

# Archivio antropologico mediterraneo

Anno XXII, n. 21 (2) | 2019

Varia

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### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/aam/1887>

ISSN: 2038-3215

### Publisher

Dipartimento Culture e Società - Università di Palermo

### Electronic reference

Stefano degli Uberti, « Borders within. An Ethnographic Take on the Reception Policies of Asylum Seekers in Alto Adige/South Tyrol », *Archivio antropologico mediterraneo* [Online], Anno XXII, n. 21 (2) | 2019, Online since 31 December 2019, connection on 02 January 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/aam/1887>

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This text was automatically generated on 2 January 2020.

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# Borders within. An Ethnographic Take on the Reception Policies of Asylum Seekers in Alto Adige/South Tyrol

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## 1. Introduction

- 1 Recent developments in border crossings, commuter migration trajectories, secondary movements, forced mobility and the involuntary settlement of populations on and across the edges of nation-states within Europe and at its sea and land thresholds, have urged border scholars to rethink the theoretical and analytical tools used to describe this “multilevel complexity of borders”. This has meant a “processual turn” in analysing how borders and «border regimes» (Fontanari 2017), conceived of as “practices of bordering/border-making”, are created (Paasi 1998; van Houtum, van Naerssen 2002; Newman 2006).
- 2 Autochthonous and migrant populations, ideologies, policies, narratives and daily practices, as well as classificatory processes promoted by institutional and non-governmental actors such as those operating in the communication and public service sectors, all foster the development of bordering processes. The processual approach to borders has turned out to be particularly salient when it comes to capturing the complexity of those informal settlements inhabited by wandering migrants such as “the Jungle” of Calais or the towns of Šid in Serbia, Bihać and Velika Kladuša in the Bosnian canton of Una-Sana, and the Italian municipalities of Ventimiglia and Bolzano, all located at the gateways of migrant trajectories. The understanding of the dynamics

occurring in these social contexts is still shaped by conceptual approaches to borders characterized by a fixation with the notion of border as a tangible entity, the physical outcome of political, social and/or economic processes (Newman 2006: 144). While this approach has developed through sophisticated and erudite conceptual analysis (Reichert 1992; Parker, Vaughan-Williams 2012), it is not always anchored in empirical evidence but rather in abstract theorization.

- 3 Conversely, the anthropological perspective, grounded in the analysis of the socio-cultural, symbolic processes and meanings behind the enactment of border practices and regimes in relation to migration, seems better equipped to inform the epistemological, ontological and methodological dimensions of borders<sup>1</sup>. Such a perspective becomes particularly telling in contexts such as Alto Adige/Südtirol, a territorially and culturally distinct area due to the co-presence of «old minorities» along with the so-called “new” minorities originating from international migration (Medda-Windischer 2009)<sup>2</sup>.
- 4 In the summer of 2015 the border crossings of migrants directed to Italy from Austria through South Tyrol developed in parallel to the emergence of a growing number of migrants who, with no intention of settling in Italy, moved to the Brenner Pass as an active transit point for making their way up from other Italian regions to reach the EU’s northern countries. In the wake of growing pressure from the media as well as the public, also fuelled by the concurrent long and drawn-out Austrian presidential campaign, the German and Austrian governments responded by appealing to chapter II of the Schengen Treaty, followed by a reintroduction of EU internal border controls, the strengthening of trilateral patrols along the railway lines and the reinstatement of border checkpoints. Although the physical barrier has not yet been built, the restoration of control and identification points not only caused controversy in regional and national public opinion and even gave rise to demonstrations, but it also affected the collective imagination due to its symbolic nature and the repercussions it has had on cross-border trade and historical ties within the Euregio<sup>3</sup>.
- 5 Against this background of the enforcement of border control practices along the Brenner Pass between Italy and Austria, almost 400 hundred asylum seekers became stranded in the provincial and urban areas of Bolzano, crowding the entrance hall of the train station, wandering around the city’s most touristic streets and spreading out in Talvera central park. Within a few weeks of their arrival, the social perception of their public presence was amplified by local politicians’ and the mass media’s increasingly frequent calls for the rapid diffusion of the category of “out-of-quota” asylum seekers (*profughi fuori quota/Asylbewerber “fuori quota”*). This label was used to identify those migrants who had not arrived through the Mediterranean routes and therefore were excluded according to the Italian national quota system of redistribution<sup>4</sup>. The visibility of these so-called “autonomous” migrants, lacking the requisites to access the national reception system and at the same time excluded from Bolzano’s provincial reception system as they exceeded the limits of available places, quickly triggered political confrontations between the two main actors responsible for local migration governance: the Government Commissariat<sup>5</sup> and the Autonomous Province of Bolzano.
- 6 For over one year the “autonomous migrants” were left to themselves, setting up informal settlements in the city and receiving only voluntary support from the Alexander Langer Stiftung Foundation, the humanitarian association ‘SOS Bolzano’ and

other third sector organizations. On October 7, 2016, over a year after their arrival in the territory of Bolzano, an official agreement between the former Italian Minister of the Interior (Angelino Alfano) and the governor of South Tyrol (Arno Kompatscher) provided the legal basis for including these people in the national quota. However, it is interesting to note that by recognising the hundreds of autonomous migrants who were excluded from the national system in October 2016, the agreement not only established the important principle that any future process of inclusion by the appointed institutions will always depend on a formal act of assignment by the central state, but also that those who from then on arrive in South Tyrol outside the quotas will not have access to the reception system<sup>6</sup>.

