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18. "Suspended lives": Institutional challenges towards refugees' self-determination

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Abstract: Four years have passed since asylum applications in Europe reached their peak. From that moment onwards, there's been a consistent remission of the influx. In 2018 requests dropped to nearly half of those in 2015. While numbers might contribute to political rhetorics claiming that the so-called European refugee crisis has come to an end, the critical scenarios are far from being over. On one hand, it has revealed the frailty of the EU's humanitarian and democratic values.

Specially in those countries where populist nationalism is on the rise, promoting xenophobic attitudes. On the other, asylum seekers and refugees are still facing big challenges related to integration and participation in social life. The inefficiency of organizations in providing support, has showed the limitations of highly bureaucratized systems in responding to the demands of increasingly complex and pluralistic societies. In other words, the forces of social acceleration (Rosa, 2010) and rapid social change are overrunning institutional responsiveness, while creating conditions for alienation. Drawing from the results of 14 semi-structured interviews to asylum seekers and refugees, and one focus group with 12 stakeholders, this paper will focus on experiences of integration and participation in Portuguese society, highlighting the (missing) nexus, between agency and structural factors, that determine the subjects' autonomy. This study is part of a greater body of research within the framework of the PandPAS project, backed by the EU's AMIF, which objective is to develop improved processes of welcoming and first integration.

Keywords: refugees; integration; social acceleration; agency; Europe

Introduction

By the end of 2015, after witnessing a peak of asylum applications in Europe, citizens could read '*refugee crisis*' and '*one million*'⁵³ all over the newspapers' headlines. For many, as we've seen in the

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past four years, these words were the sound of the alarm. Fear was thus instrumentalized to generate political rhetorics promoting xenophobic attitudes. Ultimately, this combination of events set into motion the rise of populist nationalism in countries such as Italy, Hungary and Austria.

On March 6th, 2019, after a progressive remission of 2015's influx⁵⁴, the European Commission's first vice-president, Frans Timmermans announced: *"Europe is no longer experiencing the migration crisis we lived in 2015, but structural problems remain"* (European Commission, 2019).

Though numbers may point towards that direction, it's critical to consider what led asylum requests to drop by half in 2018, comparing to three years before. In 2016 the EU struck the famous *one in, one out* deal with Turkey, which implies returning refugees to a country that is unable to assure their rights (Gogou, 2017). That same year, Macedonia, Croatia and Slovenia shut their borders, limiting the surge of migrants in the Balkan route. Finally, in 2017, a Memorandum of Understanding between Italy and Libya was signed in order to keep under control Sub-Saharan migratory flows.

Instead of looking forward to long-term solutions for a phenomenon that has been largely attributed to structural conditions (Boswell, 2002), we argue that these measures are aimed at containing and storing migrant flows, consequently producing 'a regime fundamentally based on the principle of deterrence rather than human rights protection' (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Tan, 2017: 28).

As for those who have managed to arrive in Europe, many are the difficulties faced in their daily lives and challenges are far from over. Racism, exclusion from the labour market, struggling to see their degrees and working experience recognized as well as to achieve a good language proficiency, risking to be transformed into illegal refugees after seeing their asylum applications rejected, slow asylum seeking procedures accompanied by a systematic inefficiency of institutions to translate refugee-hosting policies and integration programmes into practice, are just a few of many other obstacles that lead to situations of limited autonomy and potential alienation (Scheibelhofer & Täubig, 2019).

Although our research is but a fragment of an international social survey conducted within the framework of the *PandPAS*⁵⁵ project, we will focus mainly on the experiences of AS&R⁵⁶ in terms of integration in Portuguese society, as well as those of relevant stakeholders, responsible for reception. In specific, we're interested in understanding which might be the macro elements at play and how

States (Eurostat, 2016).

⁵⁴ In 2016, the total of asylum applications in the EU-28 Member States had an insubstantial reduction of about 100 thousand applications comparing to the previous year. In 2017 though, it significantly decreased to about 700 thousand and, finally, in 2018, to about 640 thousand, nearly the same as in 2014 (Eurostat, 2019).

