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RESEARCH ARTICLE

MOTIVATIONS AND EFFECTS OF VOLUNTEERING FOR REFUGEES

Spaces of encounter and political influence of the 'new civic engagement' in Milan

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ABSTRACT: The article focuses on the new civic engagement often referred to as volunteer welcome initiatives. Indeed, during the misnamed 'migration/refugee crisis', a consistent number of citizens in Europe engaged in practices of helping toward refugees and migrants. Based on participant observations and 28 interviews with volunteers from four different voluntary groups running their activities in Milan, Italy, I argue that such organizations offer a space of encounter and confrontation with migrants throughout which volunteers develop a strong sense of outrage and critical awareness of asylum system deficiencies. Moreover, it is argued that these organizations have had an important role within Milan's urban policy arena, to the extent that they contributed in shaping how the challenges of receiving the many newcomers were addressed locally.

KEYWORDS: Civil society mobilisations, immigrant rights movement, Milan, volunteering, welcome initiatives

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1. Introduction

Today, Europe is dealing with the aftermath of a period (roughly between 2013 and 2017) of heightened arrival of forced migrants (Castelli Gattinara 2017). While the EU and its member-states have chosen to focus on preventing new arrivals rather than providing for successful policies of inclusion, some cities in Europe have been confronting the necessity to receive forced migrants¹, by claiming their role in facilitating migrants' arrival, passage and settlement (Mayer 2017). In this context, cities have seen the emergence of a new actor. Indeed, in partnership with more established civil society actors like NGOs, 'ordinary' middle-class residents, traditionally placed in the socio-political 'centre', spontaneously joined the 'welcome movement' and established new voluntary organisations (Karakayali and Kleist 2016). Across European cities, at train stations, along roads, in temporary shelters and through demonstrations, these residents have welcomed the newcomers, demonstrating their refusal to accept the dominant anti-migration discourse and policies of their political leaders (Youkhana and Sutter 2017).

The newly-obtained centrality of this population in pro-migrant activism has come hand-in-hand with the necessity to investigate this understudied phenomenon, the analysis of which leads to the question of hospitality in cities. Moreover, this calls for an inquiry into its different aspects: the wide variety of motivations and drivers, how it affects the volunteers and its impact on public perception at the city level.

In this paper, I will add to the emergent literature on these new pro-refugee movements the case of the Italian city of Milan. Indeed, during the so-called migration/refugee crisis², Milan served as one of the primary European hubs of passage and (unstable) settlement for forced-migrants (Costa 2017). Although little to nothing has

¹ In consonance Castles (2003), I prefer to use the phrase *forced migrant*. This notion results from the effort to exceed the ambiguous dichotomy between economic migrants and refugees. By it, I include asylum-seekers, beneficiaries of international protection, internally displaced persons and generally everyone who is 'forced' to escape, even if it is 'irregular' in the country of arrival.

² Throughout the text, the term "migration/refugee crisis" is not used to suggest that Europe has been confronted with a crisis that originates in the person of the figurative migrant/refugee. Instead, this term is used to critically question the governance of migration characterising contemporary Europe, as suggested by scholars (e.g. New Keywords Collective 2016). In accordance with these analyses, indeed, we can mobilize the term 'migration/refugee crisis' in order to emphasize the "crisis" of (postcolonial) state power over the transnational human mobility of those whose movements are otherwise presumptively disqualified as "illegal" (effectively, on the grounds of global class, race, or nationality inequalities)" (New Keywords Collective 2016:21).

been written about it, beginning in summer 2013 in Milan (like in other European cities), thousands of residents joined voluntary associations or formed spontaneous initiatives to support the large numbers of migrants arriving in the city. Among these helpers have been many longstanding activists as well as many newly-engaged volunteers from the socio-political centre. This movement has contributed to orient the public narrative of the city toward a more cosmopolitan and open image (see Section 5).

This paper aims to debate the impact that these initiatives have had on both the ways in which the arrival of migrants was viewed on an individual level, through questioning their attitudes, and on a more macropolitical level, by influencing the public debate and the decisions of the public administration. In particular, we will see how these voluntary groups can represent 'micropolitical practices' that work "to continually alter the disposition and sensibility of both the individual and the affective mood of wider macropolitics of government, law and sovereign states" (Darling 2008:93).

This exploration is part of a 13-month ethnographic-oriented study based on both participant observation and in-depth interviews with volunteers of four different newly-established volunteer groups. After placing this study in the context of the current literature in the next section, these insights will allow me to discuss the 'detachment in proximity' that characterises the relationship between migrants and native residents in Milan, often marked by indifference. Subsequently, I will focus on the motivation to volunteer and the personal transformations that this activity implies for the 'helpers'. Finally, I will address the significance of the 'welcome movement' for the city of Milan, particularly in terms of public discourse and policy orientation.

2. The contemporary city and the 'welcome movement'

One way to conceptualise the 'welcome movement' that has recently arisen in Europe is to frame it within its urban dimension. From Germany to Spain, many European cities with already well-developed networks of pro-migrant activists have been the setting for the emergence of such mobilisation (Mayer 2017). After all, social scientists have increasingly emphasised the role of the city in supporting migrants' struggle for rights (e.g., Sassen 2013). Isin (2012), for example, has shown how the city can become a battlefield for 'acts of citizenship', while Nail (2015) has sustained the idea that the city has the potential for constituting a 'kosmopolis'. A prime example in this line of thought is the literature on the 'city of refuge' (e.g., Darling 2008; 2010; 2011; Oomen and Baumgärtel 2014), a body of work that has recently emerged in an attempt to answer Derrida's (2001) quest for the development of new urban rights and ethics in fa-

vour of refugees. This body of works has generally based its assumptions on the idea that the city is particularly favourable to the growth of pro-migrant initiatives, partially due to its urban 'configuration' (i.e., the type of relationship that can arise between migrants and native residents).

