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Paradoxical migrant allyship: the adoption of a disciplinary model of 'compulsory integration' for asylum seekers in Italy

Audrey Lumley-Sapanski^a and Senyo Dotsey^b

^aThe Rights Lab, The University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK.; ^bDepartment of Social and Political Sciences (Global Politics and Society Program), University of Milan, Milan, Italy

ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship has focused extensively on the deployment of technologies of security as a tactic of migration governance. The analyses have largely been on the effect of prioritising state security over migrant rights and the subsequent impact on their well-being. In our analysis of a migrant accommodation centre called the L'Accademia d'Integrazione (Bergamo, Italy) we contribute to this literature through a multi-scalar analysis of the place-specific rationales justifying the use of these technologies. There, migrants are required to wear jumpsuits reading 'Thank you Bergamo,' and subject to behavioural regulation, restricted mobility, and omnipresent surveillance. We observe how this new model of migration governance based around compulsory training and discipline emerged as an attempt to gain political control over the dominant discourse around the perceived migrant threat. Racialised preconceptions of African migrants, their presumed lack of cultural compatibility and a perceived unwillingness to participate in existing integration programs permeated the media and political rhetoric, challenging state sovereignty and perceived control. We see how this approach designed to foster 'palatability' contributed to their further differentiation, subjugation, and marginalisation. We question the conceptualisation of integration within the program arguing that rather than produce parity it commits structural violence in form and practice.

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Introduction

One can say this is something like military style. I haven't experience anything like that before: gathering, left, right, salute, attention. I can say only soldiers and scouts who do these things and other activities. We aren't soldiers. So why these things? I don't see any benefits of this. (Interview, Azouk, 2019)

In Bergamo, in northern Italy, there is an Integration Academy (l'Accademia per l'Integrazione) for asylum seekers and other humanitarian migrants¹ awaiting the resolution of their legal claims to protective status. It is an alternative to the standard accommodation centre, the first-stage reception centres (CAS), and is optional for individuals

CONTACT Audrey Lumley-Sapanski  Audrey.lumley-sapanski1@nottingham.ac.uk

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who prefer its ‘fast tracked’ option. It promises language training, behavioural coaching, and job readiness in order to ensure that asylum seekers are fully integrated at the time that they leave the academy. While asylum seekers are provided with no-cost language and job training, they also live in dormitory-style housing, wear prison-esque jumpsuits emblazoned with the phrase ‘Thank you Bergamo!’ on the back, and undergo behavioural conditioning through militaristic daily schedules (e.g. rise at 6 am and lights out at 11 pm) and behaviour regulation – including saluting and standing at attention, and requirements concerning the organisation of personal space (e.g. bed making and drawer organisation). The behavioural conditioning is reinforced with ‘appropriate’ punishments, like washing dishes for missing curfew or the use of a cellphone, and progress is assessed with repeat examinations.

The *l’Accademia per l’Integrazione* or The Integration Academy is an extreme form of the specialised institution (Foucault 1977) which employs an ‘assemblage’ of technologies of security to manage vulnerable, humanitarian protection seekers (Collier 2009; Rose, O’Malley, and Valverde 2006). Prior work of critical migration scholars has drawn attention to the effect of these specialised institutions which deploy containment and dispersal in similar humanitarian migrant reception and detention facilities. These institutions are designed to inculcate norms through control, regulation, regimentation, and surveillance (Foucault 1977). Deviance is managed by the omnipresent threat of discipline inherent in structure and form. In the case of reception and detention centres, immigrants are also segregated from the general population and in creating physical space between asylum seekers and the public, asylum seekers are differentiated from the general population limiting their knowability (Burridge et al. 2017; Conlon 2010; Mountz 2011). Their absence from shared public space, allows nativistic and xenophobic political and media rhetoric – in this case linked to the ‘migrant crisis’ narrative-to dominate perceptions of asylum seekers and migration and justify the need for control and separation (Semperebon and Pelacani 2020).

This research builds on this body of critical migration, post-colonial, and feminist scholarship in the analysis of the emergence of the approach used in the Integration Academy and the implications for participants (Ahmed 2000; Conlon 2010; Foucault 1977; Hall et al. 2013; Tazzioli and Walters 2016; Walters 2015). Through analysis of interviews, review of contemporary media and reporting, site visits, and participant observation conducted from late 2018 to early 2020, this paper addresses the following research question: why did the integration academy as constructed emerge when and where it did, and, what are the implications of the approach for immigrant participants? Specifically, we explore the implications of the migrant threat and migrant crisis framing on the construction of the academy. We focus on how the political leadership within Bergamo used the academy (architecture and approach) in an attempt to regain control over the dominant migrant crisis and migrant threat narrative. Racialised pre-conceptions of African asylum seekers, their presumed lack of cultural compatibility and a perceived unwillingness to participate in existing integration programs permeated the local political rhetoric within Bergamo and throughout Italy driven by increases in visible Africans in public places. The media reinforced the migrant threat narrative, drawing attention to the increased number of Africans crossing irregularly via sea. The academy was constructed during this period in an attempt to positively manipulate perceptions of immigrants and improve integration outcomes. In the academy, asylum seekers were segregated from the public where they underwent a process of ‘forced

integration' achieved through disciplinary control. Their public interactions were limited to orchestrated productions by the academy. Paradoxically this approach to 'integration' – one which erased asylum seekers from public places and eliminated individual and cultural markers – was implemented by immigrant allies who saw this whitewashing as a method of improving their palatability and therefore outcomes. Our analysis contributes to the larger body of critical migration scholarship, by demonstrating how the migrant threat-crisis narrative was racialised and how that threat influenced migration governance leading to the academy's approach. In our critique, we demonstrate how this approach, rather than creating and facilitating opportunities for integration, creates and deploys cultural and social borders which narrowly target specific asylum seekers containing their migratory aspirations and use of autonomy.