⁵⁵ The Pre and Post Arrival Schemes project was backed by the EU's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, and it aimed at developing improved processes of welcoming and first integration of forcibly displaced populations within the hosting countries. For more information visit pandpasproject.eu.

⁵⁶ Asylum seekers and refugees.

they influence institutional response. Finally, we'll try to highlight the agency-structure nexus and how the latter influences the former.

Forced migration and social acceleration

Following Castles' effort to assemble a solid body of knowledge on forced migration and social transformation, which paved a new sociological approach towards the phenomenon, we find that our research belongs to one of the topics proposed by the author within the '*dynamics of settlement category*', i.e. 'the relationship between bureaucracy and human agency in refugee settlement' (Castles, 2003: 29). Some of the outlined principles that we wish to undertake in the present paper are the analysis of social transformations at a transnational (global) level, how these broader changes translate locally and, finally, investigating the forced migrants' human agency.

Navigating through literature, it's possible to identify a trend followed by many scholars, in which the world order is understood in terms of power relations. Some have conceptualized nations as core, semi-peripheric or peripheric (Wallerstein, 1974), some have made use of the North-South divide to explain inequalities (Kacowicz, 2007; Rasler & Thompson, 2009), others chose the East-West dichotomy to highlight the underlying cultural dimensions (Said, 1978; Huntington, 1997).

While acknowledging the existence of such forces and recognizing that there are privileged areas and groups within the global system (Castells, 1996; Beck, 1997), we feel urged to introduce a transversal, unavoidable and inconspicuous element into the (forced) migrations' theoretical debate: *time-space compression*⁵⁷.

According to Rosa (2005: 446),

"the history of modernity is in fact an ongoing process of social acceleration and (...) most of the phenomena we commonly grasp under the concept of "globalization" can in fact best be understood as instances or consequences of the latest wave of social acceleration."

Before further developing our argument, it is equally important to reiterate that we share the assumptions by which mobility – and thus (forced) migration – is not only an intrinsic trait of globalization (Castles, 2003), but it also constitutes a strong stratifying factor (Bauman, 1998). Though such stratification might be more evidently related to class conditions, i.e. higher levels of financial and social capital that enable subjects to bypass visa restrictions and cross borders at will, it is also linked to legitimate asylum claims and definitions of the refugee label. The possibility to clearly distinguish migrants from asylum seekers has been object of debate (Castles, 2003; FitzGerald & Arar, 2018) in account of the thin and blurry line that separates both, as well as the challenges brought by

⁵⁷ Due to the fast and easy ways in which space can be crossed.

establishing and circumscribing such concepts, since that would imply reifying those who experience such labels and neglect the liquid attributes of postmodern times (Bauman, 2000). As Castles asserts,

“many migrants and asylum seekers have multiple reasons for mobility and it is impossible to completely separate economic and human rights motivations – which is a challenge to the neat categories that bureaucracies seek to impose.” (Castles, 2003: 17)

Additionally, it has been argued that human rights are adaptable and determined according to specific historical contexts (Frezzo, 2015).

To understand the process by which the speed of social life increases, it's important to take a closer look at the three joint dimensions of acceleration outlined by Rosa (2005): technological, social change and pace of life. The first realm can be easily explained by recent developments in transportation, communication and economic production. The second is related to the rates of change itself. In other words, modern society's dynamic character implies that 'our material knowledge about the world (...) is losing its validity at ever increasing decay rates' (Rosa, 2005: 447). Finally, the third process can be understood in terms of pressure. Since individuals perceive that there's a growing scarcity of time, they feel compelled to speed up their lives in order to stay synchronous with an ever elusive present condition. Our analysis will be focused on the second realm, that of social change. More specifically, on the European hosting countries case precisely because 'forced migration brings about social transformation in Northern societies by increasing the social and cultural diversity of populations and by contributing to the proliferation of transnational communities' (Castles, 2003: 19).

Social acceleration has proven to be a key factor contributing to the fulfilment of modernity's great promise – democratic self-determination. It has mitigated the inertia generated not only by traditions, but also by social barriers that undermine autonomy. On the other hand though, it has been gradually reaching a temporal threshold in which 'democratic control over many aspects of social life seems no longer possible, unless one accepts long moratoria or politically imposed slow-downs' (Rosa, 2005: 451-452).

