. A few days later, as Drissa and I talked informally about the volunteer activity, he expressed his frustration: “I don’t want to work for free. Work for free and work for photos--this is [a sign of] our weakness.” At the same time, he feared disappointing the center’s staff. Asylum seekers attempt to anticipate or manage the taxonomic power of the reception centers where they live, either by cultivating the type of personality that the center rewards or preparing to deal with the consequences.

Chains of Marginality
When asylum seekers arrive on the Sicilian shores they do not just arrive in Europe; they arrive in a marginalized periphery with its own history of dispossession and emigration and its own present condition of socioeconomic crisis. Far from operating in a vacuum, the Sicilian reception centers for asylum seekers are enmeshed in these histories and experiences of marginality. In this sense, the dispositions that the center’s staff and other local residents display in their everyday interactions with Awate, Suleyman, Drissa, and other globally displaced people cannot be fully explained by generalizing, abstract frameworks that emphasize institutional violence against refugees, or racist attitudes toward noncitizens or non-Europeans. European colonial, racial histories and postcolonial structures of power play an important role in shaping the moralizing and resentful attitudes that arriving asylum seekers from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa experience in Sicily. However, so do the distinct local histories and experiences of marginality. Refuge in impoverished Sicilian towns is therefore chained to local marginalities in a double sense: marginality works as both a fetter and a link. It creates feelings of being stuck in a place marked by injustices more than rights, by exploitation more than respect. While these feelings are real for both local residents and arriving asylum seekers, they are caused by different life experiences and raise fears of scarcity, which push local residents to cling to their own sense of injustice and downplay that of marginalized asylum seekers. As a result, rather than producing empathy or solidarity, these chains of marginality produce distinct injuries for those seeking refuge.

A final illustrative example can help flesh out how these nested marginalities play out in the institutional reception of refugees. The center’s social workers express irritation at asylum seekers’ complaints about humiliating and exploitative working conditions and are particularly aggravated with those that refuse certain types of jobs, for example agricultural jobs. As Antonio
puts it, “This is the situation, if you have an opportunity to work, don’t let it go or don’t complain about it…if it is heavy work, you do it, if they give you 35 euros per day you don’t spit on them.” Antonio adds: “The reality is that we all work off the books, we are not protected. All the jobs I did were without contracts, in the restaurants, bars, supermarkets…what is the alternative?” In his interpretation of “the situation,” what Antonio resists is an acknowledgment of the marginality of others—in this case, globally displaced people who are profoundly exposed to misrecognition, indignity and exploitation. Similarly, researchers on refugees in an Italy and Europe marked by longstanding inequalities must recognize these nested marginalities and experiences of suffering. In so doing, they may help identify potential bases for solidarity across marginal groups rather than estrangement between them.

Endnotes

1 All names are fictitious. Sentences and words in quotation marks come from my interviews and informal dialogues with asylum seekers, staff, and residents in a Sicilian town. I do not identify the town’s name to ensure the anonymity of the asylum seekers and refugees that I encountered. I conducted my fieldwork from January to April 2015 and revisited the town in May and August 2015 for ten days each time.

2 Asylum seekers would typically use the word “camp” to refer to the reception center. For space limits this article signals but does not analyze this preference.

3 Migrant arrivals in Italy through the central Mediterranean route were 170,100 in 2014, 153,842 in 2015, and 181,436 in 2016. They stood at 15,582 in the first three months of 2017. Recorded migrant deaths in the Mediterranean as a whole were 3,279 in 2014, 3,673 in 2015, and 5,079 in 2016. The central Mediterranean route from Libya to Italy was the most popular and deadly from 2014 until mid-2015, while the eastern Mediterranean route from Turkey to Greece was intensively used in 2015 with 850,000 arrivals, and was particularly deadly in the second half of the year. In 2016, the central Mediterranean route was once again the most used and deadly one. This trend continued through the first three months of 2017, during which there were 525 recorded deaths, almost all of them in the central Mediterranean route. Needless to say, many deaths in the Mediterranean go unrecorded. For details on sea arrivals and deaths in the Mediterranean see https://www.iom.int/news/mediterranean-migrant-arrivals-top-363348-2016-deaths-sea-5079. For an early account of the central Mediterranean route see Naor Ben-Yehoyada, “The Clandestine Central Mediterranean Passage,” Middle East Report 261 (Winter 2011).

4 According to the Dublin Regulation, asylum seekers should claim asylum in the first EU country they reach. They should be fingerprinted and entered in the European database called Eurodac in the first port of arrival. Intra-EU migrant mobilities have challenged this regulation.

5 This redirection of funding obviously has negative repercussions on the services that the center can offer to asylum seekers.

6 The recording is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7NzexUMmMyo.
These boats carried about 15,000 Albanian migrants. The Italian government collectively detained them in a sports stadium without adequate services and deported them in the following weeks.


Mare Nostrum was subsequently repealed and substituted by the still active Operation Triton, which has an emphasis on border control rather than rescuing lives. On the Mare Nostrum and Triton rescue operations, see Martina Tazzioli, “Border Displacements: Challenging the Politics of Rescue between Mare Nostrum and Triton,” *Migration Studies* 4, 1 (2016), pp. 1-19.


Some of the largest CARA centers in the South are situated near agricultural areas renowned for attracting migrant labor.


The “Capital Mafia” corruption scandal involved the management of CARA centers in Sicily.

Sicily has the highest percentage of SPRAR (21.9%) of all Italian regions except the central region of Lazio, where most SPRARs are concentrated in Rome, the capital city (22.9%).