Context

Italy has only recently become a country of net-immigration and scholarship tends to understand and explain the response to the rise in immigration numbers through this newness. It is true that Italy has seen the number of immigrants as a percentage of the population rapidly increase during the last thirty years. Immigrants are now nearly 10% of the total population and come from an increasingly diverse array of places (Blangiardo 2018). However, during the 'migrant crisis', lasting from 2013 to 2017, the number of foreigners did not change drastically. During this period, Italy only saw an increase in total immigrant arrivals of 2.5% (Blangiardo 2018), but the number of 'authorised' entries fell and was substituted by an increase in the number of 'non-authorised' entries. Non-authorised entries grew – via sea – from less than 10,000 in 2009 (pre-crisis) to over 181,000 in 2017, before returning to pre-crisis numbers in 2019 (UNHCR 2019).

During this period, arrivals from West African countries via the sea captured the media and public's attention (Blangiardo 2018; Semprebbon and Pelacani 2020). Italy saw a 19% increase in arrivals from the region and, in particular, sharp increases in arrivals from Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia and Mali (Blangiardo 2018). Though they represent a relatively negligible population of the total immigrant population (6.57%) their visibility in the media due largely to their mode of entry drew concerns both about the state's ability to secure the border and the threat they presented to cultural stability (Blangiardo 2018; D'Angelo 2019).² In part, this is because asylum seekers who arrive from these countries claims are regularly rejected contributing to a widespread perception that these asylum seekers are bogus or 'clandestini' – individuals seeking to defraud the system (Colombo 2020; D'Angelo 2019; Distinto 2020). In addition, African immigrants are generally portrayed as less assimilable and therefore their arrival more problematic. An ISMU migration report (the preeminent independent research institute in Italy studying migration) released during the 2013–2017 period described African immigrants in the following way, the

most recent migrations seem to be characterized by an average development profile 'upon departure' more dissimilar from that of the destination country. A distance which, in the case of asylum seekers, appears enormous and increasing over time ... in all likelihood, their full integration and inclusion in the host society may turn out to be longer and more complex. (Blangiardo 2018, 28)

There was a secondary concern that due to the entry process, the population of asylum seekers might harbour potential terrorists (De Genova, Garelli, and Tazzioli 2018). As a result of their perceived lack of cultural compatibility, a perception of illegality and highly visible arrivals, African asylum seekers drew public scrutiny.

Public opinion surveys throughout Europe show that during this period there was widespread fear of arriving asylum seekers (Musaro and Parmiggiani 2017) made worse by the images and language in the media and political rhetoric. The language used by politicians and amplified by the media during the 'migrant crisis' is often cited as a factor in 'whipping up tensions' directed towards asylum seekers (Musaro and Parmiggiani 2017). The former Minister of Interior, Matteo Salvini (2018–2019), regularly referred to migrants and asylum seekers as 'clandestines' ('illegals') (Redazione ANSA 2020). The Lega Nord representative Gianluca Buonanno proposed the use of electrified barbed wire 'if and when illegals come around these parts' to stop them, 'like you do with boars' (Redazione ANSA 2015). Evidenced in this language is the popular (reinforced) conceptualisation of humanitarian protection seekers as illegal and the use of language that dehumanises them as wild animals.

During the 'migrant crisis' period, Italy's immigration system was poorly prepared to deal with the influx of arrivals giving a further impression of crisis and a lack of state capacity. This is largely because Italy has historically been a transit country: immigrants often landed in Italy with the intention of continuing onward (Semprebón and Pelacani 2020). The historical Italian approach to border governance has permitted this outcome, elsewhere described as *laissez-passer* (Ciabbari 2015), meant to imply that onward secondary movements were accepted. However, in response to EU pressure in 2015 (Fontanari and Borri 2017; Semprebón and Pelacani 2020), Italy began enforcing border closures and started fingerprinting irregular migrants and entering data into the shared Eurodac system. These biometric records prevented humanitarian protection seekers from outmigration to other European countries and applying for protection there. This 'trapped' more humanitarian protection seekers within Italy. In turn, the national governments implemented increasingly restrictive policies and austerity measures, limiting access to resources legally and through entry (D'Angelo 2019; Pallister-Wilkins 2020).

The Italian system of reception for humanitarian migrants distributes asylum seekers to facilities where they are provided basic services during the time that their asylum claim is heard. The reception system during the research period was divided into three core stages.³ First, when someone arrived at the border with the intention of claiming asylum within Europe they were taken to a hotspot where they remained for approximately 24 h. There they were provided medical aid and fingerprinted. After, they were sent to what is referred to as an emergency shelter or a first reception centre. The majority (78%) are assigned to an emergency welcome centre called a CAS, or a *Centro d'Accoglienza*. The CAS model, created during the 'crisis' due to insufficient bed space within the existing Italian migrant reception system, was meant to temporarily house people; as a result, CAS centres offer little beyond basic accommodation (Scholten et al. 2017). If the system has space and functions properly, individuals are moved from a CAS into a second stage accommodation centre, formerly called SPRAR. These centres are smaller and more spatially distributed. These individuals have access to a greater array of integration services.⁴ The approach to integration is decentralised to these local

entities who design programming in line with the standards established by the central government. Though times vary greatly, the average time it takes to receive a decision on an application for status is currently 300 days during which time eligible asylum seekers reside in a CAS or SPRAR (Sempredon and Pelacani 2020). The lack of adequate spaces for these arrivals within the CAS/SPRAR system led to a perception of inundation and a lack of ability to respond (D'Angelo 2019). The academia was born as an alternative model, intended to improve on the CAS approach/outcomes.