- 7 Policy, media discourse and its translation into daily practice have a great impact on creating and conveying meaning and social representation in both the reception system and the image of asylum seekers. However, the relationship between policies and the categories of migrant identification – such as official statistics and classifications – is anything but neutral (Giudici 2013; Marras 2009; Manocchi 2014). Based on an ethnographic account of reception policies for asylum seekers in South Tyrol, this article empirically frames the concept of “border” by retracing the experiences of “out-of-quota” asylum seekers. This is done in light of the day-to-day implementation of the socio-cultural and political creation of the category of “asylum seeker” as prompted by policy and local media discourse.
- 8 An anthropological lens will allow us to unveil the performative dimension of labelling practices and to argue that they not only fuel misrepresentations and stereotypization of asylum seekers; they translate into bordering practices that exacerbate migrants’ vulnerability and hinder their access to reception facilities and welfare services. I will discuss how labelling practices produce the social and spatial boundaries between them and Italian society.
- 9 How and to what extent do policy narratives and the media’s rhetoric shape the trajectories of reception and accommodation of asylum seekers at the local level? How does the process of categorization impact the everyday lives of asylum seekers in South Tyrol?
- 10 I aim to provide insight into the migration regime “at work” in South Tyrol, an Italian reception context that is still relatively unexplored despite its unique socio-cultural and institutional setting, shaped by the coexistence of three socio-linguistic groups (German-, Italian- and Ladin-speakers)<sup>7</sup>.
- 11 The article is organised as follows: the first section is devoted to the theoretical and methodological framework while the second introduces the historical and institutional context of the South Tyrolean system of reception of asylum seekers. The third and fourth sections discuss the data collected, presenting an empirical analysis of local policy and media discourse vis-à-vis the narratives of migrants<sup>8</sup>. The conclusions readdress the theoretical discussion of the study of borders in light of the ethnographical account.

## 2. Theory and methodology. Local labelling processes and “border” beyond the territorial fence

- 12 Most of the recent contributions examining the issue of the category of refugee stem from the reflections of Roger Zetter. In his seminal article dated 1991 he illustrates how the categories of refugee are a bureaucratic social construction, the result of labelling processes deeply embedded in the dynamics of power relations that affect migrants' life experience (1991; 2007). Following his perspective a considerable number of studies have explored labelling processes (Sigona 2003; Marras 2009; Cabot 2012; Manocchi 2014) and how they combine with other asylum procedures to produce an overlap between the status of refugees and asylum seekers on the one hand, and that of “irregular migrants” on the other, emphasising the institutional processes of everyday «legal production of migrant “illegality”» (De Genova 2002: 429; Sigona 2012; Giudici 2013; Scheel, Squire 2014). Recognising the risks entailed in adopting a state perspective which neglects the intersubjective dimension of power relations, these pieces of research have accounted for the social context in which refugees' life experiences are embedded. While similar attention needs to be paid to elucidating the local socio-cultural meanings that inform the labelling process and how they are played out by the social actors involved, research exploring the context of South Tyrol (Zinn 2017) is still limited.
- 13 The institutional fractioning of the label “refugee” (Zetter 2007) with terms such as vulnerable, Internally displaced persons (IDP), “Dublined”, clandestine migrants, bogus asylum seekers,...“out-of-quota” allows the bureaucratic apparatus to act on migrants to either facilitate or obstruct their applications for international protection, the recognition of their refugee status and ultimately their juridical position and potential inclusion in the places of arrival. The various receptive conditions experienced by asylum seekers throughout Italy reveal the proliferation of “bureaucratic labels” (*Ibidem*) and mirror the differentiation of the political and socio-cultural contexts in which they are enacted. The intent here is to explore how the category of “asylum seeker” is constructed in South Tyrol. I will discuss how this “boundary category” is framed in the policy and media discourse as well as how migrants are received, shedding light on the category's role in the daily reproduction of “bordering processes”. By exploring the symbolic, mental, and imaginary socio-cultural dimensions through which visible and invisible borders are inhabited (Brambilla *et al.* 2015), the article conceives the «border as method», an epistemological device that «accounts for and reacts to the multifarious battles and negotiations [...] that constitute the border both as an institution and a set of social relationships» (Mezzadra, Neilson 2008: 1). In this vein, research may cast light on the performative and material dimensions of borders in order to foster greater understanding of contemporary bordering processes.
- 14 With respect to the relationship between “border” and “migration”, the sharp division between the concepts of “inclusion” and “exclusion” are questioned in light of the life experiences of migrants. The experience of “out-of-quota” asylum seekers provides an empirically grounded analysis of the processes of differential inclusion (Mezzadra, Neilson 2013: 154) by addressing the ethical and normative issues of their in/exclusion (Brambilla 2015). The differential inclusion of asylum seekers is examined in terms of the preconditions for their reception and access to juridical and social rights. The

article seeks to demonstrate how labelling practices have nourished and legitimised the actions of the institutional apparatuses of governance, marking the existential borders of some asylum seekers' lives in South Tyrol.

