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IL FATTO SOCIALE TOTALE

Voci dalla pandemia tra capitale e vita

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MATTIAS DE BACKER E ALESSANDRO MAZZOLA
LIMINAL SPACES OF MIGRANT RECEPTION
IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Abstract:

Governments measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic had a strong impact on migration, involving the closing of borders and of asylum applications in several European countries. At the same time, civil society support to migrants was almost completely stopped. Just like in the 2015-18 refugee reception crisis, however, new initiatives and forms of solidarity emerged during the COVID-19 crisis. These largely employed online channels and involved small organizations, volunteers, activists and local government personnel in surprising numbers of support activities. Civil society initiatives and practices aimed to provide migrants with a space for reception and support when formal reception spaces (e.g. reception centres) were shut down and isolated, under such exceptional circumstances as strong confinement and full lockdown.

We draw on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Belgium during two crises (the 2015-18 refugee reception crisis and the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic) to identify and discuss the “space of reception” as a key concept to understand civil society solidarity towards migrants in contemporary societies. We see the action of mobilized citizens as two-fold. On one hand they filled the gaps of the asylum system, as pointed out in recent scholarship; on the other hand, they transformed the space of reception by mediating it within the social context, filling it with activities and relations, and ultimately broadening it to cope with the crisis and create the best possible conditions for the reception and integration of vulnerable migrants.

Keywords:

Refugees and Asylum Seekers, Reception Crisis, COVID-19, Civil Society Solidarity, Reception Space, Belgium

1. Introduction

Although one may be inclined to look back on the COVID-19 crisis as remarkably exceptional – indeed many commentators have dubbed it the biggest crisis in Western Europe since the Second World War – when studying formal and informal reception structures catering for asylum-seekers, refugees and undocumented migrants during the pandemic, it immediately becomes clear that one has to go back to that previous reception crisis, between 2015 and 2018. In many ways, governments, humanitarian actors, NGOs and citizen collectives work on the debris of a prior, unresolved crisis. In the spring of 2020, difficulties that arose in providing food, housing or other support to refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants were the direct result of political choices made by local and national authorities with regard to migration or reception management in the past years.

In 2015-18, due to significant influx of asylum seekers and lack of preparedness of the reception system and structures, European countries found themselves in a state of crisis. Mobilized citizens became key actors in the practices of reception and filled the gaps left by the system. New civil society organizations and networks emerged, organized space, mobilized volunteers and cooperated with professional NGOs, while negotiating with city and state authorities (Della Porta 2018; Rea *et al.* 2019). This phenomenon can be observed alongside that of a neoliberal state withdrawing from providing basic amenities and that of migrants claiming spaces of their own. The traditional and formal spaces of reception of asylum seekers such as collective reception centers and other state-designed solutions, were significantly transformed by and with citizens and citizens' collectives.

In this paper we consider citizens involved in the reception, accommodation and orientation of vulnerable migrants (i.e. refugees, asylum-seekers and undocumented migrants) as third parties in the broader scheme of migration or reception management, orienting between the two poles (Mårs 2016) of state control and refugee agency (Agier 2008).

We will zoom in on spaces produced or operated by citizens, volunteers and activists around and within reception structure and informal settlements, places we will refer to as “liminal” spaces (Waardenburg *et al.* 2019).

“Liminal” refers to the Latin word (*limen*) for threshold (Stavrides 2010). Liminality was first theorized in temporal terms by authors such as Turner (1967) in the study of rituals and rites, e.g. the rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. Back (1996) describes “liminal cultures” as those youth cultures defying boundaries of race and ethnicity, with mixed cultural forms, offering a sense of difference.