If our societies are indeed becoming increasingly complex due to social and cultural diversity, it means there's less consensus over *which* problems should be addressed and *how* they should be addressed. Since the democratic process is time-consuming – because it implies will-formation, debates, agreements and bureaucracies –, it can be argued that the whole decision-making process is slowing down rather than speeding up in order to keep up with social change. In addition, this increases the risk of putting forth anachronistic policies that don't live up to meet the population's needs.

Finally, as Rosa claims, *'since the appropriation of novel places, objects, persons as well as experiences, and subsequent familiarization with them, requires time no longer available to individuals'* (Rosa, 2005: 457), the risk of alienation is higher.

Institutional slowdown

Based on Eurostat data, the Pew Research Center estimated that by the end of 2016, out of the 2.2 million asylum seekers in the EU, 52% were still waiting for a decision, 40% saw their application approved, 3% returned either to their home country or other non-EU country, and 5% represented those whose location was unknown (Connor, 2017). This means that, roughly speaking, 1.1 million asylum seekers who applied for international protection in the EU Member States between 2015 and 2016, lived on a limbo for at least one year. Portugal followed the same trend. In fact, there were 858 pending applications in 2016, which amounts to nearly half of the applications (1469) in that same year (AIDA, 2017).

Although there was a gradual improvement on quantitative terms regarding the pending cases in the subsequent years (AIDA, 2018, 2019), the delays and impositions in terms of bureaucratic procedures are still a common thread among the obstacles faced by AS&R (Santinho, 2016, 2017). Moreover, it has been argued that the impacts of waiting for an asylum decision include deprived privacy and self-determination in everyday life (Mayblin, 2014), feelings of personal insecurity and low self-esteem (Brekke, 2004).

The fact that it took 3 years for SEF⁵⁸ to improve the decision rate concerning asylum applications, could be read as a symptom of social acceleration. We hypothesize that the influx of displaced persons experienced by the EU in 2015 was enough to generate an institutional overload, a structural congestion that led to a significant slowdown in the bureaucratic procedures and in the flows of communication between organizations, which ultimately resulted in an inefficient response to the phenomenon. The ensuing desynchronization between structural settings and individual needs, not only poses serious constraints on the AS&R's agency, but it also hinders their possibilities to achieve autonomy (Scheibelhofer & Täubig, 2019).

However compelling it might be to assume that institutional inefficiency towards rapid social change is a consequence of an ongoing process of social acceleration, gathering empirical evidence that can account for such a rhetoric is a demanding task that requires diligent methods of inquiry and a critical view in terms of analysis. Specially because bureaucratic procedures, administrative rules and

⁵⁸ Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras (Immigration and Borders Service) is responsible for evaluating asylum applications and issuing first instance decisions.

institutional practices can be understood as exercises of power and measures of control. Having that said, the aim of this paper is to explore how macro settings of refugee-hosting and integration determine individual experiences.

Methodology

The present paper's empirical dataset is drawn from a social survey designed for the *PandPAS* project, which aimed at characterizing the population of AS&R in the partners' countries, highlighting their experiences, concerns, needs and expectations in terms of integration. Besides refugees, and in order to have well consolidated accounts of the subjective representations of each actor at play, two more categories were part of the survey: stakeholders and citizens. For that purpose, qualitative tools were used for data collection within all three major target groups. The study was multi-sited and comprised 6 European cities: Padova and Venice (Italy), Maribor (Slovenia), Zagreb (Croatia), Nicosia (Cyprus) and Lisbon (Portugal).

Overall, the research involved 148 participants: 59 AS&R were individually interviewed and 15 took part in 4 focus groups, 41 stakeholders participated in 5 focus groups and 33 local citizens attended 5 other focus groups as well. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling, in which members of a particular group (refugees, operators or common local citizens) were deliberately sought after and contacted through local organizations, receptions centres, social media and others. Data collection took place over an 8-month period between September 2018 and April 2019.