- 15 The work presented here is based on reflections and data collected while working and conducting fieldwork for almost 15 months in South Tyrol within the asylum seekers' reception system<sup>10</sup>. Between 2015 and 2016 I worked in Bolzano as coordinator of the emergency centre for homeless people *Emergenza Freddo* and afterwards as vice-coordinator of a reception centre for asylum seekers. Participant observation and shadowing practices (Czarniawska 2007), mostly with young single male migrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, were conducted not only in the reception centres but also by following their paths through the city, in the urban interstices where they set up provisional shelters or informal gathering places such as makeshift camps in the area behind the railway station, Talvera park or improvised accommodations under the bridges. The data also consist of a sample of relevant opinion pieces published between the summer of 2015 and the spring of 2017 in prominent local Italian and German newspapers and journals<sup>11</sup>. Based on this «polymorphous engagement» (Gusterson 1997: 116) that implies meeting informants across multiple dispersed sites and adopting a heterogeneous mix of research techniques and practices, attention will be devoted to the strategies and *topoi* employed by the media and political representatives when advancing their standpoints on the “out-of-quota” migrants insofar as they disclose and bring about concrete effects. Along the lines of Austin's notion of «performative utterance» (1975), I address the analysis of discourse as linguistic constructions that function as forms of social action and have the effect of change. In contrast to constative statements, which Austin considers as descriptive language that answers to the logic of «true or false», the «performativity» of discourses, «the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not *normally* be described as, or as ‘just’, saying something» (Austin 1975: 5).
- 16 Following Feldman's suggestions on non-local ethnographic methodology, the article will «shift the ethnographic focus from object and structures to processes that create the conditions for certain kinds of objectifications and institutional and network configurations» (2012: 192). In particular, the examination of an array of policy and media discourse will reveal the rationale of governance, the narratives and generative processes through which the formation of “bordering apparatus” materialises and mediates relations within the reception policy domain.
- 17 Drawing on evidence from a wide range of empirical sources including policy documents, newspapers, videos, interviews, informal conversation and interpersonal engagement, this article further develops the line of research on bordering/border making but it also aims to promote the understanding of the performative dimension of labelling practices prompted by local policy and media discourse. Recalling the distinction put forward by Fassin (2011), the aim is to look beyond the “boundary” in order to explore and unfold the multiple configurations of a “border”, eliciting its intersubjective social constructs in the everyday life of individuals and institutions, in the specific case of the “borders within” the asylum reception system.

### 3. The asylum policy framework in Alto Adige/Südtirol

18 The “refugee crisis” or “refugee emergency”, as noted by Costantini *et al.* (2016), has by its very nature not been at the heart of public debate nor the political agenda and practices of EU governments. However, «migration has become the battleground for other issues which concern the social and institutional framework» (Costantini *et al.* 2016: 10). Likewise, in dealing with the refugee crisis too little attention has been paid to historical and cultural situations. This circumstance seems to be particularly telling in the context of South Tyrol where the entanglement of memory of the recent past and the institutionalised coexistence and divisions of autochthonous linguistic groups has marked, for instance, the approach toward non-EU migrants’ integration (Medda-Windischer *et al.* 2011; Wisthaler 2016; Mitterhofer *et al.* 2016). In South Tyrol the current dominant approach to migration appears to swing from the representation of non-EU migrants as a threat to local cultures and languages, to an “assimilationist” approach pursued by local minorities to prevent the imbalances migrants might create within the so-called “Proporz” system (Wisthaler 2016)<sup>12</sup>. This approach goes along with the branding self-representation of South Tyrol, and more broadly of Trentino-Alto Adige, as an area of transit, a bridging point between different “cultures” and populations where diversity is perceived as an asset to be protected but also as «mutual enrichment» and «added value» (Marko 2008: 388). As depicted by the following passage drawn from the region’s official website:

Our territory begins its journey through the centuries with its unique peculiarities: it is a natural transit area, a space of encounter for different populations and for the two great cultural areas on the two sides of the Alps. As a border area, it has been always in touch with different languages and cultures<sup>13</sup>.

- 19 It is against the background of this ambivalent representation that the political answer to the social and political challenge posed by the presence of the “out-of-quota” asylum seekers has taken shape.
- 20 Although the separation of the three linguistic groups does not seem to reverberate upon the organization of the reception system of asylum seekers, the institutional set-up and the division of competences in the management of migrants is tied to the autonomous status granted by the Italian central government to South Tyrol as defined by the second and most recent Statute of Autonomy of 1972.
- 21 In South Tyrol the first experiences of reception date back to the 1990s and the arrival of southeast European citizens (mainly from former Yugoslavia and Albania). As mentioned above, the management of migration is organised and directed by two main actors. While the responsibility for governing migration flows lies in the hands of the Government Commissariat, the responsibility for accommodation and integration of asylum seekers and refugees in society resides with the Autonomous Province of Bolzano (Woelk *et al.* 2016; Caponio *et al.* 2018)<sup>14</sup>. Migrants are mainly hosted in large or medium-large collective centres (Cereghini, Previte 2017).
- 22 The reception system has been organized around a double and parallel funding mechanism: an “extraordinary system” financed by the state and intended for asylum seekers coming from Libya and redistributed in Italy according to “ministerial quotas”; and an “ordinary reception system” financed by provincial funds and directed at a limited number of autonomous arrivals (ordinary quota)<sup>15</sup>. From the beginning of 2017, after the Alfano-Kompatscher agreement, the remaining autonomous arrivals were

comprised in the national quota, including the 400 “out-of-quota” asylum seekers who had been left out<sup>16</sup>. About half of these were single young men, mainly from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Morocco, without regular identification documents, who had arrived through the Western Balkan route. There were also those migrants registered in other Italian regions but moving towards the Brenner Pass to reach other northern EU countries, as well as the “Dublined”. Finally, the other half was made up of single parent family groups from Somalia and Eritrea. Until February 2017, while the latter were provided with temporary shelter in hotel facilities and were waiting to be included in the ministerial quotas, the remaining asylum seekers were put on a “waiting list” but did not receive any social or accommodation support. Most of these people, *de facto* “homeless asylum seekers” (Antenne Migranti, ASGI 2017: 14), ended up sleeping on the street.