The term “liminal spaces” is often used to denote spaces where different social groups meet, live side by side, negotiate, exchange and get to know each other (Cancellieri, Ostanel 2015; Stavrides 2010). According to Dale and Burrell (2008) such liminal spaces lie at the boundary of two dominant spaces, like borderlands and customs areas, or they are located at the social and geographical margins of society. In liminal spaces, the natural order of things is challenged: symbolical conflicts in these spaces are a mode of interruption, micro-politics (De Backer *et al.* 2019; Jellis, Gerlach 2017) disturbing the police order (Rancière 1999). But “liminality” can also refer to spaces with a lack of basic human rights (Amin 2008).

Spaces of citizen involvement can be considered “liminal” in multiple senses: (1) they are often located in the social and geographical margins of society, (2) in these spaces meaningful relations are established with migrants in a liminal state (between asylum-seeker and recognized refugee, or in transit between two countries), (3) citizen-led reception initiatives are usually contesting dominant modes of migration or reception management, while also transforming traditional, formal reception infrastructures, and (4) motives and modes of these volunteers are highly mixed and fluid (Vandevoordt 2019; Veer 2020). Reflecting on the involvement of citizens in the reception of migrants almost by definition involves a discussion of the neoliberal, withdrawing state on the one hand, and of the contestation of that state’s reception practices and structures by committed volunteers, activists and civil society on the other.

In this article we use data from two ethnographic data sets deriving from one research conducted during the 2015-18 refugee reception crisis, and one research conducted in the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis, both of which in Belgium. Participants in both researches are migrants and non-migrants, including institutional actors in the migration and asylum sector, operators in reception centres, members of NGOs/CSOs, cultural mediators and facilitators, volunteers, mobilized citizens, refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants.

The first data set derives from the research project: *Public opinion, mobilizations and policies concerning asylum seekers and refugees in anti-immigrants times* (PUMOMIG), funded by the Belgian Federal Science Policy Office (BELSPO/BRAIN-be). It involves 69 in-depth interviews and numerous observations of field practices conducted in Belgium in 2017-19, when civil society mobilization was still strong and diversified. Interviews focuses on pro and anti-migrant mobilizations and forms of support to asylum seekers starting in 2015, as well as specific questions exploring the two-way relationship among mobilized citizens (i.e. volunteers

and activists), operators of state-designed reception facilities (i.e. social workers, facilitators, reception centre staff), and migrants (asylum seekers, *de facto* refugees and undocumented migrants). Participants also included politicians and institutional actors in the migration/asylum sector.

The second data set derives from the Belgian cluster of an ongoing research project funded by the Humanities in the European Research Arena (HERA), including fieldworks in Newcastle, Amsterdam, Leipzig and Brussels (2019-22). The research project investigates the everyday experiences of young refugees and asylum seekers in public spaces and mixes a multidisciplinary conceptual framework with several, parallel methodologies: literature study, urban migration history, museum ethnography, news analysis and ethnographic fieldwork (including interviews with young refugees and asylum seekers and creative methods such as walk along interviews, mental mapping, digital storytelling and photo diaries). In this paper, data are used from 32 interviews undertaken during March, April and May 2020, in the midst of the first COVID-19 lockdown, with a range of frontline practitioners (youth workers, outreach workers, social assistants, basic education teachers, reception centre personnel and personnel of public social services centres CPAS).

2. Citizen involvement and liminal reception spaces

Migration and asylum in Belgium are responsibilities of the Federal Agency for the reception of asylum seekers (Fedasil), in charge of designing and implementing asylum procedures and reception practices. Fedasil also has direct management responsibilities over collective reception structures in cooperation with the Belgian Red Cross. These structures account for two-thirds of the nearly 30,000 places provided by the whole reception network. The rest are individual reception places managed by local authorities that can enjoy significant autonomy. This multi-level governance of reception often resulted in a non-alignment between the national and the local trends in terms of both attitudes towards migrants and participation of the civil society to reception practices.

One interesting dimension of the civil society solidarity towards vulnerable migrants in Belgium pertains to the relationship between mobilized citizens and reception spaces, both in formal reception centres managed directly or indirectly by the state, and in informal settlements that appeared in a number of transition spaces such as train stations or national borders during the 2015-18 crisis and during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic.