In effect, contemporary accounts view the city as a node of multiple belongings and relations, constantly developing through connections that both stretch beyond the city and collapse into the urban sphere (e.g., Dürschmidt 2000; Amin 2004; Massey 2004). These cities are 'not just nodal points of flows of capital, finance and information, but also central to the flows of people and their social practices and beliefs' (Dürschmidt 2000, 13)—spaces continually being made through the arrival and accommodation of global flows of diversity into a locality. As emphasised by Massey (2004), cities are not bound territorial units; they are not defined by their circular shape but by the linearity of connections and influences (routes, investments, political influences and cultural identities) that depart from them and spread around the globe.

After all, we can identify a certain cosmopolitan consciousness, an openness to the world, as an element of urban culture (Beck 2006). The same origins of the word 'cosmopolitanism', meaning 'world city', come from the 'opening' of the city (Nail 2015). In resonance with Allport's 'contact hypothesis', therefore, many scholars have suggested that high concentrations of foreigners in cities and the high probability of encounters in everyday life between local inhabitants and non-local residents has an emancipatory potential, by representing a strategic location for the claims of those who lack power (e.g., Sassen 2013). In this regard, therefore, the city acts to orient moments of engagement and encounters: it is a space of encounters and intercultural contacts that can bring out positive developments (see the discussions in Valentine [2008] and Darling [2010]).

This reading, however, struggles to stand comparison with what is happening on the ground in cities. It risks romanticising urban encounters, assuming that mere contact translates into a 'cosmopolitan outlook' and the relational politics of place (Valentine 2008). While the city offers many chances for encountering strangers, this does not mean that everybody will necessarily have these encounters nor that these encounters will be positive (Valentine 2008). Instead, a sort of 'approved detachment' regulates the inter-subjectivity relationship among the inhabitants of the contemporary city (Dürschmidt 2000). On the other hand, the city may emerge as a set of bordering, the scene for a politics of place and othering processes (e.g., Witteborn 2011). It can become the setting in which close proximity generates comparisons between different social groups in terms of special treatment, thus aggravating the dynamics of rejection and reciprocal mistrust (Valentine 2008).

In view of this debate, in this contribution I advance the idea that the city can represent a context of engagement, a strategic location for migrants' struggle, under certain circumstances. In particular, 'small actions' can constitute a social change and alter the disposition and sensibility of a broad audience in cities, in a process that transforms the individuals as well as the macropolitical level. Moreover, I consider these acts as politically-charged actions, namely actions that express an aspiration to challenge an existing social order and dissent through different forms such as lobbying, advocacy, and public demonstration (see Rancière [1999]).

In order to develop this argument, then, I refer to two lines of research, one that concerns mainly the personal transformation of pro-migrant volunteer activities, and the other referring to a more public and political transformation.

The first is the literature on volunteering that has pointed to the need to engineer contacts that might be termed 'meaningful', namely encounters that 'actually change values and translate beyond the specifics of the individual moment into a more general positive respect for—rather than merely tolerance of—others' (Valentine 2008, 325). Indeed, if proximity is not enough to bring about a mutual appreciation, let alone solidarity, this can be at least achieved by spaces that foster an urban politics of negotiating propinquity and the 'geographical juxtaposition between physical spaces, overlapping communities, contrasting cultural practices' (Amin 2004, 39). These spaces have been called 'spaces of encounter' (De Jong and Ataç 2017) or 'spaces of care' (Conradson 2003) and encompass spaces, such as drop-in centres or day-centres, where asylum-seekers, refugees, other migrants and non-migrants can meet. In particular, the reciprocity and proximity to the 'stranger' allow volunteers to alter their manner of responding to these encounters and enhance their self-knowledge and evolution of the self (Darling 2011). Besides, as emphasised by Williams (2016), bringing the ideal of care into view can contribute to cultivating a 'cosmopolitan and relational sensibility' that is fundamental for responding to the call for equipping the city with an ethos of hospitality, as prefigured by Derrida (2001).

The second line deals with what Darling (2008; 2010), following Amin (2004), labelled as *micropolitics*, namely practices which seek to address how the city, not just individuals, respond to migrants' presence. In particular, through the activities of the UK-based network of the City of Sanctuary's initiatives, Darling (2010) tried to demonstrate how the notion of a 'city of refuge' focuses primarily upon building a micropolitical affective culture of hospitality within the city by circulating ideas of responsibility, empathy and cosmopolitan 'global ethics' that help in developing a coalition of supporting actors. In his work, he showed how building support (by enlarging the base of supporters) is crucial to influence how asylum is both viewed in the city by an individu-

al and on a more macropolitical level. On an individual level, these micro-politics have been associated with an ethic of care, namely 'the proactive interest of one person in the well-being of another' (Conradson 2003, 451). On a wider scale, this micropolitics is part of a project not merely attempting to welcome the newcomers but rather reimagining and contesting the current migrant governance (Darling 2010). In this way, the local political arena is conceived "as an arena of claims and counter-claims, agreements and coalitions" (Darling 2008:60) throughout which micropolitical actions aspire to create resonance across several political levels.

Based on this understanding, I argue that the pro-migrant initiatives following the misnamed 'European refugee crisis' can be seen as both a means by which a (personal) transformative engagement is possible and an instrument that orients this involvement into potentially political actions. When native citizens, even those who have long been considered 'apolitical', experience face-to-face relations through pro-migrant volunteering, bonds of solidarity can be formed (de Jong and Ataç 2017). As seen with respect to the transformative dimension of 'space of care', it can be noted that social relations turn into cosmopolitan aspirations of justice (Glick Schiller 2016; for an account on cosmopolitan justice, see Beck [2006]). I assert that in this urban movement, we can find a strong demand for solidarity that stretches outward and plays a significant role in a cultural battle between a culture of rejection and welcoming culture.