- 23 Throughout the rest of the article, I will clarify how an understanding of the local practices of categorising asylum seekers in South Tyrol is crucial to comprehending how local governance is acting to feed the social and spatial vulnerability and marginalisation of migrants.

## 4. Labelling asylum seekers

- 24 While for some time the scientific literature has shown the negative consequences of the labels attached to asylum seekers and refugees as victims, bogus refugees, clandestine emigrants, ungrateful (Zetter 1991; Marras 2009), these labels are still widely used by institutional representatives, the mass media and social workers. This tendency might suggest a limited awareness of the practical consequences of using such labels or conversely, behaviour that ends up fostering their social reproduction and heightening their political, social and cultural burden.

- 25 During my daily professional interactions with social workers, police officers and public officers in Bolzano, and by analysing the discursive registers used by local media and politicians to discuss asylum issues, the recurrence of a series of stereotyped epithets became evident. A few excerpts from the headlines of newspapers and the official declarations of institutional authorities provide a clearer picture of the feelings and social perceptions surrounding the image of “out-of-quota” asylum seekers.

Out-of-quota? They are only *presumed* asylum seekers (Il Giorno dell’Altoadige, 03.12.2015).

Out-of-quota migrants. Are they *irregular* and *undeserving*? (Salto.bz, 20.12.2015).

We are providing *only basic hospitality* to the “out-of-quota asylum seekers” but *it is risky because we end up attracting dozens of other such desperate people!* (Member of Provincial Assembly, in Altoadige, 05.09.2016).

On migrants the Autonomous Province is required to comply with the law. [...] We cannot spread the signal that we can help everyone, even those who do not have the required documents to stay (Members of Provincial Assembly, in Dolomiten 27.02.2017)<sup>17</sup>.

- 26 “Out-of-quota” migrants are not recognised as asylum seekers. They are perceived as illegitimate and unexpected persons who lack the public credibility required to meet those criteria that generally identify the standard category of asylum seekers, such as being culturally, historically uprooted or having experienced specific forms of hardship. In this respect, being labelled “out-of-quota” means simply being dismissed as people numerically in excess and therefore, undesirable and not welcome.



- 27 The categorisation numerically identifying “out-of-quota” migrants works not only to exclude these people, but they increasingly become the object of daily public “misrecognition” under the radar of the media; this in/exclusive act of naming constructs their identities and reality. Whether or not the “presumption” of being asylum seekers makes these migrants morally unreliable, their unexpected arrival through the unrecognised trajectory of the Western Balkan route makes them legally unacceptable. They are treated as «“abusive” asylum seekers who enter without authorization in order to reap the benefits of living in a wealthy state» and thus are «conceived of as a subject who is prohibited and subsequently punished for his or her transgressions» (Squire 2009: 3-4).
- 28 In line with the desire to avert an alleged “attraction factor” of “unwanted arrivals” in South Tyrol, access for these migrants to the reception system has been harshly restricted since the introduction of the *Circolare Critelli* (Critelli memorandum) from the Provincial Authority (27 September 2016). According to this memorandum, access to reception is denied to: all those migrants who have transited or stayed in an Italian region or in a European country where they might have applied for international protection before arriving in South Tyrol; and migrants with the right to relocation and male parents of minors of less than 18 years of age (initially set at the age of 14). Moreover, access is also restricted for vulnerable individuals, such as women with minors, pregnant women, the elderly or people with health problems. Only exceptional cases are taken into consideration, such as people with certified severe health problems, and only for a maximum of 3 days. Regardless of the obligations set out by the Dublin Regulation III, the alleged faculty of the Province of Bolzano to adopt a sort of ban on the free choice of where to apply for asylum and ask for reception, is totally unfounded and in conflict with Italian law (D.Lgs 142/2015) which does not envisage any territorial or temporal constraint.
- 29 The physical presence of these “unrecognised” asylum seekers is publicly and socially recognised as being “illegal”, although this attribution of illegality is illegitimate (Giudici 2013: 67). The media and institutional discourse are acting as regulatory bodies, using labels that are detached from the individual’s identities and social reality. The labelling of “out-of-quota” becomes “used as an othering” factor (Zetter 2007: 173-174), naturalising the idea that certain asylum seekers do not “deserve” the hospitality granted by either the national or local reception system.
- 30 Against this socio-political background, as also recorded by Antenne Migranti and ASGI (2017), the most pressing obstacle faced by the “out-of-quota” migrants since their arrival has been the difficulty in applying for international protection, due to the unclear rules on who is admitted to reception. For a long time, and up to the end of 2017, the Bolzano police headquarters tied autonomous migrants’ formal requests for international protection and being granted their reception rights, to the presentation of a “declaration of hospitality” at the local migration office. As pointed out by several works, the requirement to elect a domicile other than that of the local branch of Caritas, usually provided by many asylum seekers, is illegitimate because it is a requirement devoid of legal basis (Antenne Migranti, ASGI 2017; Médecins Sans Frontières 2018). More specifically, domicile is not justified by the availability of accommodation, but, as far as formalizing an asylum request, by the mere concrete fact of being physically present in a municipality (AA.VV. 2015: 17). With the entry into force of Dgl. 142/2015, this practice, declared illegal by the judiciary, has been partially

overcome. However, as of 2018 this disposition continued to be often disregarded; several other police headquarters illegally limit access to asylum procedures and related reception measures due to lack of proof of domicile such as a declaration of hospitality or similar documents (Antenne Migranti, ASGI 2017; Brambilla 2019).