The academy is located in Bergamo, an Italian industrial city in the northern state of Lombardy. About 40 km northeast of Milan, it is the capital city of the Bergamo province. Bergamo lies in the heart of the traditional industrial region and has historically been an engine for the province's economy (OECD 2001, 2016). The region has a long history of serving as a site of immigrant reception and there is substantial concentration as a result, both of internal and international immigrants. Within the city, 16.8% of the total population in 2019 was foreign (20,420). African immigrants collectively represent about 21.6% of the total or 4,400 people, of which about half are sub-Saharan Africans (Comune di Bergamo 2019). Bergamo has recently been governed by centre-left political parties who have tended to be more immigrant friendly. The city also has a strong Catholic presence and religious-related organisations like Caritas who are substantially invested in immigrant services (Dotsey 2021). The city attracts immigrants (and for that matter Italian job seekers) through its proximity to the Milan metropolitan area with its cheaper rents, thriving arts and entertainment scene, and beauty (OECD 2001).

This is the context from which the academy emerged. We argue that the Integration Academy came into form during this period as an antidote to the perceived racialised cultural threat presented by the sudden increase in arrivals of black immigrants from North and sub-Saharan Africa. It is one example of the proliferation of policy and rhetoric common in Italy and Bergamo during the period targeting immigrants, including draconian legislation such as the removal of humanitarian protection status, the externalisation of borders through paid partnerships with Libya and Turkey, and the rise of the right-wing La Lega and Five Stars Movements. Although the Integration Academy program is on face race neutral and non-culturally specific, it is through the invisibilisation of race (Tazzioli and Walters 2016) and cultural difference that the program aimed to increase the integration prospects of asylum seekers. To understand the treatment of black asylum seekers in the Italian reception system and the formation of attendant programming, we posit, requires an understanding and regard for blackness and particularly African immigrants as 'out of place' within Italy.

Theory

Post-colonial, feminist and Foucauldian scholars have written extensively about the social processes which inform and mediate encounters with 'the other' (Ahmed 2000; Hall et al. 2013; Foucault 1977). 'Othered' populations – elsewhere 'out of place' – are 'read' based on historicity, differentiating 'out of place' populations from one another, and, drawing a line between 'endangered' and 'dangerous' individuals. Danger is projected onto certain bodies, 'that which is already recognisable as different' (from home or homeland) or out of place (Ahmed 2000). Media and political rhetoric amplify risk

and the *perception* of omnipresent threat, as Hall et al. (2013) have written, leading people to see themselves as potential victims.

Prior work has identified the commonality of three portrayals of 'the migrant threat' in rhetoric and narratives related to asylum seekers or humanitarian protection seekers. First, by violating the border in staking an asylum claim, asylum seekers challenge state sovereignty. Their unauthorised presence within the state speaks to the inability of the state to control the border and undercuts state authority (Burrige et al. 2017; Conlon, Hiemstra, and Mountz 2017; Ehrkamp 2017). Migrants in this portrayal represent a security threat, an illegal breach of the militarised border. In addition, their presence opens the door for a series of other challenges to the state's hegemony. Migrants claims to asylum or protection represent a threat to state fiscal resources through their rights to claim social welfare benefits (Hyndman and Giles 2011). In this view, migrants are painted as usurping entitlements which are intended for native-born groups. Finally, migrants are perceived as a threat to the preservation of the hegemonic state culture (Gorman 2017; Hiemstra 2010). Their diverse backgrounds challenge the ability of the state to maintain and preserve cohesion. They are often associated, through rhetoric, with the 'decay and dereliction' of the familiar environment (Hall et al. 2013, 2). In sum, migrants are, 'a putative threat to national socio-cultural stability as well as to national territorial integrity' (Nevins 2010, 8).

In Italy, the surge in arrivals of humanitarian protection seekers (between 2010 and 2017) increased anti-migrant hostility contributing to an existing culture of anti-blackness into which large numbers of African migrants were received. The origins of this response lie in the colonial legacy and the formation of the European project. Stuart Hall's writing is informative in understanding the treatment of blackness within this post-colonial context and European locus. Hall (1992) describes the formation of the 'West' as a project to solidify an identity despite many internal differences. In defining the West in opposition to 'the rest,' two categories of cultures and societies emerge in opposition, allowing for comparison and ranking between places. Values are assigned to people and places, opinions and ideas then associated with 'othered' places and people (Hall 1992). Then, individuals from 'the rest' who appear within 'the West' are othered by the very nature of their origins and devalued, or ranked, against native populations. This logic appears elsewhere in Ahmed (2000)'s writing of the encounter with 'strangers' wherein a historicity of interactions informs the reading of the stranger as dangerous or otherwise as out of place. Heather Merrill in her work with African diasporic communities in Turin has identified the applicability of this narrative in the colonial relationship of Italy to Africans and African Italians. In her words, that relationship informs 'social relations at numerous spatial scales,' which 'instantiate places and subjectivities ... [with] power to ascribe invisibility to certain categories of persons and subpersonhood' (Merrill 2014, 267). The history of colonialism of Italy in Africa created relational, racialised identities built around subordination and exclusion, the legacy of which shapes the Black experience in Italy today.

At a regional scale, further scholars have situated racialised citizenship in Italy within the broader formation of the European identity. Angel-Anjani places the racialisation of nationhood and citizenship in the more recent participation in the European project (Angel-Ajani 2000). Like Hall, Angel-Ajani asserts that absent a shared collective cultural identity, the formation of the European Union required an alternative form of

collectivised identity. A collective racialised identity built around whiteness was solidified, weaving together otherwise competing and disparate identities achieved through cultural and legal exclusivity (Angel-Ajani 2000). European states institutionalised this identity by policing borders and limiting opportunities for citizenship, excluding challengers to that hegemony. Migration status is then as Romero has said, 'inscribed on the body' (Romero 2010) with implications for legality and out-of-placeness.