From this point onwards, considering we'll focus our attention on refugees and stakeholders within the Portuguese context.

Regarding the AS&R group, it was established that it could include relocated asylum seekers, persons under subsidiary protection, persons with refugee status (tout court), resettled refugees (with refugee status, having lived in a different country than the one of the partnership) and other situations (undocumented, for example). In our case, the sample amounted to a total of 14 interviewees including 9 subjects under subsidiary protection, 2 subjects with refugee status and 3 in other situations⁵⁹. Out of those 14 subjects, 10 were male and 4 were female. Concerning the country of birth, there were 10 Syrians, 1 Iraqi, 1 Eritrean, 1 Palestinian and 1 Cuban.

As for the stakeholders, the objective was to access what institutions from the hosting country, engaged in refugees' integration, had to say about the process. Among the 12 participants there were

⁵⁹ While two had a temporary residence permit, which had to be renewed every 6 months, and were still waiting for the subsidiary protection official document to be issued, the third one, who had recently been deported from Germany back to Portugal, didn't have any official documents and was waiting for his case to be looked at.

6 representatives from NGOs and civil society, 3 from migration management and integration services, 2 from intergovernmental institutions, 1 from an education and training institution and 1 from local government officials.

Since the research team decided to adopt a grounded approach while trying to respect project deadlines, semi-structured interviews were regarded as the most suitable form of inquiry. Thus, interviewers followed a script containing open-ended questions and had the possibility to explore other topics that could emerge and deviate from it whenever they felt appropriate.

Scripts reflected the aims of the survey and were designed in such a way as to address fundamental domains of integration such as rights, language, housing, employment, education, healthcare and social connections.

Some of our interviews were mediated by a suitable interpreter, selected according to each interviewee's own language and taking into consideration potential group affiliations that could symbolize oppression or discrimination.

Agency-structure: testimonies of a desynchronized nexus

Asylum seekers & refugees

When prompted about the negative aspects about Portugal as a hosting country, many of the AS&R that we interviewed reported that *“there’s a lot of bureaucracy and that documents are always delayed”* (Interview no. 4, male, Iraq). These frequent delays in terms of institutional responsiveness towards an increased number of individual requests undermines the AS&R's access to important realms of integration, such as the labour market. Additionally, since social change – which is here partially induced by migrant influxes – requires a structural readaptation in order to include new categories, it has also been reported that there's a lack of institutional preparation. In fact, as one of our interviewees claimed,

*“public servants don’t have that much experience with refugees. They are experienced in working with foreigners but not with refugees. What makes it worse is that they don’t speak the same language as refugees, so they have a problem communicating and that causes him problems finding a job.”*⁶⁰ (Interview no. 4, male, Iraq)

In other instances, it was possible to observe the dissonance that the specificity of these cases, together with the incapacity of institutions to adapt to the high speeds of change, produce on an institutional level. As illustrated in the following example, though theoretically speaking it should be

⁶⁰ Third person quotes stand for the interpreter's real-time translation of the interviewee's answer.

possible to access the labour market with a temporary residence permit, technically the holders of this document are excluded from that possibility:

“Before he had this residence card, he had a temporary residence permit for 6 months that didn’t entitle him to many things. Although he was allowed to work, he couldn’t get a social security number, he couldn’t open a bank account. Many institutions didn’t even recognize the document.” (Interview no. 4, male, Iraq)

These situations, which ultimately translate into limitations in terms of individual selfdetermination, are further highlighted by the institutional delays experienced by subjects regarding the examination and drafting of legal documents:

“They said «We have accepted the asylum, now you just need the card. Wait one or two months and you’ll have it». It’s been one year now. They have no system, you know?” (Interview no. 7, couple, Syria)