2.1 *Transforming reception spaces during the refugee reception crisis*

Starting from the second half of 2015, individual citizens and groups gathered around those areas where migrants concentrated. These included the formal collective and individual structures mentioned above, but also informal settlements where asylum seekers amassed during the crisis peak. Sometimes, citizens in local communities mobilized even before the arrival of the first waves of asylum seekers, and as soon as announcements of the opening of reception centres were shared. Their impact on the reception space began as they provided first-hand logistic support to prepare reception and accommodation infrastructures, and collected and distributed clothing and other non-perishable goods. In most of the cases we observed, citizens entered the reception spaces and enjoyed relative freedom to organize the space and implement activities in cooperation with the Fedasil or the Red Cross management. In a short period of time, their presence became massive, and the management of the centres started to grant them spaces and facilities within the camp structures in which to organize, coordinate and implement support activities. In some instances, civil society organizations had great autonomy in occupying spaces and exploiting facilities in the reception centres.

The impact of citizen mobilization was twofold, as it filled the gaps of the asylum system while also transforming the idea of the reception space itself. The earliest enactment of this double function occurred in the beginning of the reception crisis, when several structures were opened by the government to accommodate newcomers. These structures can be considered “liminal” since they were supposed to be temporary and transitional spaces set up to cope with a state of emergency. Conceived as waiting areas between one time/space and the next, and, as a result, disconnected from the environments where they were located. As evidence of this liminal condition, it is significant that often authorities did not give sufficient notice to residents in the areas and neighbourhood where collective reception centres were about to open. This caused tensions among the populations concerned, even in areas traditionally tolerant of migration. Lack of communication occurred not only between institutions and citizens, but also between national and local authorities. Charles Mangus, mayor of the city of Arlon, remarked that:

It wasn't the Red Cross, it wasn't Fedasil, nor the ministerial authorities that informed me of the opening of a centre for asylum seekers in Arlon. We got to know it from an intermediary [...] one or two days before. Then I got a call from the Minister's Office who told me there were 450 people coming. Then

again, we got to know from the newspapers that these would actually be 900. We did not have the correct information. [...] All this has caused a feeling of insecurity and uncertainty in the population.

The lack of adequate communication and preparation on the part of the authorities therefore led not only to difficulties in initial reception procedures, but also affected the attitude of citizens, fuelling anti-migrant sentiments.

Mobilized citizens acted as mediators between the reception spaces and the local context, and facilitated the contact between migrants and the local population and its social networks. This function was enacted both in a discursive way, and through direct actions. In the former case, mobilized citizens were actively involved in community meetings and public gatherings, and reassured the population by providing first-hand information on the progress of the reception practices and on the profile of migrants newcomers. In the latter case, they organized and implemented practices to stimulate solidarity and to promote direct knowledge among the local population. These practices include collections and other solidarity actions and activities carried out within the centre but open to the outside public. The Namur-based volunteer group *Collectif Citoyens Solidaires* (CCSN), for example, organized an open-doors community breakfast taking place on Saturdays, every fortnight, within the premises of the reception centre. Philippe Tinant, one of the leaders of CCSN, explained the purpose of this activity:

We thought it was important to bring citizens here [in the centre], you know, just to show them what's going on, how the centre's residents are like. [...] It's a moment of conviviality, but you're not obliged to come. We don't want to have any programming for this event, as we do for other things open to the public. This is just a moment you come here freely, have a coffee and a croissant, and talk to people, just like any other coffee place in town. [...] Human beings fear the unknown, and you can't imagine how these simple things can be of help.

The kind of activity described here is particularly exemplary of the impact of citizen initiatives on the reception space. Mobilized citizens mediated the reception space by taking control over it and filling it with activities and relations, and eventually broadened it to become a city-wide reception space. The effect is even more important in those contexts where reception structures are sited in peri-urban areas cut off from city life. Citizen initiatives broadened the reception space by appropriating it, inviting citizens to visit the centre, and by facilitating the encounter between citizens and migrants outside the centre, in the city spaces. The

central scope of such practice moves from a perspective of reception to a more articulated idea of integration of newcomers into the local social setting, activities and networks, a domain of intervention that has been sidelined by the Belgian authorities for a long time during the reception crisis.