To maintain cultural and social hegemony (Hall 1986) and to secure the border from threat, the state and governance institutions institute 'hyperpreventative' measures (Lemke 2014). These are often preemptive security measures which involve the use of an amalgamation of disciplinary and 'hyperregulatory' technologies of security (Foucault 1977; Lemke 2014) and are used to demonstrate security within the nation and home from 'dangerous others.' A 'multiplicity of actors' including migration management entities, social welfare organisations and hotspots contribute to a diffused, decentralised form of migration governance (Burrige et al. 2017; Gorman 2017; Mountz 2011; Rose, O'Malley, and Valverde 2006; Schuster 2005a, 2005b). Their power is derived from knowledge of subjects and society (Lemke 2014); a specific configuration of elements gathers knowledge of 'populations' and uses that knowledge for their management and regulation (Collier 2009; Rose, O'Malley, and Valverde 2006).

This occurs also within the 'specialized' institution (Foucault 1977) like the reception and accommodation centres. There, migrants are dehumanised through constant surveillance, subjected to sign ins, and disciplinary mechanisms for non-compliance (Conlon 2010; Lumley-Sapanski 2022). In order to survive or be successful and avoid discipline (and maintain service eligibility) within the system, migrants practice self-regulation (Ehrkamp 2017). Migrants who are more 'cooperative' benefit, while those who fail to comply receive more supervision (Distinto 2020).

In taking this approach, diverting migrants to certain places and spaces, the government invisibilises the migrant and demonstrates control (Tazzioli 2020; Tazzioli and Garelli 2018). This invisibility has implications for their recognition and humanity (Brighenti 2007). Migrants are visible in the media but have no control over their own images. Their images are distorted by social processes outside of their control which identify and classify them. Migrants become socially invisible, yet, symbolically important to a narrative which further alienates them (ibid). This is true for migrants in reception centres where they are removed from the background context and places which define their identities. Instead, within detention or holding facilities migrants are discursively defined by the detention context. They become knowable through their detention as illegalised migrants (Mountz et al. 2013). With this segregation from both broader society – through segregation within accommodation centres and isolation from a social network – new migrant subjectivities are assigned and created often based on political rhetoric and media narratives (Distinto 2020).

In sum, these literatures demonstrate the ways in which immigrants and specifically African humanitarian protection seekers are constructed as out of place through cultural, legal and educational processes. What is more, these literatures demonstrate how Blacks and Black immigrants are subordinated and targeted as out of place and a putative threat. These scholars offer insights into the ways in which histories of interaction between places and in particular spaces are racialised and contextually dependent. Institutions reinforce the hierarchies. The resulting processes of 'normalization' are intended to

reconstruct the migrant subjects and to reduce the threat. We incorporate these critiques into our analysis of the academy with its racialised structure and deeply disciplinary approach to modifying behaviour.

Methods

Based in Bergamo, this research is part of a larger project exploring ‘Migration and Precarity in Bergamo, Italy’ focusing on asylum seekers, refused asylum seekers, ‘economic’ migrants, and refugees undertaken between 2018 and early 2020. Following the established qualitative tradition, our analysis employed semi-structured interviews, participant observation, content review of contemporary media sources, and repeated informal conversations with asylum seekers and stakeholders. The mixed methods approach provided in-depth analysis of individual experiences contextualised within a broad overview of the processes of reception and accommodation from the institutional perspective. Further, the use of varied methods to collect data facilitated the triangulation of information and its validation.

We selected in-depth qualitative interviews as the primary form of data collection. Participation was voluntary. Interviews were conducted on site and off site. We conducted 27 in-depth interviews, twenty of which were held with asylum seekers in the academy. These men were from Pakistan (1), Iraq (1), Mali (4), Senegal (5), Ghana (2), Benin (1), Guinea (1), Nigeria (2), Cote d’Ivoire (1), Gambia (1), Liberia (1). The majority of interviewees were of working age, between 20 and 40. The interviewees’ educational background was highly varied and included individuals with no educational background (4), a Quranic education (5), a completed basic (2), middle (6) and high school (2) education, and some college experience (1). The interview questions were directed towards the participants’ background, views, motives, expectations, and experiences in terms of precarity with attention to their participation within the academy. An additional seven interviews were held with stakeholders associated with the academy. Purposive sampling was used to identify these individuals based on their work at the academy, in its initiation and/or their knowledge of its functionality. Interviewees included: two camp operators, the coordinator of the camp, the mayor’s Chief of Staff, the vice president of the Social Cooperative Ruah, and two Italian language instructors.

Due to the nature of the academy, interviews were supplemented with participant observation and site tours. This approach helped to achieve the balance between the issue of ‘being there’ (Devereux and Hoddinott 1993), or ‘experience-near’ and ‘experience-distant’ (Geertz 1976). Repeated trips were made to the academy over time. This provided invaluable insights into the management of the program, the physicality and materiality of the program, and the participants’ engagement over time. Researchers conducted a targeted review of media sources published during the research period. Media sources were reviewed (in Italian language news media) based on search terms specific to the research questions. Additionally, the research revolved around repeated ‘conversations’ with participants – the asylum seekers and social cooperative staff – in *the academy* (Bonizzoni and Marzorati 2015). Typewritten notes (of field observations, in-depth interviews and daily conversations), and transcriptions of voice-recordings, from these sessions formed the main data source for this study. They are quoted from

extensively here throughout the texts. The individual identities of participants are concealed, and interviewees are referred to either by their role at the academy, pseudonyms or country of origin.⁵

Analysis

Here is the origin: since we don't have the tools, we can't force people to go to school, I create a structure like the academy which is like that. After a year of study and work, you have the opportunity to obtain an internship and a real work contract, not illegal but protected with a possibility of continuity and a future. But when you are inside the academy you have to follow some rules which are quite strict. There are rules of coexistence [...]. On the one hand, these people grow up, they learn Italian and a job and therefore it is positive for them; on the other hand, the city receives a benefit and also the companies benefit from it because they find people to employ. (Interviewee, Program Architect, 2019)

This analysis explores why the academy and specifically the model of migration governance practiced in the academy emerged when and where it did, and what the implications are of the approach. We begin by situating the program's emergence within the temporal and geographic landscape of Bergamo and the rhetoric surrounding the 'migrant crisis'. We then use the interviews with the model's architects to demonstrate how the model was conceived in response to the crisis-threat narrative. We link the design to the three objectives described by architects in adopting the program design. First, the program architects – who were immigrant allies – designed the model as a response to the perception that the existing tools (e.g. CAS) were inadequate for producing integrated subjects. Second, architects used orchestrated public performance – like voluntary service – to help build controlled familiarity and tolerance towards the asylum seeker population. Third, the academy sought to combat the racialised tropes of idleness and criminality and more broadly as a societal antidote to the perceived migrant threat. We situate the academy's approach within the emergence of similar responses to migration governance that privileged security and discipline over individualised service planning or needs (see Basham and Vaughan-Williams 2013). In taking this approach, the academy eliminates opportunities for the use of participant autonomy and minimises integration prospects.