Fieldwork and methodology

This paper has developed as part of 13-month ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Milan between January 2017 and February 2018, during which I conducted interviews with volunteers, civil servants, legal advisors and forced migrants. Such endeavours allowed me to carefully examine the 'asylum question' in this city, an aspect that has proved crucial for understanding the overall significance of pro-migrant volunteerism in the Milanese context. Following the Arab spring and the rough conditions on the opposite side of the Mediterranean Sea (see Campesi [2011]; Fontanari [2016]; Castelli Gattinara [2017]), indeed, Milan has seen the arrival of hundreds of thousands of 'forced migrants' into its territory. While some of these refugees were motivated to settle in and others were passing through, usually via train or bus, incoming migrants were obvious in specific parts of the city, notably its central railway station, especially between 2013 and 2014. Beginning in the summer of 2013, with the arrival of prospective refugees from Syria, this situation determined a strong response from citizens: a 'wave of generosity' hit the central railway station, the setting where migrants became acquainted with Milan for the first time. Many locals who had witnessed the dire needs

of the newcomers spontaneously provided help and solidarity by joining volunteer associations or forming spontaneous initiatives. This led to a novel form of activism and non-traditional civic engagement, a ferment from the civil society similar to ones arising in other European cities (e.g., de Jong and Ataç 2017; Mayer 2017; Milan 2018). An *infrastructure of welcome* arose and spread throughout the city; it took over many first aid tasks from private actors and public authorities: paediatricians and doctors voluntarily assisted underage and adult migrants, private citizens brought food and clothes, and members of Muslim faith-based organisations offered linguistic mediation. In what appeared to be a spontaneous process, these initiatives have endured beyond the 'emergency' phase during 2013–2014 and have evolved to offer 'integration-oriented' services. Indeed, initially ordinary citizens stepped in to help migrants, mainly Syrian nationals, with basic necessities; however, more recently these initiatives have often started also offering 'immaterial' support (e.g. language classes and job training) to Milan's population of asylum seekers and refugees, increasingly composed of people from West Africa and South Asia.

Having embraced ethnographic-oriented research throughout my fieldwork, I often cooperated and worked side-by-side with volunteers. Indeed, ethnography requires observing and partaking in the studied environment (Gobo, 2008). In particular, for this paper I applied overt participant observation, meaning that all members were made aware of my role as a researcher, by volunteering in one newly-established voluntary group³ - SOSERM - from May to September 2017.

During this time, soon I familiarised with the group researched and developed an affinity with my 'colleagues'. I benefitted from my position of *insider* (see Herr and Anderson [2005]). Indeed, being an insider comes with several benefits. First, it allowed me to access a reception centre and gain awareness of the day-to-day interactions, stories, events and moments that characterise the activity of pro-migrant volunteers within it. By volunteering over an extended period, then, observing became a vital research practice that represented a useful basis for reflection. Finally, my positionality made easier access to other groups of volunteers. Indeed, in a second period (roughly between September and November 2017), the observational work was enriched by semi-structured face-to-face interviews with volunteers of SOSERM and other three groups⁴,

³ In particular, during this time, I volunteered for SOS Emergenza Rifugiati Milano offering support for teaching Italian to the guests of a reception centre.

⁴ In particular, the interviews' sample was drawn from volunteers from four different Milanese voluntary groups: SOS Emergenza Rifugiati Milano (henceforth SOSERM, established in 2014 spontaneously by a group of residents who provided first aid to migrants in Milan's Central railway station and subsequently recognised by the municipality and evolved to offer support for learning Italian in reception centres to asy-

which I contacted through referrals from members of SOSERM and selected following two criteria. First that they all occupy a middle space between established NGOs and social movements. Second that they either started anew or significantly redirected their action toward forced migrants following the surge in forced migrants' arrivals in Milan. The resulting group is composed by groups ideologically diverse (e.g. religious-driven and secular groups), though their political profiles may lie somewhere to the left of the spectrum.

The position of insider came also with ethical and positional dilemmas. Being an *insider* is, indeed, fraught with 'tensions': tensions of trust, friendship, loyalty, guilt and discomfort (Williams 2016). I dealt with these tensions by trying to make sure each volunteer I worked with was aware of my role. Moreover, assuming an insider-position led me to establish personal connections that clashed with the pretence of 'objectivity', an attribute that, traditionally, the methodological literature requires the ethnographer to assume. Instead, I adopted a *reflexive approach* to my work. With the term *reflexivity*, scholars define the self-aware analysis of the dynamics between researcher and participants, and the critical capacity to reflect on how the researcher's positioning impacts on the research process (Gobo 2008). Throughout a reflexive approach, I acknowledge my positionality: how it shaped my research and influenced my interpretation and understanding. Through reflexivity, I engaged in a process of 'conscientization' (Gobo 2008), by uncovering my prejudices, ideology and tacit knowledge, that helped me to contextualize my position about the research process and to develop this present analysis.

lum seekers – mainly from Western Africa and South Asia), No Walls Corelli (Coeval with SOSERM, it provides activities and Italian classes to African and Asian migrants in reception centres), Progetto Arca (the voluntary group linked to Progetto Arca, a relevant Third Sector organisation that provides assistance to homeless and migrant people in Milan. Its volunteers (more than 1,000 in total) are involved in a range of activities for the benefit of Italian as well as foreign people, from food and clothing distribution to Italian classes), and Memoriale dello Shoah (group which includes individual citizens and members of faith-driven groups (mainly Community of Sant'Egidio and parishioners) who voluntarily run an informal reception centre that hosted African and South Asian migrants who were not assisted by the national system of reception. This first-aid activity was conducted every summer between 2015 and 2017 in Milan's Holocaust Memorial, i.e. *Memoriale della Shoah*). In this phase, I collected 28 in-depth interviews with volunteers, to which we need to add 9 complementary interviews with public officials or NGO workers.

