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The Reception System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Italy: A Case of a New Total Institution?

Abstract: This article offers a critical reflection on the Italian reception system for asylum seekers and refugees, assessing how and to what extent it differs from "total institutions". More specifically, the article focuses on ordinary reception centres (SPRARs) and emergency centres (CASs) in order to explore their organizational and structural aspects, as well as the staff involved. The first section provides an updated overview of the regulatory framework of the reception system between 2015 and 2018. We also present an analysis of the CAS tendering procedures published by the Prefetture of Florence, Siena and Arezzo. The second section focuses on the relation between "reception centre operators" and hosts. This reflection arises from qualitative research conducted in the metropolitan area of Florence in 2018. It included in-depth interviews with the head of the Central Service and four CAS facility contractors. In addition, we carried out participant observation in one centre. The study asked whether and how different reception standards between the SPRAR and the CAS system influence the type of day-to-day reception that they offer.

Keywords: Italian Reception System, total institution, de-humanizing, bureaucratic identity, segregation, control devices.

1. The research: objectives, method and sensitive concepts[1]

This article conducts a critical reflection on the Italian reception system for asylum seekers and refugees in order to assess how and to what extent it

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1 Although this article is the result of the joint reflection by the two authors, Sections 1 and 2 were written by Ivana Acocella (University of Florence) and Sections 3 and 4 by Margherita Turchi (Medici per i Diritti Umani).

differs from "total institutions". In Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates (1961), Erving Goffman defines a "total institution" as a place for those who – cut off from society for a period of time – find themselves spending part of their lives in a closed and strictly managed environment. According to Goffman, an institution becomes "total" if and when it takes over part of the time and interests of those who depend on it, through all-encompassing actions. There are also spatial all-encompassing elements such as closed doors, high walls and the location of the institution in an isolated place. Other all-encompassing total actions concern the way in which life is organized. In these contexts, the various daily activities (sleeping, working, recreation, etc.) are all carried out in the same place and are rigorously ordered in accordance with a pre-established routine, under the control imposed by an institutional authority. Furthermore, the individuals who live in the institution are treated in the same way and obliged to do the same things. The purpose of such settings is to exclude undesired categories of people from society (deviants, sick persons or outsiders). In order to maintain this social aim, the target groups of these institutions need to accept these conditions. For this reason, the main objective of this institution is to create institutionalized identities. The purpose is the deconstruction of Self, through a progressive depersonalization and objectification of an individual's own identity. This leads to a progressive loss of psychological integrity and an increase in personal degradation, especially in a context where denials of, and offences against, the Self constantly occur.

Based on this theoretical framework, the research group's question was "Does the Italian reception system for asylum seekers and refugees, which intends to integrate and rehabilitate migrants, risk becoming a total institution, and if so, in what way?"

In order to answer this working hypothesis, the article focuses on ordinary and emergency reception centres under the "System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees" (SPRAR) and the "Emergency Reception Centres" (CASs) – exploring their organizational and structural aspects, as well as the characteristics of the staff within them.

Following the "refugee crisis" of 2015, the international protection policy of the EU in general, and of Italy in particular, appears more exclusionary. Indeed, against the background of the "continuous emergency", the stigma of so-called "bogus refugees" who exploit the privileged channel of asylum to guarantee themselves entry into an EU country has quickly spread. The direct consequence of this categorization process is the shift of the refugee figure from a "person in need of protection" to a person who

must "prove" the authenticity of their requested protection status (Campesi 2018).

Starting from the European migration agenda of 2015, a "new frontier regime" has been progressively experimented and institutionalized, introducing various devices for the control, filtration and confinement of human mobility (Tazzioli 2017). For example, the "hotspot approach" – currently operating in Italy and Greece – has introduced a new method of controlling external borders, in order to quickly "sort" and "channel" the mixed incoming flows, separating the potential beneficiaries of international protection from other immigrants found to be in an irregular position and subject to repatriation. Furthermore, collaboration with third countries (of origin and transit) in the fight against illegal migration has been strengthened – above all through economic incentives – in order to increase these states' capacity to repatriate migrants who have been rejected and to control their own frontiers for entry and exit. Therefore, new border configuration strategies have been experimented and institutionalized which aim to limit irregular incoming migration flows, with the risk, however, of overlaps and confusion with the inviolable obligation to protect the right of asylum with measures connected to security and safeguarding public order (Sciurba 2017).