The impact of mobilized citizens on the space of reception is particularly evident in informal settlements. The most known example of this kind in Belgium is the large settlement near the *Gare du Nord* railway station and Maximilian Park in central Brussels, where migrants lived in extremely precarious conditions with no access to basic services throughout the reception crisis. A large and active civil society organization named *Plateforme Citoyenne de Soutien aux Réfugiés* was created for providing support to migrants in that area. The activity of mobilized citizens in this group included shuttling migrants with private vehicles to their destination, organizing clothing and basic necessities collections, and above all distributing food and hosting migrants in private homes, similarly to other informal settlements in Europe (Crawley *et al.* 2017). Solidarity in informal spaces of reception had to face extremely difficult structural conditions all along the crisis. Such conditions were particularly visible in the public space and caused discontent in the population, although the settlement was relatively well tolerated.

In this case, citizens did not transform the space of reception, they created it from scratch. Again, this action can be seen as motivated by both a humanitarian reason, and also by the need to integrate and fill institutional gaps that were particularly evident in such contexts. State intervention, indeed, has often involved the control and repression of such settlements, rather than an attempt to formalize reception practices in these spaces. Accordingly, the mediation function performed by mobilized citizens, in these cases, goes beyond the reception or integration of migrants, and becomes a demonstrative action towards the wider population. Eve, a volunteer in Brussels, highlighted this perspective:

Yes, it can be shocking for someone to see the settlement here, but I think this can help us to promote awareness, if you see what's going on in your daily space, not just on the television. [...] Not only are the migrants visible here, you can also see the help, those who help. There are the people in need and the people who help them out, and this is important. It's important that the population sees this, how engaged and supportive their fellow citizens are.

If a mediating function is evident here, it is equally clear how civil society involved in informal settlements has aimed to broaden the re-

ception space, and that this function is of particular importance in these specific contexts. Although not physically excluded from their surroundings, informal settlements are indeed socially isolated. The migrants who populate them cannot rely on institutional support structures such as the Red Cross, and are often marginalized or even ostracized by the population. In particular, volunteers were particularly active in providing migrants with social networks, pointing them towards migrant organizations and networks. Volunteers also became themselves nodal contacts for migrants, by offering the possibility to access their own established personal and professional networks and contacts. They provided the link with public space, and contributed to establish, enlarge and reinforce the social network of migrants.

2.2 Reception spaces during the pandemic

The spread of COVID-19 in Europe in early 2020, pushed governments to act with urgency and define strategies to control the activity and movement of people. Restrictions were implemented everywhere at local, national and supranational levels, including local and national lockdowns, curfews, the closing of borders and aviation traffic, and even the temporary suspension of international mobility conventions such as the Schengen treaty. Although the refugee issue had dominated the public debate in previous years, during the early days of the pandemic, the fate of refugees, asylum-seekers and undocumented migrants did not play any role in political decision-making. If and whenever these groups were mentioned, they were depicted as a problem, as a security and sanitary threat.

Governments eventually implemented new exclusionary strategies towards these migrant groups: with few exceptions, initial reactions were oriented toward reducing and eventually stopping the arrival of new migrants, such as in the case of Belgium, The Netherlands and Germany where new asylum applications were stopped for an indefinite period of time (Mazzola, Martiniello 2020). Restrictions implemented during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic also affected the reception of asylum seekers, in the on-the-ground solidarity practices of civil society and citizen initiatives that characterized the refugee reception crisis starting from the long summer of migration of 2015. The general lockdown led to the closing-in of asylum-seekers in full reception centres, the disappearance of citizen initiatives providing shelter to migrants in private residences, the

closure of day and night shelters for homeless and undocumented migrants and the emergence of various new practices, actors and networks.