3. Othering at the local-level: 'Culture of rejection' and indifference

As advanced in a well-known essay by Gupta and Ferguson (1992), the field of immigration is one of the areas in which the *politics of space* (that is, the process through which states and national elites make a space 'meaningful' by assigning reified and naturalised cultural identities to territories) and the *politics of otherness* (the production of difference for political, economic and ideological aims) associate very directly. At the centre of this association are forced migrants who have fled violence and/or hardship to find themselves stuck in a context of temporal displacement, violations of human rights and economic difficulty (e.g., Vacchiano 2011; Witteborn 2011; Kersch and Mishtal 2016): a world of connections (Amin 2004; Massey 2004) in which power relations produce cultural differences, and borders between 'them' and 'us' are continuously reproduced through the restriction of immigration, where excluding discourse and a politics of space allocate migrants to heterotopias such as reception centres.

We can have a good approximation of this dynamic from how, in recent years, the European Union and its member-states have reacted to the misnamed 'refugee/migration crisis', a reaction that relied on a politics of otherness and the securitisation of forced migration (Kersch and Mishtal 2016). The issue of immigration has quickly become a major public concern, and measures like the ones included in the 2015 European Agenda on Migration (e.g. the quick sorting of migrants in the so-called hotspot centres) have arguably represented the building blocks of a 'European politics of fear' (Castelli Gattinara 2017, 11). Italy has been no exception: it introduced a controversial law called the 'Minniti-Orlando', which limited the legal safeguards for asylum-seekers, and has tolerated xenophobic viewpoints on migration (Panzera 2017). Mass media have extensively reported on the (supposedly) criminal behaviour of migrants and aggravated public anxiety (Campesi 2014; Castelli Gattinara 2017).

This reaction has been fraught with consequences in both the public and private dimensions. On the one hand, forced migrants have occupied a specific 'discursive location' (Witteborn 2011). Migrants have often been described in media discourse as outsiders that need to be quarantined and as threats to national socio-economic, cultural and physical security (Castelli Gattinara 2017). A negative public discourse has barged into a big chunk of the public opinion in Italy, as demonstrated in opinion polls (e.g., see Pew Research Centre [2016]). This has cemented what we can arguably call a 'culture of rejection'. Anti-migrant campaigns have prospered in Italian cities and towns (Marengo 2015; Castelli Gattinara 2017), even in Milan where this 'culture of rejection' has taken on a variety of different expressions, ranging from residents on anti-migrant

patrol in specific neighbourhoods⁵ to vocal opposition of residents and far-right parties (notably, *the League*) and the opening of reception centres⁶.

In the private dimension, however, this 'culture of rejection' has intertwined with other difficulties that affect migrants' lives. The insertion, in Milan and elsewhere, in locations (such as reception centres and squatted buildings) physically at the margins of the city and limited access to language classes, have restricted social relations with other residents (see Kersch and Mishtal [2016]). The consequences are often loneliness and mental stress; as Kalidou⁷, a migrant whom I encountered during my research, summarised:

"I've been in Milan so long. [Here] nobody talks to you, everybody's busy with the phones [...] Try to know me, who's me, what kind of experience I have in my life [...] Talk to them, talk to these people [...] That's the problem here, Milan is so silent they're killing us. They don't talk to us. We don't know whether they hate us, whether they love us, what they're thinking"

However, this 'incarceration' of 'others' in a separate frame is also linked to the 'incarceration of the natives', namely the distance that many long-term residents feel towards the newcomer residents. The feeling of unfamiliarity with migrants ran through my conversations with native residents. The problem is one of contact and communication across separated socio-spheres. In this sense, the process of othering at work exacerbated the 'detachment in proximity' by juxtaposing different socio-spheres as 'ourselves' and 'others', a shared experience for inhabitants of contemporary cities, as suggested by Dürrschmidt (2000). This intensified what many participants identified with a sentiment of indifference, if not open irritation, toward newcomer migrants and made the city into a set of opposition, disconnection and disinterest between its different populations.

4. Volunteering: Motivations and individual implications

By drawing mainly on the literature regarding volunteerism, this section explores dynamics that drive individuals to volunteer in pro-migrant initiatives and their effects

⁵ http://www.z3xmi.it/pagina.phtml?_id_articolo=6889-No-alle-ronde-private-a-Porta-Venezia.html

⁶ https://milano.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/16_ottobre_31/caserma-montello-arrivati-primi-profughi-60-donne-bambini-dfeca2fa-9f54-11e6-9daf-5530d930d472.shtml?refresh_ce-cp

⁷ To protect anonymity, all informants' names have been changed.

on engaged individuals. Questions about what drives people in Europe to help refugees and the impact volunteering has on these individuals are of particular interest, especially in light of negative discourse about the arrival of refugees in Europe.

As shown by the authors who investigated the *Willkommenskultur* in Germany (e.g., Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017; Karakayali 2017; Mayer 2017), the media coverage about refugees activated an original group of citizens. Traditionally, pro-migrant volunteers have been composed of migrant and non-migrant activists with a long history of human rights advocacy. Prior to the recent upsurge in refugee solidarity, they originated in faith-based circles or left-wing groups (see Nyers and Rygiel 2012; Monforte 2014). Instead, this 'emergency' has strongly mobilised both traditional pro-migrant activists and ordinary middle-class citizens who are usually placed in the socio-political 'centre' (Hamann and Karakayali 2016; Milan 2018) and often considered apolitical, meaning that many of them had never been politically active (Hamann and Karakayali 2016). As a consequence, moreover, also the motives characterising their commitment appears to have changed (Ambrosini 2016b; Hamann and Karakayali 2016).

My investigation allowed me to observe a similar situation. The profiles of the new volunteers in Milan tended to reproduce the characteristics of pro-migrants volunteers in other contexts. Thanks to the interviews with the participants, I found out that volunteers occupy a wide range of age (from 18 to 80 years in age) with a peak from 60 years old on, while – gender-wise - there is a predominance of female volunteers (21 over 7). They are also prevalently of middle-class background (24 people worked or used to work in *white-collar* professions) and had no prior relevant experience in political activism.