To ‘*have no system*’ is how interviewees assess the quality of institutional capacity to enact congruent policies and bureaucratic procedures. Instead of facilitating access to important domains of social inclusion, such as work, it produces odd constraints that prevent an individual and structural relief from situations of dependency, precisely because the integration of refugees into local society could be a *win-win* opportunity (de Graauw & Bloemraad, 2017). This inefficiency to readapt the bureaucratic system to a society that is increasingly complexified and contingent due to its accelerated nature (Rosa, 2005), also led some interviewees to assert that *“the government should have a better articulation with all entities and municipalities”* (Interview no. 10, male, Eritrea) to avoid incongruities between policies and practices. The need to ‘*have a better articulation*’, implicitly expresses an institutional inability to deal with the accelerating rate of change happening within the social system. The fact that *“some people have been waiting for one year, some for two years”* for an official decision either *“about the social security number (or) about granting the refugee status.”* (Interview no. 10, male, Eritrea) is another indicator of the delays experienced by AS&R, caused by an institutional slowdown.

Moreover, other interviewees considered that the 18-month integration programme should be extended:

“It’s not enough for refugees to be prepared for the job market and life in general. Specially because they don’t teach you Portuguese right from the beginning. It’s only at the very end – in the last 3 months – that they teach you and it’s only for 3 months.” (Interview no. 9, male, Syria)

This need to extend the programme reflects not only its insufficient capacity to provide refugees with the necessary tools to achieve self-determination, but also a 'perception of a growing scarcity of time', propelled by a 'perpetual pressure on the speed of social life itself' (Rosa, 2005: 447). According to the author, individuals and organizations act under the feeling that time is running out and that they must accelerate the speed of life to keep up with the pace of events.

Stakeholders

The stakeholders' point of view was strikingly convergent with that of AS&R. Most of the participants reiterated the experiences highlighted above, admitting that they *"could be better organized in order to give a faster and more efficient response to the specific needs (of refugees)"* (NGOs and civil society representative, Portugal).

Some participants also acknowledged that reviewing asylum applications is a slow process, that *"often takes about a year to be validated with a stamp"*, which has a negative impact on the AS&R's integration since *"the person, under these circumstances, can't work nor access PPT⁶¹"* (NGOs and civil society representative, Portugal). It gets worse for those who see their application rejected because, even if *"there's the possibility to appeal"*, they'll have to face *"all (the) consequent delays that it implies."* (Migration management and integration services representative, Portugal).

In addition, the time it takes to know the outcome, together with the uncertainty about such decision poses a challenge towards developing long-term intervention plans, which implies resorting to temporary, contingent solutions:

*"We can't develop intervention plans that contemplate all stages of integration because we don't know what will be the final decision."*⁶² (Migration management and integration services representative, Portugal)

Given that *"there's a political effort to standardize practices in order to allow everyone to access the same supports."* (Migration management and integration services representative, Portugal), it could be plausible to consider that institutional inefficiency in terms of integration might not be so much related to an implicit hostility towards refugees, a lack of hospitality or will to accomplish a moral and political duty, but rather to *'time structures'* and *'time horizons'*, as a macroscopic factor that is often seen as *'natural'* or *'given'* (Rosa, 2013) and thus, seldom taken under scrutiny.

⁶¹ Português para Todos (Portuguese for Everyone) is an initiative that grants immigrants free access to Portuguese language courses.

⁶² Speaking about the appeal cases.

Conclusion

Though it's hard to isolate precise indicators of an ongoing process of social acceleration through a sole analysis of interviews and focus groups, it has been our effort to demonstrate in this paper our initial propositions. That mobility, a fundamental trait of globalization, is often both a product and cause of major social changes in the countries of departure, as well as a multiplier of diversity in the countries of arrival, thus increasing levels of social complexity. Since throughout modernization there's been a gradual compression of time and space, the pace at which societies change is ever-rising. Such change is often followed by uncertainty and instability about present and future scenarios.

As we've seen, what happens on an institutional level is an inability to provide a timely response to the emergence of new social problems and consequently, given the volatile nature of circumstances, a tendency to implement temporary measures. On the individual level, AS&R are forced to lead precarious lives, and must constantly face obstacles in gathering the necessary conditions to achieve integration and autonomy. As a result, what could be a safehaven turns out to be fertile ground for alienation.

Finally, as it was our intention, we hope to have contributed to the sociology of forced migration's theoretical debate by introducing a new key of interpretation and to have encouraged further research about the effects of social acceleration.

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