The reception system in Italy has also been progressively restructured in more exclusive and segregated terms, transforming the asylum seekers' condition of "exceptionality" into an "ordinary" condition of suspension and waiting for the chance to enjoy the related protections and rights. The article aims to reconstruct this involution of the Italian reception system in order to explain the predominant change of "route" in government policy. Indeed, while in 2015 the Italian government seemed determined to strengthen the SPRAR model – a type of reception without institutionalization or containment – in the following years the opposite direction prevailed. We have witnessed a progressive institutionalization of the CAS system, as well as a progressive distancing of the CAS facility regulations from the decentralized, dispersed model sought in the SPRAR centres. It is in this state of convolution that the Italian reception system has progressively become a segregating and institutionalized "closed regime", typical of institutions defined as "total".

The article is divided into two sections. The first provides an updated overview on the evolution of the specific services for asylum seekers and refugees provided in these facilities. The reflections presented are based on an analysis of the institutional and regulatory framework of the ordinary and emergency reception system between 2015 and 2018. We also present

an analysis of the CAS tendering procedures published by the *Prefetture* of Florence, Siena and Arezzo, in order to show how the network of Emergency Reception Centres is organized in Tuscany. The second section of the article focuses on the relational aspects between "reception operators" and migrants that can be configured inside these facilities. The reflection arises from qualitative research conducted in the metropolitan area of Florence from January to June 2018 through the collection of in-depth interviews with the head of the Central Service and four CAS facility contractors. Some observations were carried out in one of the bigger CAS centres. The main purpose of the field research was to detect if and how the different reception standards (with relation to the host structures, the services provided and the internal staff) between the SPRAR and the CAS system influence the type of day-to-day reception that they offer. Ultimately, the aim was to identify which structural, organizational and professional factors can produce dynamics of power and subjection between staff and the hosted migrants typical of so-called "total" institutions.

2. The evolution of the reception system in Italy: the "eternal" border

Since 2015, following the transposition of the new EU "Reception" Directive (2013/33/EU) into Legislative Decree 142/2015, the "System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees" (*sistema di protezione per richiedenti asilo e rifugiati,* SPRAR) – introduced with Law 189/2002 – has been confirmed as a "unique" reception system in Italy. The two inspiring principles of the SPRAR are: the planning of a dispersed decentralized reception system, integrated with local services and with the direct involvement of local authorities and the third non-profit sector; the development of intervention projects for asylum seekers and refugees aimed at their autonomy and integration in local society. Therefore, the SPRAR aims to overcome a form of pure welfare assistance that – by reducing the figure of the asylum seeker to a mere "physical life" (Fassin 2005, 367) – has the recurrent effect of making the subject chronically dependent on institutional charity (Harrell-Bond 2002).

The Emergency Reception Centres (*centri di accoglienza straordinaria,* CAS), instead, were introduced in 2014 by the Italian Government in order to cope with the exceptional amount of arrivals of migrants by sea and asy-

lum applications, and the consequent saturation of the SPRAR centres (Circular Order 104/2014 issued by the Ministry of the Interior)[2]. Therefore, the main purpose of the Government was to quickly find places to provide shelter and meet basic needs. However, under these "emergency" conditions, the CAS system – based on what are by their own definition "provisional" facilities – is structured without a clear regulatory framework or a minimum standard to be respected, with the exception of some general indications in ministerial decrees and circulars: provisions that do not have the force of law (Campesi 2018, 493).

Although the Ministry of the Interior envisaged the gradual absorption of the CAS into the ordinary reception system (MI Circular 14906/2014), this provision was largely disregarded. In fact, because of new arrivals by sea between 2015 and 2017, the Government chose to strengthen the emergency reception system parallel to the SPRAR centres, with a considerable increase in these facilities throughout the country, rather than downsizing them[3]. Indeed, Article 11 of Legislative Decree 142/2015 introduces the possibility of setting up new CAS facilities if there are insufficient places in the ordinary reception system.