As we will see, then, for the bulk of these new volunteers, who constituted the backbone of the voluntary infrastructure of welcome in many cities, neither religious nor political parameters played a significant factor (see Hamann and Karakayali 2016). In particular, similarly to what Malkki (2015) claimed in her work on international humanitarianism, volunteers' 'need to help' appear not to originate primarily from altruistic (religious or humanitarian-driven) motives but from drives associated with 'self-escape, self-loss, dehumanisation, self-humanisation, self-transformation, the care of the self, the relation of self to others and the relation of self to the world' (Malkki 2015, 10; see also Wuthnow, 1991).

The next section will touch precisely upon this aspect. We will see, in particular, that along with 'emotive' motivations (moral emotions), there also exist more 'deliberate' motives such as the acquisition of knowledge and social contacts.

Moral emotions

In the study of solidarity movements that arose during the recent surge in forced migrants' arrivals in Europe, emotions have emerged as particularly significant, especially the so-called 'moral emotions' (Karakayali 2017; Milan 2018). These are considered "feelings of approval and disapproval based on moral intuitions and principles" (Jasper 2011:143) and include sentiments such as guilt, pride, shame, outrage and compassion. Moral emotions, in particular, are linked to shared cultural meanings and cognitive understandings and orient individuals toward what is right or wrong (Jasper 2011). In this case, these emotions emerged as particularly relevant during the first stage of mobilisation. Based on an understanding of the situation as 'outrageous', the informants felt compelled to volunteer. This situation is well-represented by the next vignette narrated by Laura, a volunteer for No-Walls:

"There is an episode in particular. While I was in the station, in front of me I saw a group of Syrian women with kids. Then, a little girl ran toward me and by gestures she asked if I could have handed [the fruit in my hand] to her...I don't know why but at that point I felt a need to help."

Episodes like Laura's represent 'moral shocks' initiated by a proximate encounter with migrants in need. Beyond direct episodes, however, moral emotions were generally considered a prominent trigger (more than other elements like political or religious beliefs) generated by the diffusion of information concerning the arrival of migrants in Milan (on emotions and movements see also Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta [2001]). This is also the case for those few volunteers who were previously politically active like Luciano (a volunteer for Arca), who stated that the decision to get involved in pro-migrant volunteerism represented a sort of moral necessity related to information he read in newspaper articles.

"I needed to do something; we cannot sit back [...] It should spring a decision from there, in everyone [...] It should be normal. If you hear of someone's hardship, someone sick, helpless ... you must act."

In conclusion, whether through indirect or direct episodes, moral emotions constituted the first step in the decision to volunteer, raising moral feelings that incline people to take action.

Curiosity and openness

The second source of motivation (which often intertwines with moral emotions) is an imaginative/intellectual curiosity. This attracted many of the participants to volunteer, as Luciano describes in the following excerpt.

“I wished I could know the world; this is a way. Here, you see people from around the world.”

The desire to ‘know the world’ is a common reason for volunteering. For example, Renato, a volunteer with Arca, spoke at length about his deep love of travel and the nexus between that and his decision to volunteer.

“I noted that who doesn’t like to travel doesn’t like volunteering either.”

He added:

“The fear of being cut off from what happens in the rest of the society is a drive. The fact of being curious about it is crucial.”

Renato’s words suggest another interesting aspect concerning curiosity: for many of the informants, this meant a curiosity toward a new societal dynamic like the arrival of migrants from afar. As will be seen, volunteering allowed for the establishment of new kinds of social connections—with migrants (as we will see) and other volunteers—that ‘enriched’ participants. When volunteers manage to create inter-personal connections, helping others becomes more stimulating and provides a reason to continue volunteering. Furthermore, it casts a different light on volunteering, which becomes less a matter of selflessness and more of self-serving, as we can see from the next interview with Carla, a volunteer for Memoriale:

“[Volunteering for me is] to go out of my cocoon. Since I stopped working quite young, because of my children, volunteering’s been a means for connecting with other people. It enriches you because you learn much, it gives you meaning beyond your family life.”

In light of these testimonies, we can argue that volunteering originates from complex motives that include both ‘deliberate’ and ‘emotive’ drives. In line with accounts

on ‘post-modern volunteering’ (Ambrosini, 2016b), this phenomenon can be read within an ‘individual expression’ perspective: a way to express one’s individuality (e.g., in terms of moral choices), which in turn is beneficial to both the helper and the helped.

Caring and transformations

As demonstrated in this study, through activities such as teaching Italian and service-orientation volunteering entails engaging with people, so personal relationships are unavoidable. In this sense, volunteering might be viewed as an activity of engagement not with anonymous masses but with particular persons (Malkki 2015). During my time at SOSERM and through in-depth interviews, it became clear that strong personal bonds developed through regular contacts between volunteers and migrants. According to Smets (2011), social contact between members of minorities and majorities can develop from the first encounter to relations of mutual help through positive and regular contact. It is not surprising, therefore, that regular encounters between volunteers and migrants can lead to the development of emotional bonds. In this sense, it was common to hear from the volunteers that they established significant relationships with particular migrants, even relationships of friendship. These findings shed light on how volunteering is grounded not just in vertical relations (e.g., ‘host versus guest’; see Conradson [2003]) but also in horizontally-oriented, bi-lateral and inter-subjective reciprocal exchanges resembling friendship. In this regard, whether conducted in drop-ins or reception centres, volunteering seems to open the space for caring relationships: it offers proximity and mutuality in terms of giving and receiving care, attentiveness and consideration. This theme is illustrated in the following quote from Giovanni (a volunteer for Memoriale), who spoke at length about the difficulties that volunteering implies.