Mobilizations in civil society and among citizens that surfaced during the 2015-18 reception crisis initially suffered enormously from the COVID-19 pandemic. Remarkably, the *Plateforme Citoyenne de Soutien aux Réfugiés*, which was created in 2015 to address the lack of facilities for refugees, asylum-seekers and undocumented migrants in the Brussels Gare Du Nord area, also closed its doors and stopped most of their initiatives in the early days of the lockdown. Although initial practices of citizen help had, over the years, developed into more fundamental, structured and sustainable support actions, they proved not entirely corona-proof (Mazzola, Martiniello 2020) as did many official and humanitarian services.

In the first days of the lockdown in March 2020, day and night shelters of local authorities closed their doors, as well as food distribution centres and food kitchens. Also asylum-centres and institutions for unaccompanied minor refugees closed their doors for visitors. Initiatives usually closed their doors for three reasons: worries about the health of older personnel and volunteers, worries about insurances, and unsuitable infrastructure. Some initiatives managed to stay open by rearranging the use of their spaces, or by catering to their target groups in other locations or outside, in public space. Organizations that stayed open and continued to offer basic amenities suffered from temporary scarcity of food and medical supplies. Food distribution in the Maximilian Park was closed down by the police and the public dispersed, moving afterwards to several other places, including *Allée du Kaai* in the Brussels Canal area. Particularly devastating for asylum-seekers was the closure of the Immigration Department (*Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken (DVZ)/Office des Étrangers (OE)*, where newcomers are expected to request asylum and are provided with orientation to temporary housing and other basic amenities), which also implied that these groups did not obtain information that could guide them to humanitarian help, and the closure of many of the more informal information points. With the closure of DVZ/OE, refugees and asylum-seekers were no longer directed towards legal support. Nearly none was offered in asylum-centres, while legal offices and lawyers were only reachable via telephone.

In the first weeks of the spring 2020 lockdown, frontline organizations realized that along with the sanitary crisis came a food and housing crisis, something which local authorities had underestimated. Since official structures for migrant reception were unavailable or inaccessible to re-

cently arrives asylum-seekers, undocumented migrants and intra-European labour migrants, some of these citizen and volunteer-led initiatives set up support structures from scratch. Impromptu shelters were organised in hotels, hostels, squats and temporary spaces. Organizations that usually provided leisure or social assistance to undocumented migrants, asylum-seekers, refugees and homeless transformed their entire management in order to provide food distribution, while creating new networks of mixed commercial and humanitarian partners for the provision of basic goods. Improvised shower facilities were installed, and several hubs were set up that provided food, access to toilet facilities, Internet and dry clothes. Numerous citizen collectives and student groups supplied food to vulnerable groups, established street antennas of volunteers hanging out in public space and offered comfort to isolated individuals or single-parent households.

Many of the volunteer-led initiatives were characterized by their hybridity. Some of them consisted of new networks of various partners in the social and cultural sector, partly supported by the local authorities but also by crowd funding campaigns, coordinated by NGOs/CSOs or city administration personnel working in their time off, staffed by civil servants, citizens and activists. They consisted of new constellations of co-workers. One hub in Brussels was staffed by the personnel of a theatre, an artistic workspace for migrants and a day shelter for homeless, another initiative was run by a day shelter, civil servants and volunteers, while being funded by the city council and provided with basic supplies by a network of nine social and cultural organisations. Although in some cases the local authorities were involved in the establishment, support or funding of these spontaneous and improvised initiatives, there was no central, city-wide coordination.

The hybridity of the networks as well as the improvised nature of these establishments also resulted in new ways of governance. In the Belgian city of Ghent, certificates for homeless and other precarious groups were drafted and provided by a solidarity network. These documents were designed to attest that these people were in the streets because they had nowhere else to go. A similar example could be found in Brussels where a temporary shelter and leisure space for the homeless, which was scheduled to close in April, was simply claimed by an outreach worker. These practices in a quite literal sense broadened spaces of reception, while establishing liminal spaces for housing, health, leisure and food. The bottom-up governance of the COVID-19 crisis also informed liminal discursive spaces of contestation of official governmental policy and practice in the management of migration

and reception, contrasting with the analysis made by Agier (2008) about humanitarian aid as part and parcel of the state's control apparatus.