Although this choice seems initially to have been the direct result of the Government's difficulty in finding alternative solutions, a deliberate strategy for governing the Italian reception system soon took shape. Indeed, the duty to safeguard and protect human life has been progressively replaced by very different topics such as the "segregation" or "containment" of asylum seekers, who are increasingly represented as people to be "monitored" and "supervised" until the "truth" of their condition has been proven (Sciurba 2017). However, the involution of the national reception system in recent years has taken place in a period of sharp decline in the number of arrivals and asylum seekers, thus contradicting the narrative register of the "continuous emergency" (in 2017 the number of arrivals by sea decreased to 119,369, and in 2018 it fell to 23,370).

The change in government policy has produced a profound difference between the formal and substantial dimensions of asylum. In fact, although

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2   Henceforth Circular Order issued by the Ministry of the Interior: MI Circular.
3   The number of arrivals by sea was 170,100 in 2014, 153,842 in 2015, 181,436 in 2016 and 119,369 in 2017 (source: data from the Ministry of the Interior, 31 December 2016). On 31 December 2017, the number of migrants hosted was 183,681, 14.9% of whom were received by the SPRAR, 85% by the CAS system and 0.1% by the remaining First Reception Centres (Source: Report on the Functioning of the Reception System published by the Italian Chamber of Deputies in 2017).

both types of structure are aimed at providing accommodation to migrants entering the international protection system, the SPRAR and the CAS are characterized by distinct governance systems, requiring different reception methods and purposes.

Below, we will reconstruct the differences between the SPRAR and CAS between 2015 and 2018, in order to highlight their impact on Italian soil. In detail, we will analyse the SPRAR regulations, which were already very consolidated in 2015, up to their evolution into SIPROIMI (*sistema di protezione per titolari di protezione internazionale e per minori stranieri non accompagnati*) with the entry into force of Law 132/2018 (conversion of the so-called Salvini Decree). At the same time, we will take a closer look at the CAS system regulations, which above all consisted of ministerial circulars between 2015 and 2016 (under the Renzi government), until the introduction of the ministerial decrees issued on 7 March 2017 (by the Minister of the Interior Marco Minniti under the Gentiloni government) and on 20 November 2018 (by the Interior Minister Matteo Salvini under the Conte government), with the introduction of much more detailed and specific rules.

Two parallel systems: the "asylum and reception lottery"

The protagonists of the SPRAR are the municipalities in a multilevel governance system. To activate SPRAR places, the municipality presents a project in order to access the *National Fund for Asylum Policies and Services* administered by the Ministry of the Interior. Even though the project manager is the municipality, the material supervision of the reception is entrusted to a social cooperative (a private association). The connection with the central level takes place through the SPRAR Central Service (created by the Ministry of the Interior, but entrusted to the National Association of Italian municipalities). The Central Service has coordination functions, establishing minimum reception standards (referable to the host structures, the services provided and the internal staff) and distributing migrants throughout the country according to a national distribution plan calculated according to the sustainable impact for each municipality (MI Directive issued on 11 October 2016). In this system, the centrality of the municipality makes it possible to adapt the project proposal to the specific features of the local area – with reference to available resources and to the critical issues that occur – ensuring, at the same time, a more effective link with the social actors and local services.

Instead, the Ministry of the Interior manages the CAS system directly. Responsibility for the facilities is entrusted to private cooperatives or associations (not exclusively operating in the social sector) through tendering procedures arranged by the *Prefetture* (the local offices of the Central Government). The allocation of ministerial funds takes place according to the ability of the contractors to guarantee, above all, accommodation and basic facilities, allocating to these subjects a quota of 35 euros daily for each person accepted (MI Circular 104/2014). The contractor is required to send the *Prefettura* a daily report, in order to demonstrate the correspondence between the quota received and the number of people accepted (MI Circular 2204/2014). For the SPRAR, this obligation is not required since the allocation of ministerial funds takes place according to the proposed project. Therefore, compared to the SPRAR, the CAS governance system, on the one hand, is more centralized at ministerial level; on the other, it is based on the priority of rapidly distributing incoming asylum seekers throughout the country. Even if such distribution is binding, there is no compulsory connection with local authorities to establish the reception methods, thus excluding the opportunity to take advantage of the mediation capacity of local authorities or to adequately assess the specific features of each municipality (Campesi 2018, 501)[4].