“The difficulties come when you face the suffering and you don’t know what to say, what to do [...] Behind this feeling, there’s the inability to softly enter into others’ lives because it means to bear their problems. It means that once you entered into somebody’s life, you take and bring his/her suffering at home [...] In this sense, for me, volunteering is to say, ‘I care about you’. This means a movement of the self: I go out from myself.”

Giovanni’s words show how the ability to care about others involves a ‘movement of the self’, a transformative process. This transformative process was a common topic during my time at SOSERM and during my interviews with other volunteers. Through

them, I was able to understand how the effects of such transformation reach the individuals' most personal traits, as Maria's (long-term volunteer for SOSERM) next quote illustrates.

"The transformation is really personal. Working in fashion, I was truly a 'fashion victim' ... well, now I don't care anymore! You see these people, their problems, and you feel silly."

As highlighted by Hamington (2007), encounters become an opportunity for transforming individually. Through the opportunity to 'encounter eye-to-eye' and care, volunteers receive something in return. Francesca (volunteer for Arca) describes how volunteering transformed her attitude about life:

"I gain more than I gave. It's a big deal for my view of life, my priority, cultural enrichment."

The opportunity to volunteer (by which an individual meets and cares for another individual) can, therefore, be seen as a device through which a transformative process emerges. In the following section, we will see to what extent and in which direction.

Injustices and awareness

In the previous section, we saw how the relationship between the helper and the helped through volunteering implies a process of caring. I argue that this characteristic, in turn, favours an identification with the needs of others. This identification resembles the process of 'becoming-minor', a philosophical concept that describes an intense identification with the conditions of dominated groups of society (e.g., women) and a condition for resisting oppressive forms of power (Deleuze and Guattari 1986). Furthermore, this identification pushes toward questioning the personal attitude and dissenting to the existing policies on the asylum, elements that are important prerequisites for forms of 'micropolitical practices' (Darling 2008).

Volunteers' identification with migrants often represents a 'natural development' of the relationship of care that volunteers establish with the assisted persons. The movement from 'getting to know' to 'identifying with' is, indeed, a common dynamic for those who volunteer. Anna, for example, was among the youngest volunteers for Memoriale. Like others, she pondered on how volunteering led her to discover shared identities and similarities with the assisted migrants:

"I cannot understand this rage toward the 'stranger'... I don't see them as a stranger. I mean, when you talk, you discover they're your age, they go to school..."

Moreover, identification is connected to another aspect: increased awareness of migrants' situations. Indeed, by connecting a population like forced migrants with members of 'mainstream society' (like middle-class volunteers), volunteering exposes the latter to injustices that characterise migrants' daily life that would otherwise have been unheard-of to volunteers. Therefore, as illustrated by the next excerpt from SOSERM volunteer Natalia, for many participants volunteering is a means of transcending a common knowledge about migration.

"I've often questioned my involvement during this time because it's hard when you hear this news about migrants...that they steal, do drugs...for me, it's impossible not to question [...] But even if you're doubtful then, somehow by volunteering you realize [the truth] that they're not evil."

In effect, as Anna seems to suggest (and as many participants explained to me), getting to know the migrants and their struggles through volunteering is not self-contained but a first step for cultivating a more in-depth knowledge that advances, for example, through attending conferences or reading specific books. This more in-depth knowledge often implies a questioning of personal attitude. Moreover, this increased awareness of the realities of forced migration often generates a critique of the poor state of the asylum system. These aspects are highlighted in the following quote from Laura:

"Fifteen years ago, during some migrants' demonstrations, I wondered why they protest if they have the status. I thought: what do they want? Now, I changed my perspective. I realised that getting the asylum, it's not the end, it doesn't give you all the instruments and protections."

Quotes like Laura's shed light on the political significance of volunteerism. Recent discussions about the contemporary humanitarian assistance tend to illustrate volunteerism as an action contributing to the *depoliticization of asylum*, namely an issue of moral sympathy complicit with state-driven intentions (see Ticktin [2011]; Fassin [2012]). Instead, as I observed in Milan, volunteerism and politics may go hand in hand. In this context, politics is understood, along the lines of Rancière (1999), as an action which

challenges the order of things through raising questions and objections. In our case volunteering has had the potential to urge individuals to question the logic, discourse and myths that surround the misnamed 'migration crisis' and its governance. In particular, volunteering functioned as a micropolitical practice: it allowed volunteers to be outraged by structural injustices, sympathise with migrants and, as we will see, engage in outspoken forms of dissent such as lobbying, advocacy and public demonstration.

5. Volunteering within the 'urban arena': the influence on the public debate and macropolitical dynamics

Cities in Europe have been crucial settings during the recent surge of forced migrants. As noted by scholars, (e.g. Mayer 2017), in this period they were at the forefront of migrants' reception and increasingly constituted 'arenas' where players from the public, private and civil society sectors competed to orient the city's response. In this 'arena', an important role has been played by those groups which are part of the movement for the 'welcome of refugees'. The empirical literature about civil society tend to illustrate how these groups conceive their activities not merely as acts of humanitarian assistance but also as a commitment to engage in forms of protest (such as lobbying, advocacy or public demonstration) expressing aspiration to change a hostile attitude toward refugees and migrants (e.g. Sinatti 2019).

A similar situation was at play also in Milan. In this city - at first informally, but increasingly evolving their organisational structures - civil society groups not only collected donations and provided food, clothes, hospitality and orientation to migrants. Civil society's organisation (including the participants' volunteer groups) were also involved in what we can argue is a cultural battle to make public opinion aware of the importance of values like the welcome of refugees. In particular, many of my respondents were actively supporting their organisations during what they sometimes referred to as 'awareness-work' (i.e. *attività di sensibilizzazione*); an activity that includes meetings at school, contacting journalists, and running event at neighbourhood-level. One of these was Paola, a pensioner who has volunteered in different groups (mainly SOSERM and Memoriale). Together with her group-mates, Paola carried out an awareness-work in her neighbourhood (Porta Venezia, where a consistent presence of incoming refugees, mainly Eritreans, had resulted in protests by a part of the residents and shopkeepers), by organising and running a series of events. In particular, hereunder, Paola remembers her involvement in the organisation of a 'charity day' in her neighbourhood, one of the many activities she supported during her volunteering.