- 31 While from a juridical point of view the inability to meet this obligation entails the possible rejection of their application and registration on a generic “waiting list”, in the daily experience of several Afghan and Pakistan men I met, it means being abruptly catapulted into a neglected condition<sup>18</sup>. For most of them, such as Imran, the only place of relief was the emergency centre for homeless people where I was working, which consisted of three containers housing seventy people. I still remember his profound frustration and despair after his encounter with local migration officers. A 30-year-old journalist active in local politics, he left Pakistan in 2015 after being threatened and kidnapped by unknown people due to his professional and political engagement against the former ruling party. When I met him, queuing in front of the gateway of the dormitory and waiting for a bed, he commented:

I don't understand why I am on the street and other people like me... same conditions... are hosted in a camp. They have their own bed and they can have a shower every day! (Imran, Bolzano, 11.2015).

It is hard to say if it is worse now in South Tyrol or before arriving here. I am living in a kind of never-ending limbo. I do not know my destiny. Now, I just have to wait, like so many others, with no possibilities to change my situation (A Pakistani weaver, 22 y/o, in Salto.bz, 20.12.2015).

- 32 The words of Imran echo those of other homeless asylum seekers in describing a night-time reception service limited to a few days a week and a morning meal. Access to the dormitory was regulated by selective criteria and a waiting list of up to weeks. During my time spent in the structure, the most significant aspect of the implementation of these bureaucratic procedures was how the selective criteria turned into a labelling mechanism that produced an internal hierarchy, not only between homeless people and asylum seekers, but among the asylum seekers themselves. As noted by Wodak and Meyer (2015) discourse and social reality are mutually constitutive; discursive practices can have major ideological effects, enabling the creation or re-creation of unequal power relations and, as suggested by the experience of asylum seekers in Bolzano, the configuration of different fictitious legal statuses and degrees of in/exclusion according to the local reception system.
- 33 Initially, restrictions related to choosing to stay in the night-dormitory as a domicile, permitted only to homeless people<sup>19</sup>, and the unofficial differentiation and hierarchisation which some asylum seekers are subjected to daily in terms of social and political rights, reveal the underlying rationale that at the government level seems to guide the implementation of reception practices: rather than welcoming and assisting migrants, they create and govern through bordering the spaces of difference.

## 5. Local practices of in/exclusion

- 34 The difficulties of Imran and other migrants in making sense of their exclusion from the asylum reception system as well as the limited support and temporary accommodation provided by the emergency centre for homeless were frequent matters of our discussions<sup>20</sup>. Their complaints were associated with a feeling of discomfort and disappointment due to the undefined and unclear status engendered by the lack of a

certified place to stay. As a matter of fact, this «legal limbo» (Mountz *et al.* 2002), or quasi-recognised status, had concrete drawbacks for the daily life of the “out-of-quota” asylum seekers, limiting their access to basic hygienic and social services, as suggested by the following affirmation<sup>21</sup>:

Do you smell this? They [the local authorities?] do not even allow us to use the toilets of the bus station. There is no way to wash ourselves (in Salto.bz, 05.04.2017).

- 35 Access to the Italian welfare system is based on the assessment of one’s residential place of reference. The aforementioned complaint suggests the problems generated by reception policies when demanding a declaration of hospitality as a requirement for formalising an asylum request. However, during my activity as a social worker I observed a rather different, blurred conduct. Despite this restriction, Imran’s access, albeit limited, to basic social and hygienic services was tied to an arbitrary practice that equates him with homeless people<sup>22</sup>. In this regard, a declaration released by a member of the Provincial Assembly (MPA) appears rather eloquent:

Journalist: What about the numerous migrant people sleeping outside on the street?

MPA: We are doing our best but it has to be clear that *we have always had people sleeping on the street in Bolzano*. There are no more people. Perhaps these people are more visible only because they go around on the streets of the city-centre (in “Corriere dell’Alto Adige”, 8.11.2016).

- 36 Behind the institutional equation that turns “out-of-quota” asylum seekers into homeless people, what is worth noting is its underlying meaning. Their identification as homeless people becomes a means to legitimise and publicly justify the limited provision of social, psychological and logistical support. As suggested by the MPA’s public declaration, local reception policies do not seem to foster the social exclusion of these asylum seekers but rather to become the main instrument in their differential inclusion. At the same time, their access to the welfare services granted as homeless people excludes them from the juridical and social rights asylum seekers should be entitled to (Fig. 1). While Borri *et al.* (2014) maintain that the right to asylum becomes a mere right to basic services that local institutions should provide, I argue that the experience of asylum seekers in South Tyrol shows that even the right to these services is not granted when policies targeted at migrants’ reception differentiate access to the welfare system by controlling and manipulating the territorial-based criteria required for asylum-seekers.
- 37 «Migration law is at its core a border construction site» (Dauvergne 2008: 7) that not only defines system boundaries but through differences in the distribution of rights, also contributes to the emergence of new kinds of socio-political labelling, legal hierarchies and ultimately “subjects” in the sphere of refugee status, such as the “out-of-quota” asylum seekers. The labelling processes that inform local policy and media discourse on asylum seekers, primarily as “out-of-quota” and secondly as homeless people, play a functional role inasmuch as they translate into a set of practices, including bordering practices, that delimit the perimeter of social and juridical rights and hinder access to both the reception system and local welfare services. In the face of this embodied condition of disparity and in/exclusion, Imran, Abdul and other fellow migrants decided to give up queuing at the dormitory and start sleeping outside, facing the harsh temperatures of the South Tyrolean winter. As illustrated by the following excerpt from my conversations with some of them:

You won't believe me but at night I prefer to sleep outside or under the bridge with the other people, rather than being hosted in a container (Abdul 22 y/o, 06.11.2015).