Moreover, in compliance with a model that aims at a dispersed and integrated reception, the SPRAR prefers small structures located in residential areas. The purpose is to balance individual assistance and protection measures, with the possibility of favouring the (re) conquest of autonomy by accepted migrants. These facilities are also aimed at encouraging contact with the outside in terms of both participation in social life and access to local services (SPRAR 2018, 30–40). Therefore, the SPRAR aims at a type of reception without institutionalization or confinement.

Instead, in the CAS system, the housing priority, legitimized by the need to quickly find reception places throughout the country, leaves these aspects in the background. For this reason, in the CAS system, reception conditions may differ significantly from those required in the SPRAR model, with the risk of hosting the incoming migrants in huge facilities (sometimes even with 300 persons) that are not necessarily integrated into the urban context[5]. The large structures require a more centralized organization. For

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4   With MI Circular 4418/2014, the prefects are only invited to increase their coordination with the local authorities.
5   MI Circular 104/2014 only sets out the possibility for facilities not exceeding 100 people.

example, in order to comply with the official purpose of the institution, the day-to-day activities need to be subject to stricter records, according to a system of rules designated by the internal staff. The relationship with the outside is also compromised, since these structures are often located in remote places, thus endangering the potential integration of the asylum seeker with local communities (Hynes 2011). Therefore, the "bottom-up diffusion model" promoted by the SPRAR in collaboration with the local authorities translates into the "top-down dispersal model" prepared by the Ministry of the Interior, with the risk of producing various forms of segregation for asylum seekers (Campesi 2018, 500).

In addition, in these organizational models, the risks of institutionalization for the asylum seeker are high, since, in the structure, the daily life of the guest is administered by others, in a bureaucratic process that imposes a foreign life cycle on him/her and subjugates the individual's needs to organizational interests (Agier 2011, 93). This organizational form seems to reiterate the stereotypical idea of asylum seekers – typical of the old model of the "reception camp" – as mere victims "to be saved" and in need of someone to establish their destiny (Turner 2015). The risk, however, is that of transforming the exceptionality of the juridical status of asylum seekers into an "ordinary" condition of expropriation of sovereignty over their own lives, legitimizing – through categorization processes – their segregation "for humanitarian purposes" in a reception system which deals invasively with all the aspects of migrant life. In this way, their subjectivity is reduced to a mere "bureaucratic identity" (Zetter 1991, 41), whose responsibility lies entirely with external agents who also have the task of defining the set of needs and potential requests (Malkki 1995, 498). A reception system based on these assumptions can therefore more easily translate into a segregating and institutionalized "closed regime", in which the relations between staff and migrants hosted are declined according to power and highly asymmetric subjugation devices typical of so-called "total" institutions (Goffman 1961).

The different purposes and methods of reception found, until now, between the CAS and the SPRAR are also amplified if we are to evaluate the approaches followed in the type of intervention addressed towards the persons taken in.

In addition to responding to basic needs, the SPRAR proposes individual projects aimed at enhancing migrants' resilience. In short, the "project" is not limited to responding to the individual need or to the evident situation of "emergency" of each person received, but is designed on the basis of a holistic analysis of their condition, in order to enhance their specificity

and subjectivity in a strategic and situational intervention (Séverine & Shahani 2009). Furthermore, the SPRAR also promotes interventions aimed at favouring paths of inclusion in society after leaving the reception system, thus offering the migrant the opportunity to "look ahead" beyond the momentary condition of exceptionality (Manocchi 2014, 395). Among these, for example, there are actions aimed at re-evaluating the specific background of the person (trying to obtain recognition of previous qualifications) or at imparting new skills (through attendance of professional and requalification traineeships), in order to favour their progressive integration into the labour market. In the perspective of the SPRAR, these interventions should be carried out with the aim of strengthening the migrant's level of "capability" and reducing the risk of making their condition of vulnerability permanent (Bonanno 2004, 20–28). In order to carry out these complex and delicate functions, the SPRAR personnel must possess heterogeneous and highly qualified skills. To this end, the SPRAR service provides for the presence of a multidisciplinary team, clearly defining the professional figures involved – social workers, professional educators, psychologists and legal operators – and their specific skills (SPRAR 2018, 11–16).