Within the larger 'migrant crisis' period, large numbers of humanitarian migrants were passing through or arriving to Bergamo. An interviewee estimated that during the peak crisis period 'around 6000 asylum seekers have passed through the province of Bergamo'. The local mayor, Giorgio Gori vocalised support and brotherhood for arriving asylum seekers. Gori spoke publicly about the need to expand welcoming and integration measures in order to create a more effective system (Il Giorno Bergamo 10 Dec 2016).⁶ However, Gori, a member of the centre-left Democratic Party, faced a sharp public rebuke from the centre-right opposition Northern League (Lega). The Mayor's willingness to assist asylum seekers was harshly criticised by Lega politicians using language which debased the legitimacy of any claims to protection and painted asylum seekers as a cultural and economic threat. Referring to humanitarian protection and asylum seekers as *clandestini* (clandestines) (see Rame 2019)⁷ in the press, to imply illegality (Musaro and Parmiggiani 2017), the Lega politicians reinforced the association between humanitarian protection seekers and criminality.

The city secretary and Lega Nord leader Alberto Ribolla went further, launching a campaign challenging the Mayor's call for welcome, on the basis of the claim that only 7% of asylum seekers would obtain refugee status (L'Eco di Bergamo 5 Oct. 2016). The remainder, according to him, have no legal right to protection or social welfare which they receive while awaiting resolution of their claims.⁸ The fact that 'clandestini' were being supported by the state during the legalisation process at all drew condemnation (Rame 2019). Using tropes of deservingness common in the press and political discourse of the time, Ribolla went on:

We have already expressed and argued [...] our opposition to the idea (and the costs) of welcoming millions of people to our territory (housing, food, education, health) and we add that we do not understand what the problem may be in redistribution of wealth among fewer people, without the need to import cheap labor [...]. We would only suffer the economic and social costs, in a society already tried by an economic crisis and by a skyrocketing unemployment, even among young people [...]. The story that immigrants will pay the pensions of Italians is a gigantic farce. Instead of helping families, from Bergamo and Italy, to create a family, have children, with reduced rates and ad hoc services, Gori's solution is to import 8 million foreigners. (Ribolla, L'Eco 2016)

The language used by Ribolla reflects the sense of burden and threat presented by the humanitarian protection and asylum seeker. He describes the social and economic cost and grossly exaggerates the number of arrivals. In doing so, he stokes public fears, misrepresenting Gori's plan to develop a more attuned accommodation program and accusing him of proposing to import 8 million foreigners – more than the total number of foreigners within Italy.⁹

Within this context, and in response, the integration academy is conceptualised and opened.¹⁰ The experimental model adopted in the academy opened in 2018 during the charged climate of the migrant crisis. Enrolees voluntarily joined the academy following a screening process that gauges their suitability for the rigid disciplinary model. Participant-volunteers are evaluated through a series of three interviews primarily on their language skills and ability to follow the rules of the academy. When the academy opened initially it was predominately filled with volunteers from sub-Saharan Africa; thirty male asylum seekers between ages 18 and 44 were originally enrolled. An additional eleven asylum seekers joined the academy in the following months (Dotsey 2021).

The racial status of the asylum seeker was a source of threat representing cultural distance and unknowability. Consequently, the migrant threat and associated racism shaped the approach taken to program architecture. A worker at the academy summarised the threat presented by this group of asylum seekers based on racial connotations in the following way: 'There is a lot of fear of immigrants and asylum seekers and in particular of the dark-skinned African, because they don't know each other.' Interviewees suggested that individuals from countries in Africa were difficult to compartmentalise within the existing community structure given their visible otherness.

In addition to being read as out of place, racialised associations of idleness, criminality and cultural difference influenced the adoption of the disciplinary approach. The act of border crossing was regarded as a criminal act by architects and academy employees rather than a legally protected act of seeking asylum. The language in interviews with staff reflected this stance: 'having illegal immigrants in the area means opening the

doors to crime, illegal work, degradation and a whole series of problems that we know very well.’ The method of entry is conflated by this interviewee with ‘the unknown’ and the potential threat of criminality after arrival, producing fear. Further, a perceived lack of economic incorporation indicated peripherality and bred an expectation of further criminality (see also Conlon, Hiemstra, and Mountz 2017; Hyndman and Giles 2011). Interviewees pointed to immigrants sleeping, living, and loitering in public spaces like the central station whom they perceived to be idle – not working and – therefore a future source of crime. According to one interviewee, immigrant presence in public places was a source of fear and racism: ‘Seeing people who stay at the station all day, who come into contact with crime, has the consequence for the indigenous population [...] which is why there is racism in Italy.’ The academy architects’ response was to remove immigrants from public places in order to disrupt this narrative and remove the source of fear.