- 38 To describe the condition of the “out-of-quota” asylum seekers we can rephrase Zetter’s answer to the question of who the refugee is, by saying: Who is an asylum seeker? It is one who conforms to institutional requirements (1991: 51).
- 39 As suggested by the words of Abdul, being labelled as “out-of-quota” not only prevents some asylum seekers from receiving a monthly allowance, three meals a day, a shower or enjoying legal and psychological assistance, but it increases their condition of insecurity and social marginalisation. Nonetheless, Abdul and the other asylum seekers show a remarkable degree of resilience in response to their deprived situation. Their collective experience of sleeping, praying and cooking together, the social safety and comfort brought by the certainty of spending every night together in the same place allows them to reconstruct a daily spatial as well as temporal sense of stability and social cohesion against the precarious status produced by local policies regarding their reception (Fig. 2). By inhabiting the area behind the railway station or setting up their makeshift dwellings in the urban interstices of the city and in Talvera park, they somehow involuntarily make themselves visible to the local autochthonous population, in an attempt to resist the physical, spatial, legal and social practices of bordering enacted upon them.
- 40 Not surprisingly, their public visibility and stable presence in the city quickly fuelled a heated debate, also prompted by several institutional declarations and speeches of local elected politicians.
- We are witnessing land occupancy. [...] Gangs of drug-dealers and thieves are hidden upon the river banks where families mingle every day. They are the “out-of-quota”, people with no future. How can we regain control over the park? (in AltoAdige, 04.10.2016).
- Euregio is cornered. Historic Tyrol at risk. [...] Refugees [“out-of-quota” refugees] are endangering our territory and several years of work on transboundary cooperation (in AltoAdige, 13.02.2016).
- 41 Unlike the more usual and somehow reassuring social representation of the homeless people as lonely old men, the visibility and collective presence of groups of young homeless asylum seekers wandering the streets of Bolzano is socially perceived as the threat of foreign thieves or drug-dealers to public security and land ownership, and more broadly as a menace to cross-border relations between Italy and Austria.
- 42 The bordering narratives prompted by these discursive practices reveal their performative dimension. While bringing into the public foregrounds the social representation of the “out-of-quota” asylum seekers as an endangering factor to the historical and cultural relations of the Euregio, and therefore to the cultural distinctiveness of the “identities” of the South Tyrolean minorities, the lack of legal and social recognition of migrants’ rights to seek asylum and access reception facilities remains behind the stage curtain. At first glance this approach seems to clash with the much trumpeted image of South Tyrol as an area of transit, a bridging point between different “cultures” and populations. Instead, the collective sense of belonging that stems from the institutional declarations is rooted in a selective form of multiculturalism that sharply distinguishes between the dialogue of diversities envisioned among the “old minorities” and an inclusive openness toward the new minorities of asylum seekers that is instrumentally pursued by the three official speaking groups along linguistic lines. As noted by some scholars, the presence of a

non-EU migrant population is more perceived as a danger to the institutionalised multiculturalism of the three linguistic groups and their balanced political representation, due to the increasing electoral role that the “new Italians” might play in the future (Medda-Windischer 2015; Zinn 2018).

- 43 The analysis of the labelling processes enables us to clarify the multiple and complex backlashes produced on the lives of the “out-of-quota” migrants and how their lives are shaped by fragmented experiences of accommodation and assistance: from their arrival at the welcome point of the train station, to the streets or the night-centre for homeless people, passing through the low threshold facilities and voluntary services. In order to give a sense to these practices, largely aimed at discouraging the settlement of migrants in South Tyrol, an interesting contribution is offered by Tazzioli and her reflections on how governments at the national, regional and local level, «try to regain control over “unruly” mobility, namely over migration movements that “disobey” the spatial restrictions imposed by the Dublin Regulation and, more broadly, the tempos and the exclusionary restrictive legal channels of the visa system» (2017a: 1). In exploring the logic of how channels, infrastructure and government measures regain control over migration movements, Tazzioli suggests shifting the focus «from governing of mobility to governing through mobility» in order to cast light on what she calls «containment through (forced) mobility» (*Ibidem*; Tazzioli 2017b). Going beyond the idea of migration governance as a set of practices, mainly pursued through tracking and surveillance, Tazzioli notes that when migration mobility does not meet the timing and conditions of institutional requirements, increasingly policy strategies and «border tactics obstruct migrants’ movements and presence, not by fully stopping them but, rather, by forcing them to follow erratic geographies» (2017a: 1).
- 44 In a similar vein, the reception policies enacted on “out-of-quota” asylum seekers through labelling processes, more than blocking them, force on them manifold and unsettled rerouting and a condition of permanent mobility: «they are kept on the move» (Tazzioli 2017b: 2773). In the social context of South Tyrol I suggest that the strategies of containment through mobility enacted by local authorities turn out to be subtle but particularly effective bordering practices. These practices are enforced in various ways: by undermining the forms of stable settlements and collective aggregation of “out-of-quota” asylum seekers; by adopting selective criteria and restrictive measures to regulate their access to reception facilities; and by only providing temporary shelters and engendering unsettled legal conditions that hinder their access to basic social and health-care services.