These standards are not achieved in the CAS system. Since 2014, the Ministry of the Interior issued a general convention on the services to be guaranteed to asylum seekers (food and accommodation, orientation on the local area, assistance in cultural mediation, health care and psychological support), but without indicating the specific methods with which to provide these services (MI Circular 2204/2014). Likewise, in the CAS regulatory framework, there are no clear references to the skills of the personnel involved in the structure, nor to the minimum number of hours necessary for the provision of the various services. The vacuity of the expected standards obviously depends on the "emergence genesis" of these facilities. Not surprisingly, in the face of such vacuity, over time, the Ministry of the Interior has promoted other activation and organization criteria for these facilities such as the "most economically advantageous" offer or the possibility of also including economic operators among the structure's managers (MI Circulars nos. 2284/2014, 14100–127/2014, 5484/2014, 12506/2015). Although for the management of the CAS facilities, the indication provided by the Government is to prefer social cooperatives with previous experience in immigration, rather than hotels (MI Circular 104/2014), however, this remains a recommendation and not a legal obligation. Indeed, the scenario that is outlined in the country is very variegated and much depends on the https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese-italiano/thedecisions taken in the different local contexts. Many research studies and reports

show that, starting from this regulatory deficiency, the reception services have often been entrusted to "improvised administrations" lacking adequate experience in migration and asylum policies, which have provided accommodation in inappropriate or even crumbling facilities. Similarly, in some facilities, the number of reception operators was insufficient and the internal personnel were not trained to intervene efficiently regarding the specific needs of the persons received (Campesi 2018, 501).

Moreover, unlike the SPRAR, the CAS regulatory framework does not provide any services aimed at favouring the progressive insertion of migrants into the labour market. The emergency response to provide accommodation and basic necessities therefore prevails over the possibility of envisaging social inclusion paths for the asylum seeker, reducing the reception practices to purely transitional and temporary solutions that do not include longer-lasting investments in order to increase opportunities for the migrants' stabilization and integration in the country. In the CAS system, the tendency to translate the exceptionality of the juridical status of asylum seeker into an "ordinary condition of suspension and waiting" prevails (Agier 2009, 27–35). This feature further highlights the more segregating and institutionalized set-up of the CAS system, increasing its similarity to a total institution. Indeed, especially in the delicate phase of arrival and insertion into a new country, a "reception without integration system" can be very debilitating for a person forced into a lasting condition of immobility and disorientation (Bloch & Schuster 2005; Rousseau & Pottie 2011, 959–967).

This consideration is strengthened in light of the fact that, while the SPRAR can host both asylum seekers and refugees, the CAS system is reserved exclusively for asylum seekers (MI Circular 2255/2015). The allocation of the asylum seeker to the former or latter system takes place in a random manner, since it depends on the places available at the time of the migrant's placement. However, this randomness substantiates a sort of "asylum and reception lottery" (OXFAM Italia 2017), which reserves different rights and opportunities to persons belonging to the same juridical category, if we consider the reception conditions guaranteed by the two parallel reception systems.

Trying to reduce the differences between the two parallel systems is at the single prefecture's discretion