3. *Discussion and conclusion*

The COVID-19 crisis unveils an underlying crisis of the management of migration and reception. In 2015, reception systems, particularly in the beginning of the reception crisis and of the so-called long summer of migration, proved ill-prepared. They reflected what has been called an organized non-responsibility of European governments (Pries 2018) that showed a tendency to shirk responsibility concerning the implementation of on-the-ground reception practices, and enforcement of legal asylum regulations. This gap in the support and care infrastructure was spontaneously filled by citizens, volunteers and activists. Yet, the subsequent COVID-19 crisis clearly showed a malfunctioning formal arrival and reception infrastructure, the vulnerability of some informal, citizen-led initiatives and the resilience and agency of other citizen initiatives.

During the reception crisis, the agency of civil society was motivated by humanitarian principles, as an act in response to an emergency. At the same time, it also took the forms of a political act, inasmuch as it was a response to the gaps and failures of the institutional asylum system. Indeed, citizens were actively supporting a system that was improperly working, or even close to collapse at the most critical moments, while also criticizing or protesting against an anti-migration institutional stance, promoting good practices with formal actors and becoming involved in the decision-making process at the local or national level. In most cases, indeed, the mobilization of civil society actors was very factual, and involved on-the-ground practices of help.

Citizens' solidarity paved the way for new and more inclusive paradigms of integration in their specific regions, municipalities and local areas. Recent scholarship largely acknowledged the political impact of such intense, visible and localized involvement of citizens in the refugee issue (Della Porta 2018), while others even speculated about a "local turn" in the management of migration and migrant reception (Ahouga 2017; Zapata-Barrero *et al.* 2017). This citizen response often diverged from the institutional agenda, which was primarily concerned with a rather restrictive approach to asylum and migration.

Broadened reception spaces (as a result of citizen involvement) literally and figuratively also broaden the space of contestation, inherent in the idea

of liminal spaces, as a space where individual actors, parallel to or irrespective of government policy and practices develop their own initiatives, which function as a crystallization of their diverging attitudes towards migration. Liminal spaces of citizen involvement also open up discursive spaces among citizens, e.g. where citizen initiatives organized dialogue between local communities and newcomers, or where they set up campaigns to inform neighbours about the planned opening of new asylum centres.

While the above stories of activism and citizen involvement may be a cause for optimism, the liminality of newcomers' reception is also deeply problematic. Not only does this allow the state to further withdraw from delivering basic services, but is also further marginalizes the available support network and fragments the available resources. The ad hoc initiatives taken by citizens which literally broaden reception spaces are not crisis-proof themselves, nor are they necessarily stable. During the COVID-19 crisis, citizens transformed reception spaces that had already undergone a previous crisis and a previous transformation. Both in 2015 and in 2020, the existing reception landscape was challenged, reception spaces were broadened, official actors failed to provide enough services, citizens stepped in, while mediating the space of reception. The pressure put on the system resulted in both cases in increased hybridity and fragmentation. While some would argue that the combined effort of many different actors with different qualities and talents is the governance of the future – something which Beni and Wang (1993) have called “swarm intelligence” – it also creates shaky and unstable structures of support for those in need. Liminal spaces, due to their logic of contestation and their peripheral location, may experience an increased sense of agency and freedom, but they are also most vulnerable to austerity measures. Furthermore, to give stability to ad hoc citizen initiatives almost by definition implies their formalization and bureaucratization, which may affect their clout in the future. One can only wonder whether it is, in fact, possible to persist in a liminal state, balancing between maneuverability and stability, between contestation and incorporation, between state control and refugee agency.

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