Second, in conceptualising the academy, the architects were motivated to improve upon the existing system which they blamed for contributing to the above perceptions of immigrants. Representatives of the Mayor’s Office were highly critical of the common CAS approach, which the public perceived as supporting asylum seekers using tax dollars without holding asylum seekers accountable for participating or contributing to society (see Ribolla above). Interviewees described the CAS program and the perception of participants in the program as both unengaged and unmotivated. An interview with a program architect captures this sentiment,

[Currently] the migrants initially do some Italian but then after a while they don’t go to school anymore, they don’t do activities during the day. They end up staying in the rooms to sleep until noon, until two o’clock. Or someone finds a regular job or an informal job for a few hours and sets aside little money to send to families. But in these two years they don’t learn a language, they don’t learn a job, and therefore even if they get a residence permit, they don’t know how to integrate.

Here, in the speaker’s view, the CAS system is unable to force the acquisition of integration skills and the asylum seeker is faulted. The critique places blame on the individuals and explains their lack of integration in relation to their failure to participate in training. In this reading, the asylum seeker’s lack of commitment to the state’s integration process (rather than structural factors, racism, legal precariousness, geographic opportunities) is what drives their marginalisation. The idea that asylum seekers could opt out of the CAS programming was a source of frustration as it contributed, in their view, to optional dependency on state resources. As another interviewee put it, people

see that there are many people who do nothing from morning to night [...] it is wrong because not everyone who takes this path does nothing. Maybe it is 20–30 out of 200–300. But this 10% will be enough to grow a malice towards these people.

The perception of inactivity of CAS participants and its effect on the public opinion of asylum seekers was a motivating factor for the program’s inception.

Third, the academy’s architects wanted to demonstrate that it was feasible to build integration pathways which allowed the asylum seeker to share the rules and culture of the host society, to be ‘useful’ to the communities through voluntary activities and to prepare themselves, should their asylum request be accepted, for the world of work (Comune di Bergamo 2018). Architects believed the academy could force the adoption

of culture and language, and rapidly produce behavioural change through isolation from ethnic social networks. This is reflected in structure and approach. The academy is a closed space, in which asylum seekers cohabitate, governed by strict rules and discipline. Asylum seekers can only leave the building Saturday afternoon after 1600 or Sunday and must return by 10 pm. The participants follow a rigid timetable beginning at 630 and ending at 2300. The day is blocked off as follows (see Table 1) Monday through Friday. The day is broken into language and civics programming in addition to volunteer opportunities and job training. Trainees attend compulsory training each morning and language acquisition is the first goal. Trainees are expected to reach B1 or ‘intermediate’.

During their stay, phone access is restricted and WIFI is disconnected to limit use. There are rules for attire, behaviour and compartment and role play is used to train asylum seekers. For instance, participants are required to formally greet the staff (director, coordinator, educators, tutors, operators and class leader) and visitors with scripted, and rigidly defined greeting rituals. During meals, participants must also observe specific table manners. As the individual in the opening quote described, the actions were like those of trained soldiers, ‘gathering, left, right, salute, attention [...] only soldiers and scouts do these things.’ In addition, individuals must wear uniforms (jumpsuits) that resemble military or prison gear, and which read ‘Thank you Bergamo’ on the back.

Again, a language instructor described why she believed the structure of the academy was capable of facilitating changes in behaviour and the adoption of ‘Italian’ cultural norms and behaviours where other programs had failed: *It’s one thing to talk to the guys and ask ‘What did you do yesterday?’ and being told, ‘I went to the Burkinabè community for lunch with my friends in Milan,’ ‘Very well and what did you eat?’ ‘ALACECKE?’ ‘Ok. What’s this? How is it prepared?’ ‘A different thing is here: ‘What did you do yesterday?’ ‘We saw this film, we sang this song, which is Italian, we volunteered ...’ Clearly the context makes the school.’* As described, by eliminating individual attributes, access to ethnic social networks, use of language or the ability to choose and prepare food – the asylum seeker be forced to engage in processes of cultural adoption. The format – the sequestered group home and limited-and mediated outside contact – is intended to achieve ‘compulsory integration.’

Table 1. Example schedule of participant activity at the academy.

630: Rise and personal hygiene
700: Breakfast
745: Role Call
800: Linguistic and civic education
1100: Food preparation
1130: Lunch
1215: Change of attire
1230: Professionalisation
1330: Voluntary work/Community service
1730: Return to the academy
1830: Personal hygiene
1930: Dinner
2030: Group study and homework
2230: Room and cabinet inspection
2330: Lights off

Here the academy structure plays a second role – it was intended to construct the trainee as a form of public benefit and to showcase the positive role of asylum seekers in the community in order to build community support for the academy and immigrants more broadly. They ‘volunteer’ in ‘socially useful’ work in the afternoons meant to demonstrate to the city that they are contributing, and to help asylum seekers form connections. They volunteer for the first six months (while wearing uniform) in activities including: cleaning of parks, oratories, neighbourhood streets, markets, cemeteries, and roads; leaf collection; bike lane maintenance; data collection (e.g. census of state road quality); painting of public buildings; voluntary work in elder care facilities (e.g. serving at the bar); and in rare cases, more formal custodial or security support services. As an interviewee put it, trainees work ‘[from collecting leaves to animation in the elderly centers] in order to help the city.’ This was an intentional public relations campaign to decrease perceived threat and cultural distance conceived by the Mayor’s Office. The approach was meant to showcase asylum seekers in community service work where they were visible to native Italians. Through controlled interactions – like volunteerism in elder care where asylum seekers were positively contributing in their *Thank you Bergamo!* uniforms – the architects sought to reimagine the asylum seeker image.

The final goal was to create an able worker to combat stereotypes of idleness. At the core of the academy’s design was the facilitation of work readiness and job placement. Individuals are placed in traineeships in one of three main industries: industry, catering and cleaning. If the trainee does well, individuals may be asked to stay on as a contract employee.

Program architects underscored the centrality of a successful job training placement to a successful outcome,

The objective is to train people to have a normal job, be it an industry laborer or a carpenter, and that this person continues to grow while working. Today, he will be a laborer, and maybe he will be able to study and sit for the middle school exam.