In order to reduce these disparities between reception systems, the Ministry of the Interior requires the *Prefetture* to ensure reception standards more

similar to those promoted in the SPRAR (MI Circular 5484/2015). Following this requirement, in fact, in some CAS tendering procedures, additional criteria are introduced for the assignment of specific points in the final ranking. Moreover, in this case too, in the absence of more uniform indications at the centralized level, very uneven situations occur at the local level. As an example, we present an analysis of the CAS tendering procedures published, between 2015 and 2016, by the *Prefetture* of Florence, Siena and Arezzo, in order to show how the network of Emergency Reception Centres is developed in Tuscany, characterized by a system of reception governance ranked among the best in Italy. In the CAS tendering procedures of the three provinces, the criterion of the most advantageous economic offer is accompanied by a second criterion related to the technical proposal, in order to improve the quality/price ratio and discourage excessive rebates. Furthermore, incentives for small structures located in urban areas are introduced. However, in 2017, the *Prefettura* of Florence eliminated this incentive. Furthermore, while since 2015 the *Prefettura* of Arezzo has included some parameters of territorial sustainability, indicating the maximum reception capacity for the various municipalities of the province, the *Prefetture* of Florence and Siena only introduced similar incentives in 2017.

There are also differences regarding the services provided. In fact, in the CAS tendering procedures of Florence and Siena, incentives relating to Italian language teaching have gradually been introduced, as well as some elements aimed at favouring family-style living conditions for migrants (such as the ability to shop and cook independently). Instead, the *Prefettura* of Arezzo introduced this second aspect in 2016, and it only incentivizes Italian language teaching without making it obligatory. Moreover, although the CAS tendering procedures of the three provinces always provide the possibility of proposing more services concerning the migrant's integration, the minimum standards to be followed are never indicated. The *Prefettura* of Siena provides a clearer description of the minimum services to be guaranteed in 2017, taking up many of the criteria proposed by the SPRAR. Furthermore, as early as 2015, in the CAS tendering procedures of Siena, particular attention was paid to the promotion of activities aimed at encouraging the inclusion of migrants in the labour market.

Finally, since 2015 the CAS tendering procedures of the three provinces have provided incentives for the presence of qualified personnel with previous experience in immigration and asylum. However, also in this case, there are no clear references to minimum standards about the specific professional skills required. In pejorative terms, it is found that, while, in 2015, the *Prefettura* of Florence introduced an incentive for the presence of a psy-

chologist in the structure, in 2017, this figure is replaced with that of a social operator present 24 hours a day, thus highlighting an increase in the propensity to introduce control devices rather than integration measures (Diken & Lausten 2006).

The predominant change of "route" in government policy

A profound change of trend in the regulation of the CAS system occurred in 2017, when the Ministry of the Interior – under the guidance of Marco Minniti – issued new rules for these facilities (Decree MI issued on 7 March 2017). In addition to the CAS system, these rules also apply to the *First Aid and Assistance Centres* (*Centri di Primo Soccorso ed Accoglienza* and hotspots) located near main disembarkation points in order to offer support and shelter to all incoming migrants, and to the *First Reception Centres* (ex-*Centri di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo* and hubs) aimed at completing the identification and registration of the asylum seekers. The choice of providing the same ministerial guidelines for such different facilities seems to underlie the government's intention to align the CAS facilities better with previous structures. However, the CAS system often hosts asylum seekers throughout the assessment of their asylum applications – i.e. for many months – during which it would be appropriate to lay the foundations for the possible future integration of those who are recognized as protection beneficiaries[6].

The ministerial guidelines state precise rules regarding the services and the internal staff for structures hosting up to 1800 persons. Although some exceptions are introduced for CAS facilities with fewer than 50 persons, this does not exclude the possibility that, if necessary, huge facilities can be set up and, for this reason, not necessarily integrated into the urban context. It also refers to the service of "providing meals", when the most well-functioning reception facilities are distinguished by managers being able to give asylum seekers the chance to shop and cook independently. The obligation to introduce a 24-hour service is also prescribed, which is hardly feasible in reception facilities organized in small apartments. Even the introduction of improvement requirements, such as compulsory Italian language teaching, seems to reward the larger structures, since – according to the guidelines –

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6   Between 2014 and 2016, the average waiting time for the outcome of the examination of the request was approximately 307 days, i.e. almost a year (Source: Report on International Protection in Italy 2017).

this teaching should preferably take place within the structure, thus encouraging an organizational model for the CAS system that is as self-sufficient as possible. Finally, in the ministerial guidelines, there are no services aimed at strengthening the asylum seekers' professional skills or favouring integration into the labour market, confirming the tendency to consider these facilities as "waiting places" mainly providing accommodation and basic necessities (Campesi 2018, 489 and 501).