“In spring 2015, we threw a ‘charity day’ [...] We brought together different groups in order to raise the idea that we should solidarize with the migrants. [That day], we organized a football game and other games; this for stirring up feelings and in this context some hundred people were present.”

This ‘aspect’ of pro-migrant volunteering is not new. Darling (2008; 2010) clearly illustrated it through the example of Sheffield’s ‘City of Sanctuary’, where the build-up of a range of supporters accompanied the creation of an alternative discourse on asylum. Indeed, pro-migrant groups represent micropolitics, initiatives to alter the attitude of a wide audience and “the affective mood of wider macropolitics” (Darling 2008:93). Similarly, also in Milan volunteers conceived their activities as focused (also) on influencing the attitude of the public opinion. Indeed, many volunteers perceived an attitude of indifference - if not hostility and rejection - in a big chunk of the public opinion. As in Carlo’s case, the author of the next excerpt and important member of Milan’s Holocaust Memorial as well as a volunteer in Memoriale, this attitude is at odds with personal and collective values:

“I think that at the moment there is a prevalent attitude about asylum, which is the indifference. To fight against indifference is part of our philosophy. [...] So, the decision [to host refugees in the Holocaust Memorial], from the philosophical point of view, is due to the fact [...] that the Memorial is conceived as a reminder of what indifference can cause.”

Like Carlo, in effect, many volunteers maintain that their activity has the value of testimony. This testimony can contribute to altering the public opinion on asylum. In this respect, some of the volunteers - often those who (like Paola) are active in ‘unfriendly’ neighbourhoods – report instances of tension with residents and other groups that are hostile toward refugees. After all, Milan is historically a stronghold of *The League*, the notorious xenophobic party highly critical to pro-migrant organisations⁸. Moreover, populism in Italy has grown in the past few years, thus contributing to the culture of rejection of the city. However, volunteers like to remember that their activity frequently succeeded in altering the affective mood of specific neighbourhoods. Similarly, they recount how, more generally, they feel that their awareness-work influenced the climate of the city and created a culture of welcome. The next quote is from Simo-

⁸ <http://espresso.repubblica.it/attualita/2019/01/29/news/crociata-matteo-salvini-migranti-1.330892>

ne, coordinator of the volunteers at Memoriale, and well explains the prominence that this awareness-work has had for the groups:

"To involve many people was strategic for us. [...] We tried to appeal to the residents. [Therefore] we tried to explain the migration phenomenon to our volunteers and the Milanese people by asking journalists to come or by communicating directly. [...] That was fundamental: dragged many people to us and generate a culture of welcome."

In effect, in the last decade, Milan's institutions, and in particular its local administration, have shifted their attitude on migration. After an 18-year period of centre-right governments, in 2011 a centre-left coalition won the mayoral election, replicating this result in 2016. Since then, the new coalition has arguably worked the hardest to sustain its self-image as an 'open city', in discontinuity with previous administrations. In the Italian context, Milan has emerged for its 'tolerance' and 'good reception' of refugees, so much so to become an 'example'⁹. In May 2017, the municipality launched a pro-migrant demonstration (attended by 100,000 people) to reiterate the necessity to extend solidarity toward asylum-seekers and refugees. In March 2019, another similar demonstration gathered around 200,000 people¹⁰.

In general, the volunteers welcomed these initiatives of the local administration; indeed, these initiatives aroused the common feeling of contributing to challenge the indifference and the attitude of rejection in the city and to sustain an open approach. In particular, the awareness-work, in which many volunteers are involved, make them feel important actors in the Milanese arena and players at the macro-political level. Some volunteers, as Simone in the following extract, picture this arena as comprising two antagonist forces. Therefore, the value of volunteering lies also with the fact of contributing to the primacy of one over the other.

"We think in this very moment there're two Europe, two Italy, two Milan, namely the one pro-solidarity and welcoming, and the indifferent one. Volunteering at Memoriale means allowing standing in favour of the first alternative."

⁹ The so-called 'modello Milano' (namely, the 'Milanese model') has been a benchmark for intervention within Italy (https://milano.corriere.it/notizie/politica/17_maggio_18/migranti-80-sindaci-firmano-l-accordo-un-nuovo-modello-milano-dell-accoglienza-50def9b6-3b88-11e7-83da-130c74015a48.shtml?refresh_ce-cp)

¹⁰ <http://www.ansa.it/lombardia/notizie/2019/03/02/razzismo-corteo-people-prima-le-persone-a-milano-per-i-diritti-contro-la-politica-della-paura-b6e04d74-1db0-4dd4-a0df-c31a7e0a51c0.html>

Volunteering and macropolitics: the assistance of transit migrants

The crucial role that pro-migrant voluntary groups have had in Milan's macropolitics is best exemplified by their influence on the assistance of the so-called transit migrants' population of the city, an activity that saw the involvement of several volunteers, including many of our participants.

As earlier mentioned, between 2013 and 2016, Milan was one of the main gateway for those migrants who, once disembarked in Italy, headed to Northern Europe, a movement that saw the passage of more than 100,000 people (Costa 2017). Instead of turning from them, Milan responded by 'opening up' through the establishment of different initiatives for the assistance of this population.

The assistance of 'transit migrants' represented a turning point for the civic support of refugees and civil society's influence on the local government. The first actors that mobilized for this population were civil society groups; however, soon, the local administration backed up the activity of the civil groups. This involvement led up to the creation of a formal mechanism of assistance, endowed with adequate resources, that incorporated and scaled up the assistance of the civil society. Indeed, the municipality established a 'hub' in Milan's central railway station where people received board and lodging, medical care and clothes, and were sent to reception centres (see also Sinatti [2019]). The 'hub' became a well-known 'space of care' and offered a unique vantage point to observe the *humanitarian scene* of the city, also composed by 'our' voluntary organisation. In it, indeed, volunteers and workers from different associations and NGOs worked side by side and under the coordination of the local administration.