## 6. Conclusion

What *kind* of resource is this boundary? What is it used *for*? In which (and how many) contexts is it relevant? What is its status in historical or situational time? For whom is it an asset, for whom a liability? With what other differences is it congruent or associated? What meaning does it have on the other (outer) side? (Wallman 1978: 208).

- 45 As if to virtually answer the interrogatives that Sandra Wallman urged should be addressed back in 1978, the article examines what Berg and van Houtum summarised as the «social, relational quality of borders» (2018[2003]: 4). Moving from a growing awareness of the multiform dimension of “border” the article challenges its dominant understanding – a physical-geographical means of demarcation between states – and

operationalises the critical knowledge of borders by examining the daily political, socio-cultural, intersubjective constructions of “borders occurring within” social contexts, such as the reception system of asylum seekers in South Tyrol.

- 46 Since the 2015 enforcement of Italian-Austrian border control, hundreds of non-EU migrants have arrived autonomously in Bolzano; as they were outside the national quota system of redistribution, they quickly become subjected to a «state of exception» (Agamben 2005) that affects the very juridical and social condition of asylum seekers. Through the ethnographic examination of the migration reception policy in South Tyrol and using the case of the so-called “out-of-quota” asylum seekers, the article contributes to the discussion on the border-migration relationship, calling for deeper exploration of both the productive features of the “border” and how the performative dimensions of bordering processes affect the subjective experiences of migrants. In fact, these features are often treated only to a limited extent in border studies compared to ontological and epistemological reflections on borders. Instead, the article narrows down the analysis to how local policy and media discourse informs the labelling practices of “out-of-quota” asylum seekers and shapes their mobility trajectories within the reception system of South Tyrol, a still little explored social context despite its entanglement in the specific political, socio-cultural and multi-linguistic setting of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano.
- 47 The ethnographic case spells out the procedural dimensions of borders and illustrates the performative role of the shifting categorisation to which asylum seekers are subjected. The anthropological perspective on border has allowed me to cast light on how labelling practices turn into local processes of spatial and social bordering that not only increase the social misrepresentation of asylum seekers, but affect their legal and social conditions, mainly hindering their international rights, reproducing unequal power relations and discouraging spatial settlement through forms of (forced) mobility. These practices have created the context for differential inclusion in which the migrants’ social vulnerability and legal insecurity are publicly legitimised and sharpened. Those affected react to these measures with resignation in the face of powerlessness, but also with forms of resistance, showing solidarity with one another.

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## APPENDIXES

Fig. 1. Asylum seekers demonstrating for their social and juridical rights



Source: Salto.bz - Das Nachrichten- und Communityportal für Südtirol, [www.salto.bz](http://www.salto.bz)

Fig. 2. Everyday life experiences of asylum seekers



Source: Alto Adige online newspaper, [www.altoadige.it](http://www.altoadige.it)

## NOTES

1. Since border studies has recently become a field of analysis and dialogue encompassing several disciplines (e.g. anthropology, political science, sociology, and international law), empirical contributions capturing the finer details of the bordering processes at work have been produced (Andersson 2014; Vélez-Ibáñez, Heyman 2017).
2. Besides the Italian linguistic group, the province of Alto Adige/Südtirol is inhabited by two other historical linguistic groups: the German- and Ladin- speaking communities.
3. The “Euregio” indicates a particular cross-border area and an institutional organization focused on developing cultural, scientific and economic exchanges between three different regions: Tyrol (Austria), South Tyrol and Trentino (Italy).
4. The planned distribution of non-EU migrants among the various Italian regions is based on incremental contingents that consider the regional demographic density and the percentage of the access quota to the National Fund for Social Policies. According to the national reception plan released by the Ministry of Interior on 10 of July 2014, only migrants who have arrived in Italy through migration routes by sea are included in the national quota system of redistribution and will have the possibility to access the asylum reception system.
5. The Government Commissariat (Commissariato del Governo) is the office that represents the central state in the province of Bolzano.
6. Based on data collected by the project Antenne Migranti, coordinated by the Alexander Langer Stiftung Foundation, after the 2016 agreement there was still a considerable number of non-EU migrants excluded from the reception system (146 people in June 2017). In December 2018, nearly a hundred people were still recorded as “waiting to be hosted” in a reception center or in the night dormitories (Antenne Migranti, ASGI 2017: 8). And still at the beginning of the summer of

2019, the presence of dozens of migrants excluded from the reception services prompted local associations including representatives of Catholic and Lutheran churches to officially request the opening of a “daytime low-threshold care center with no access requirements” (in Salto.bz 15.06.2019).

7. See Semprebon, Pelacani 2020.

8. For privacy reasons the real names of the respondents have not been used.

9. The term “Dublined” refers to those asylum seekers who are sent back to the country where they were first registered; when they apply for asylum in another country their fingerprint will come up. In this case, their claim cannot be considered according to “Dublin Regulations (the so-called Dublin III).

10. Although the discussion of the Italian reception system is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth saying that following the approval of Legislative Decree 142/2015 the system «evolved according to a model that reflected in some way the idea of a complementarity between a “first” and “second” reception system as advocated by the UNHCR» (Campesi 2018: 493). Three phases can be distinguished: the phase of first aid and assistance, the first reception phase in large governmental centres generally in areas socially and physically separated from the rest of the population; and the second-line reception phase, characterized by a decentralized and territorially widespread reception system based on small-sized housing and the promotion of integrated reception services (legal, health, education, social and professional) managed by the local authorities in coordination with the third sector (namely the National Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees - SPRAR).