Even if, only a few years before, the Ministry of the Interior aspired to progressively closing down the CAS system and reabsorbing it into the SPRAR, it is clear that, through the issuance of these ministerial guidelines, the Emergency Reception Centres are now conceived of as permanent structures. Furthermore, these rules issued by the Government underline a very different type of governance for the CAS system from that sought in the decentralized and dispersed model typical of the ordinary reception system, which, in addition to responding to basic needs, also aims to support migrants in the longer term on the path to integration into the country.

The CAS system designated by these new rules implies the assumption of an even more secure approach to asylum seekers. As already detailed, the obligation to introduce a 24-hour service refers to the issue of social control. Whereas, in a First Aid and Assistance Centre, this service can reassure a migrant who has just landed in Italy, in an apartment intended for everyday life the night-time presence of staff seems to be designed purely to perform surveillance. Moreover, before 2017, some tasks assigned to the CAS managers and operators already underlined this aspect of surveillance, such as the requirement to send the *Prefetture* a daily report indicating the number of people accepted each day (MI Circular 2204/2014). Furthermore, since 2017, the person in charge of the facility has been recognized – for all legal purposes – as a public official, with the task of notifying the asylum seeker of communications relating to their asylum application (Law 46/2017). This provision issued by the Government interferes with the "neutral" role of the facility manager with respect to the institutional functions carried out by the *Prefetture* towards the asylum seeker.

Therefore, in 2017, through governmental provisions, in addition to the progressive institutionalization of the CAS system, there was also an increase in means of segregation and control for the asylum seekers hosted in these facilities. In this way, the legal obligation established by the international regulatory framework to protect the asylum seeker was reinterpreted

through assumptions of public order and safety for national society[7]. The risk is that of reinforcing stereotyped images of asylum seekers as a "potential public threat" who need to be segregated and kept under surveillance (Zetter 1991) – due to their still uncertain and always reversible legal status – within an "exceptional space of suspension and control" reserved for "those who do not belong to any political community" (Agamben 2009; Pastore 2015). In this way, reception facilities risk becoming "all-encompassing institutions" which make the asylum seekers' condition of institutional asymmetry "ordinary" through "power devices" associated "with the control of time and space" (Foucault 1975; Whyte, 2011, 18–20) and structural measures of physical and psychological subjection. These power devices and structural measures of segregation and subjugation are produced by formal and institutional rules ascribable to the same reception system (Agier 2011; Campesi 2018).

Compared to the protection beneficiaries, discrimination against asylum seekers was intensified in 2018. Indeed, Law 132/2018 (which converted Decree 113/2018, issued by the current Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini) redesigns the Italian reception system, restricting hospitality in the SPRAR centres (henceforth called SIPROIMI centres) exclusively to the beneficiaries of international protection and unaccompanied foreign minors, while the reception of asylum seekers is entrusted to the CAS system. New guidelines were also issued for the CAS system, moreover establishing the reduction of the daily grant of 35 euros to a range of between 21 and 26 euros depending on the size of the facility (MI Decree issued on 20 November 2018). The drastic downward revision of the grant derives from the fact that the new ministerial guidelines describe two levels of services, ensuring asylum seekers first-aid and welfare services, while activities aimed at social inclusion are reserved exclusively for those benefiting from protection.

The government's justification for this provision refers to the need not to "waste money" on those still awaiting the granting of asylum – i.e. until

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7   In Italy, in the same period, we witnessed an increase in the practice of detaining expelled migrants awaiting repatriation. Article 17 of Law 46/2017 (which converts the so-called Minniti-Orlando Decree) provides for an increase in the number of Permanent Centres for Repatriation (CPRs, previously CIEs – centres for identification and expulsion) and extends the notion of "risk of escape" (including repeated refusal to provide fingerprints). Migrants could originally be detained in a CPR for up to 90 days, but that was increased to 180 days by Law 132/2018. We are therefore witnessing a countertrend compared to the past, when the choice instead prevailed to decrease the number of such facilities and the time spent there, substantially reducing the migrants' detention to a residual practice (Campesi 2017, 26–31).