According to volunteers, moreover, the institution of a system, in which civil society groups and the municipality cooperated, contributed also to the development of strong ties between voluntary organisations and the local government. Indeed, the 'hub' gave birth to a forum for discussion and a mechanism of feedback comprising the different actors present there. In such context, the voluntary groups used to partake in different round-tables that saw the presence of the municipality, Third sector organisations and NGOs. In these meetings, in which the municipality played a leading role, operational logics were discussed and future plans were designed. In the next passage, Silvia, one of the founder of SOSERM, illustrates how the mechanism of feedback between municipality and voluntary groups used to function:

"There existed several roundtables, at different levels. Indeed, depending on the level, diverse issues are discussed, and on a different basis. For example, third sector organisations that undertook a contract with the municipality used to have frequent

meetings with the municipality. [...] We, as other civil society groups, also used to be part of this mechanism [...] by which we had the opportunity to 'have a say'."

In effect, at the hub volunteers were not only involved in the humanitarian assistance of migrants. As maintained in particular by the *leaders* of the voluntary groups, volunteers perceived their activity at the hub as influencing the *logic* of assistance. As noted by Sinatti (2019), at the hub the assistance of migrants went hand in hand with the critique of the conditions under which help was delivered and with the vocal opposition toward institutional mechanisms. In particular, dissent expressed through the form of advocacy directed to the municipality. This dissent was expressed within and without the formal mechanism of feedback, with the result of challenging and changing the policy regulating the hub. A case in point is the process of universalisation at the 'hub'. The 'hub', originally designed to care primarily for Syrian nationals, in 2015 was open up to assist all the other nationals, mainly thanks to the advocacy-work of the voluntary groups engaged in assisting Eritrean refugees. Therefore, as Simone explained to me in the next excerpt, voluntary groups were not only called upon to deliver essential services but they were able to advocate for a reform of institutional mechanisms, as, for example, a process of 'equalisation' between Syrians and refugees of different nationalities:

"The decision to open up the assistance to migrants of different origins and with different situations was a great achievement of the voluntary groups involved in the hub. This was the result of a work conducted during the meetings with the municipality. Indeed, our group took part in different rounds of consultations in which, along with other groups, we tried to influence the municipal decisions. [...] In this respect, Milan is peculiar. The decisions from the local administration orientated us, but we also orientated the local administration."

In conclusion, the example of the assistance of transit migrants has allowed us to see how the micropolitical actions of voluntary groups can create resonances across several levels, by working to change macropolitics of government. In this case, the voluntary groups at the hub (apparently involved in small acts of humanitarian assistance) influenced the policy-making on asylum. In particular, they influenced the municipal decision on the assistance of transit migrants.

6. Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have attempted to show how the experiences of pro-migrant volunteers may represent a means for opposing the wave of anti-migrant discourse and policies Europeans are facing in the aftermath of the misnamed 'migration/refugee crisis', an antidote primarily directed against a xenophobic public discourse and individual indifference. In particular, by offering a conceptual reading of middle-class citizens' engagement in pro-migrant volunteer activities in the context of Milan, this article shed light on volunteering as an enabler of transformation for both individuals and the public. This study has demonstrated how moral emotions and curiosity drive individuals to volunteer, as volunteering offers these individuals the possibility to enrich their knowledge and their connections with others. Moreover, volunteering favours a 'relationship of care' between the helper and the helped, and this can prelude to developing a greater awareness of the structural injustices marking migrants' daily lives. This dynamic connects with macropolitics; by catalysing the efforts of multiple individuals in different volunteer organisations, volunteering has a remarkable public impact, on both the public discourse and the policies of the city. In other words, through this paper, we have shown how volunteering can serve as an act of contestation of migration governance, which has increasingly been based on 'othering' logic.

Starting from this understanding, we distance ourselves from works that argue, drawing on critics of contemporary humanitarian care (e.g. Ticktin 2011; Fassin 2012), how the new 'welcome culture' contribute to the depoliticization of asylum (e.g., Karakayali 2017). Instead, this paper is in line with works that stress the political potential of the emergent refugee support organisations: researches either based on the analyses of emergent refugee support organisations in different context that unmasked the myth of apolitical volunteering (see de Jong and Ataç [2017] and Fleischmann and Steinhilper [2017]), or contributions that sustained the political subversive character of pro-refugee initiatives, which have the courage to repudiate the dominant anti-migrant discourse and policies (Buckel 2016; Glick Schiller 2016).

However, while these works mainly focus on intervention in the public discourse, this paper aimed to illustrate its impact on both the private and public dimensions, as well as the nexus between the two. This positioning originates from the belief that these two 'sides' need to be read together as part of a process of micropolitics that resonate across several levels, influencing aspects of the macropolitics.

In conclusion, I wish to discuss both the empirical limits and the future prospects of this study. As seen, the study is based on a qualitative endeavour developed through a

single case, the city of Milan. I believe that the city of Milan offers a privileged vantage point. This because Milan has had both a rich history of volunteerism (Ambrosini 2016a) and a particular relevance in the current geography of forced migration. However, a comparison of multiple case studies could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the role and significance that pro-migrant volunteer groups, especially newly-established groups, have played in the past and can play in the future. In this respect, an interesting prospect may come from monitoring how this welcome movement develops in response to more recent dynamics. In particular, the fading of the 'crisis' from the public eye and the increasingly aggressive stance against forced migrants' arrival in many countries and on the part of their national political leaders (notably in Italy) raises questions about the future of this movement. In this respect, I believe that two concerns stand out as particularly relevant: in which directions can the 'welcome movement' develop, and to what extent can this movement condition the positioning of local political leaders vis-à-vis the national governments?

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