Through the tiered training process, the program was to produce someone who was employed legally, respected the rules and therefore paid taxes. This goal was evidenced in the internships and job readiness training. Said one interviewee, ‘We are training people who will become workers. People who will lead a normal life, pay taxes ... This is our goal.’ A ‘normal life’ as conceived is narrowly defined as one in which someone works, pays taxes and follows the rules omitting any greater contributions, goals or aspirations that immigrants themselves might have.

What’s more, the form of economic incorporation is limited to the preidentified array of job opportunities provided by the industrial organisational partner. The one-size fits all approach to job placement meant that jobs were restricted to jobs in the secondary labour market. The language training was structured to fit ‘that’ sort of work. As one instructor described: *the work they do as a volunteer requires language skills ... if they go to work in the park and ask them to take the rake, they need to know what to get. We try to be there when they give instructions here at the academy to help understand what it says. So, there is all this work-related specific issue: understanding what you have to do, the vocabulary you need.* In sum, the vocational training is not individually specific but rather designed with a predetermined understanding of the types of work an asylum seeker will receive which tends to be in the secondary labour market.

In terms of job training and placement, there is an important impact of participation within the academy worth noting. The Territorial Commission – the body which determines the outcome of an individual claim to humanitarian protection – considers ‘proven integration’¹¹ among the reasons to grant a positive outcome. That is to say, an individual has a better chance of receiving a permit of stay if they have a regular job, in addition to proof of traineeship, language acquisition and volunteering activities at the time of their status determination hearing or during appeals. Thus, in perhaps its most important role, the academy works to facilitate the receipt of a job contract at the time of the commission hearing. This is important because, a person’s right to stay in Italy is not therefore based on the legitimacy of the asylum or humanitarian protection seeker claim, but on a narrowly conceived definition of economic integration potential.¹² The ability of the program’s orchestrators to influence the outcome of the Territorial Commission is invaluable. The integration academy helps asylum seekers to delay their hearings if they are not yet legally employed and to demonstrate their integration. Thus, they negotiate the legal hearings on their behalf and in so doing permanently alter their likelihood of receiving a permit of stay and the first steps to legal security. This was not in fact part of the rationale for program design but is a significant outcome of the program as structured with massive implications for participant-trainees.

Conclusion

Then, in returning to the research question, why did the integration academy as constructed emerge when and where it did, and, what were the implications of the approach for immigrant participants? This analysis has shown that the model arose from a political need to affirm control and to communicate to the masses that the government possessed the tools to (re)gain control over the threat posed by the ‘migrant crisis.’ The academy was an attempt to fill a perceived deficit: the inadequacy of the existing CAS system that it saw as contributing to optional dependency. Secondly, by removing the visible ‘migrant threat’ from public space the academy was meant to improve the image of state failure in addressing the crisis. Consequently, the approach is based on compulsory training and spatial confinement. In addition to demonstrating governmental competence, the academy also sought to address community fears, mistrust, and poor public perception of asylum seekers. Compulsory integration was achieved through normalisation or invisibilisation by recasting asylum seekers as non-threatening community service workers, scouts, or soldiers. However, because of the approach, the academy contributes to the production of hierarchical power relations through processes of subalternisation and invisibilisation. Its most significant contribution to the well-being of asylum seekers – legal status – was nowhere articulated as a goal.

The model might have taken form in any city within Italy or for that matter in Europe more broadly during this period, but a set of specific factors led to its creation within Bergamo. First, and perhaps most importantly the centre-left party responsible for governing the territory was sympathetic towards humanitarian migrants. Though the mayor and his colleagues questioned the capacity of the CAS system to facilitate inclusion, they thought integration was possible and they were willing to expend effort to produce a better outcome. Though it is extreme in its disciplinary structure, it is actually a demonstration of (misguided) allyship and came at the expense of

considerable political will. The academy would not have emerged where the opposition party in power.

This reflects a more generalised trend of left or liberal leaning governments pursuing migration policies that have elsewhere been referred to as ‘muscular liberalism’ (Cabinet Office 2002). The term is most associated with David Cameron’s government wherein increased military and security spending were justified by an underlying assumption that these approaches make the state more secure (Basham and Vaughan-Williams 2013). Even sympathetic governments in the post 9/11 period were influenced by discourses of secure borders and implemented broad exclusions and punitive policies towards asylum seekers and immigrants (Sales 2006). This mindset influenced the creation of the academy while the set of heterogeneous technologies deployed to ‘integrate’ asylum seekers – the invisibilisation, the cultural erasure, the surveillance, and discipline – is specific to the concerns in Bergamo of the impacts of the ‘migration crisis’ locally and the specific threat it represented.

Second, the model’s design takes its form and its structure from perceived failures of the CAS system. The academy intended to create an Italian microworld into which asylum seekers would be inserted and processed. The academy does so by eliminating cultural outlets, supports, or individual identity. Within this gap, the academy offers a program of forced integration. Finally, the approach can be viewed as a response to concerns over the cultural distance between – in particular black – immigrants and Italians and the threat they represented to social cohesion. However, to do so the model seeks to mitigate the impacts of culture and race on native perceptions of asylum seekers. This is evidenced by the strict use of the ‘Thank You Bergamo’ uniform and the forced public performance of community service.

In turn, however, the academy treats the men in question as though they themselves had no autonomy or individual aspirations. The academy removes the rights to self-determination, to exert preferences, or to communicate their individuality. In doing so the academy ultimately makes integration more difficult, if not problematic. It perpetuates a spatial and cultural divide between asylum seekers and the hosts, and it is difficult to conceptualise relationship formation between native and non-native populations when they are kept physically distant from one another. In so doing, the dangerous stranger archetype is reified and the need for ‘his’ removal justified (see Ahmed 2000). What’s more, we understand from previous analyses that cross cultural ties are more likely to be formed with people who are perceived as equals and not when they are constructed as other, or marginal and subaltern subjects (Conlon 2010). In this reading, asylum seekers are limited *by the nature of the reception program itself* and the form of integration it pursues. In short, this model which purports to achieve integration may win the battle but lose the war, which is to say that the academy provides training but by limiting expressions of the self and access to resources, they limit the use of autonomy and impede integration.