11. Salto.bz, L'Altoadige, Il Corriere dell'Alto Adige, Dolomiten.

12. The Proporz is a proportional system of “ethnic” representation that, according to the numerical size of the three linguistic groups historically present in South Tyrol, defines the allocation of jobs in the public sector, and of financial resources in key sectors such as education, culture and social affairs.

13. My translation. See: [www.regione.taa.it/Storia.aspx](http://www.regione.taa.it/Storia.aspx) (last accessed 04.11.2019).

14. At the time of my research South-Tyrol had not joined the SPRAR system; only in September 2017 did the district communities (comunità comprensoriali) adhere to the SPRAR network.

In this regard it is worth recalling that in 2018, after the Immigration and Security Decree (the so called ‘Decreto Salvini’) issued on 4 October 2018 converted into law on 1 December 2018 (Law no. 132) entered into force, SPRAR was renamed SIPROIMI – Protection System for Beneficiaries of International Protection and for Unaccompanied Foreign Minors. Whilst the new legislation granted access to SIPROIMI to holders of a residence permit for “special reasons” (such as victims of violence, trafficking, domestic violence, labour exploitation or calamities, or for poor health, or for acts of particular civic value), it excludes access to some specific categories: asylum seekers with pending applications and those holding permits for humanitarian protection. Only unaccompanied children have immediate access to SIPROIMI.

15. Protocol on the "Reception of refugees in South Tyrol", in force since 02.04.2013 and revised on 04.02.2015.

16. At the beginning of 2016 the prescribed quota of asylum seekers that South Tyrol was expected to host, according to the ministerial quotas (1.470 equal to 0,9% of the total at national level), was not reached. Despite this numerical criterion, in October 2016 only 1.080 asylum seekers were registered and hosted at the reception facilities of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, while autonomous arrivals were excluded from the reception system.

17. See also Dolomiten, 27.02.2017 - [www.stol.it/artikel/politik/asylbewerber-landesraetin-stocker-trifft-quaestor-racca](http://www.stol.it/artikel/politik/asylbewerber-landesraetin-stocker-trifft-quaestor-racca) (last accessed 04.11.2019).

18. See also the report of by Médecins Sans Frontières (2018) that discusses the conditions of several migrants experiencing this situation.

19. According to Italian legislation the possibility of enjoying social and welfare services is tied to the assessment of place of residence. Homeless people are guaranteed access to welfare benefits because they can elect the night-service accommodation where they are hosted as a fictitious domicile.

20. Although used for migrants as well, the emergency centre is generally a temporary winter facility for the homeless, which pushes migrants back onto the streets in the summer.

21. The lack of hygienic services is a daily problem for the many migrants living in improvised encampments because they can only shower or wash their clothes once a week at the Caritas station (see also Benedikt 2018).

22. Some of the migrants who arrived autonomously were able to formalise their request for international protection and access basic assistance services by electing the dormitory as a temporary domicile where, however, they cannot stay for more than thirty days. Therefore, when the time is over they return without a valid place of reference and lose the acquired rights.

## ABSTRACTS

The “processual turn” in the study of borders has opened up to the analysis of how borders and border regimes, conceived of as social practices, are created/recreated in many ways, for many actors, at any place and time; however, this perspective still coexists with traditional approaches to borders, characterized by a fixation with the notion of border only as a tangible entity, the physical outcome of political, social and/or economic processes. These studies develop through sophisticated and erudite conceptual analysis, not always balanced by equal empirical anchorage. Conversely, based on an ethnographic account of asylum seekers’ reception policies in Alto Adige/Südtirol, the article empirically frames the concept of “border” by retracing the experiences of the so-called “out-of-quota” asylum seekers (*profughi fuori quota/Asylbewerber fuori quota*) in light of their categorization prompted by local policy and media discourses. The author unveils the performative dimension of labelling practices by arguing that these not only fuel misrepresentation but translate into bordering practices that exacerbate juridical and social vulnerability and hinder access to reception facilities and welfare services.

La “svolta processuale” negli studi sui confini ha aperto all’analisi di come i confini e i regimi di confine, in quanto pratiche sociali, siano prodotti e si riproducano sotto una pluralità di forme, coinvolgendo molti attori e in una molteplicità di tempi e luoghi; tuttavia, questa prospettiva coesiste ancora con approcci tradizionali allo studio dei confini, caratterizzati dall’adozione di una nozione rigida di confine inteso esclusivamente come realtà fisica e tangibile, esito di processi politici, sociali e/o economici. Questi studi si sviluppano attraverso articolate ed erudite analisi concettuali che tendono a non essere bilanciate da un corrispondente ancoraggio empirico. Di contro, prendendo le mosse da un’etnografia delle politiche di accoglienza verso le persone richiedenti asilo in Alto Adige/Südtirol, l’articolo elabora un’analisi empirica del concetto di “confine” ripercorrendo le esperienze dei cosiddetti “profughi fuori quota” (*Asylbewerber fuori quota*) alla luce dei processi di categorizzazione promossi dagli attori politici e da alcuni media locali. L’autore svela la dimensione performativa delle pratiche di etichettamento, dimostrando come non contribuiscano ad alimentare soltanto distorte rappresentazioni dei richiedenti asilo, ma si traducano in pratiche di *bordering* che acuiscono la

vulnerabilità giuridica e sociale e ostacolano l'accesso alle strutture di accoglienza e ai servizi di assistenza sociale.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** bordering, differential inclusion, asylum-seekers, reception policy, South Tyrol

**Parole chiave:** bordering, inclusione differenziale, richiedente asilo, politiche di accoglienza, Alto Adige/Südtirol

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