It is necessary to underscore what is implied here, and that is the problems with the accepted definition of integration employed within the academy. What is integration if it requires loss of identity and absorption into a racialised hierarchy? What does it mean if integration programming is structured around eliminating or invisibilising different but equally valid social and cultural norms? This question has been asked by scholars (see, e.g. Castles et al. 2002) who have called attention to the need to understand the

process of integration as relational and two way, or even three way (see Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx 2016). Yet, these critiques are often of de facto forms of absorption and integration. In this case, the Integration Academy is a structure intended to perform integration which it implicitly defines as the elimination of individual attributes, re-forming asylum seekers instead as lieutenants in the army, attentive, subservient, and docile, or as malleable children. There are many problems with this approach but perhaps one of the more egregious is that it is completely incongruous with the Italian self-conception. To state the obvious, Italians do not live in military style barracks, wear uniforms or regulate their behaviour in such a manner. The model employed within the academy is not intended to produce adaptation or acculturation to an Italian way of life (if we can reduce Italianism to a narrow cultural definition). Its goals are not then to create an integrated Italian but to create more palatable 'other'. Building on the work of Hall (1992), we see how the program responds to the 'rest' in targeting its interventions with the understanding they are out of place and require normalisation. By whitewashing asylum seekers, the model contributes to the segregating affect described by Foucault, one of differentiation through production of subaltern subjectivities (Foucault 1977; Lemke 2014).

Lastly, connecting Hall and Merrill with the critical integration scholars who have critiqued assimilationist framing (see, for instance, Castles et al. 2002; Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx 2016; Schinkel 2018), we see the futility of the academy's approach. Italian society has structurally worked to exclude black Italians and black Africans through migration governance, differential access to permits of stay, and socio-culturally; whitewashing them under the auspices of assisting them in achieving assimilation will have little effect on their structural or actual inclusion. Structural interventions are needed which are targeted at undoing the rhetoric produced by leaders like Matteo Salvini, not at penalising vulnerable asylum seekers.

Notes

1. Claims to protection made by humanitarian migrants in Italy are evaluated based on eligibility for one of several statuses: refugee status, or a permit of stay for humanitarian, subsidiary, or temporary protection. Each status guarantees the holder slightly varied protection, and associated rights and entitlements (Giannetto, Ponzio, and Roman 2019). In 2018, 65.3% of all applications – either first applicants or on appeal – were rejected, 23.1% of applicants were granted humanitarian protection, 6.2% subsidiary protection, and 5.2% refugee status (EUROSTAT 2019). We use the term asylum seeker throughout for all individuals who have filed a claim for protection and for whom the outcome is not yet determined. When a migrant is used by another author or entity, we use migrant in line with their language.
2. Immigrants within Italy are by and large from other European and EU countries, the largest of which are Eastern European countries; during the 'crisis' period the largest were from Romania, Poland and Bulgaria (ISMU 2018).
3. Salvini Decree.
4. Formerly called SPRAR – the System for the Protection of Asylum seekers and Refugees, these have now been replaced by SIPROIMI – the System for Migrants Holding International Protection and Unaccompanied Minors. The law has (again) subsequently been reversed.
5. The research process (methods and approach) were independently reviewed and received clearance prior to initiation through institutional procedures at Gran Sasso. All participants were asked to and gave consent before interviewing.

6. <https://www.ilgiorno.it/bergamo/cronaca/sindaci-vaticano-migranti-1.2743185>.
7. <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/lultimo-trucchetto-sinistra-far-restare-italia-i-clandestini-1762100.html>.
8. While it is true that only 7% of applicants were receiving refugee status at the time, a quarter earned humanitarian protection status as noted above.
9. In addition, in a telling moment within this critique, he refers to the migrant population as a source of cheap labour arguing that the country does not need to import cheap labour. In line with Calavita's (2005) critique, there is an implicit assumption within Ribolla's attack on the mayor of the role of the migrant. It restricts their potentiality to exploitable labour implicitly. It relegates their potential contributions to a particular tier of the peripheral community.
10. ***The academy shares its home with a much larger CAS. It is located in a former Carisma retirement home. Carisma is a large three-story building meant to host 350 people. The academy uses one floor with a kitchen, common space, and individual bedrooms. The remainder of the space is utilized by a large CAS reception center – the largest in the city – which hosts 250 individuals. Most academy participants were referred from this CAS to the academy. The model is governed by the city in line with programming and support from TSOs. The City Council, a centre-left leaning administration, took the leading role in formulating the experimental model for asylum-seekers' reception and integration, in partnership with the local Manufacturers' Federation (Bergamo Confindustria), and the third sector (the Diocese, through the Diakonia association and Social Cooperative Ruah). The City Council coordinates the partners, identifies asylum seekers, and liaises with the Confindustria for internship and job placements. The Ruah oversees the academy's day-to-day activities and basic services while the Diakonia association contributes to funding calls.
11. The Territorial Commissions sometimes took this into account before law 132/2018. This law has, among other things, abolished humanitarian status and replaced it with "special permits". The passage of this law has profoundly shaped asylum seekers' lives as over one-third of them often received humanitarian status in the worst-case scenario. Consequently, these changes in the law have heavily shaped the experience of the academy. However, it is worth noting that most of the changes were largely reverted by law 173/2020, with the measures entering into force on 20 December 2020.
12. This is an interesting contradiction with the larger stated concerns over the migrant threat. Stakeholders were concerned about bogus claims to asylum. Yet, the system supports a positive outcome for individuals irrespective of the technical legality of their claim thus undoing any basis for making a larger argument about illegal entry or bogus claims.

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