the authenticity of their condition has been proved. The touted goal of discouraging the so-called "bogus refugee" has, therefore, been used to definitively institutionalize the CAS – which Italian law defines as an "emergency" facility – making it part of the ordinary reception system for asylum seekers. At the same time, the new ministerial guidelines state that, in the CAS system, services aimed at integration should not be provided, including Italian language courses and local guidance. Psychological assistance is eliminated as well. Furthermore, in relation to these facilities, the resource cuts make it almost impossible to offer forms of reception organized in small apartments in residential areas or providing high-quality services. The tendency that had already emerged to reduce the CAS to a mere "containment" and "waiting" facility for the asylum seekers is therefore drastically exacerbated.

The same law also abolishes "humanitarian protection", introduced by the national immigration law for those who, although not falling into the category of "refugee", incur "serious reasons […] of a humanitarian nature or resulting from constitutional or international obligations of the Italian State" (ex-article 5 of Legislative Decree 286/1998). The law replaces "humanitarian protection" with other forms of protection (for "medical care", "natural disasters" and "acts of particular civic value"), aimed – as claimed by the Government – at granting complementary but more specific protection. However, while allowing possible access to the SPRAR system, the new forms of protection (except for "acts of particular civic value") are limited to the exceptional reasons that allowed the asylum seeker entry to the country and their inclusion in the reception system, without this translating into a longer stay for the migrant.

Therefore, the exceptionality of the status of asylum seeker – always reversible "until proven otherwise" – is definitively translated into a "condition of general exception to the suspension of fundamental rights", in light of a policy of criminalizing foreigners to justify what the State is willing to grant (Turner 2005; Dines, Montagna & Vacchelli 2018). Ultimately, Law 132/2018 is the epilogue to an ambivalent path that has always characterized the national regulatory framework in the field of international protection, involving the inevitable loss of meaning of the "right to asylum" and the progressive structuring of the reception system – also through the law – into a space of confinement and suspension for "forced migrants". The transformation of the asylum-seeker reception system into a "total institution" is thus definitively accomplished, while the decentralized and dispersed model sought in the SIPROIMI (ex-SPRAR) model remains a merely residual practice. Moreover, even if the beneficiaries of international pro-

tection will be able to benefit from this service, after years of imprisonment and segregation, their path to social reintegration will be severely compromised.

3. Daily practices of reception: the "power" of assistance

By the end of 2017, in the province of Florence there were 691 places in SPRAR projects and 3,297 in emergency reception centres for asylum seekers. The Florence municipality hosted the largest number of refugees and asylum seekers (758) while only four municipalities in the province decided not to organize reception facilities in their territories: Barberino Val d'Elsa, Marradi, Palazzuolo sul Senio and San Godenzo. Overall, considering the total amount of places in the SPRAR and CAS system, the province of Florence is in line with the numbers of the National Plan of Allocation for Arriving Migrants (MI Directive issued on 11 October 2016). However, if we focus on the *Zone Distretto della Provincia* (corresponding to the various healthcare areas), in the south-eastern area we can see the greatest deviations from the mean provincial value, with some municipalities hosting far fewer migrants (Bagno a Ripoli and Greve in Chianti) than others (Londa, Reggello and Rufina). Moreover, the Mugello Mountain Union Area (Zona Unione Montana del Mugello) presents a larger number of migrants on average, with three municipalities (Borgo San Lorenzo, Dicomano and Vicchio) which even exceed the fixed benchmark by 200%. The number of people hosted per facility is also available for the CAS system. The average number for the entire province is 15 people, but there are exceptions, such as the municipality of Calenzano, in which 126 asylum seekers are hosted in only two facilities, and Sesto Fiorentino and Vaglia, which host an average of 30 people per centre (ANCI Toscana 2017).

Given these data about the reception system, we will now consider the dynamics of relationships between "reception operators" and asylum seekers and refugees observed in some of the facilities, presenting the results of qualitative research conducted in the metropolitan area of Florence from January to June 2018.

With reference to the SPRAR, spoken accounts were gathered from the Central Service referees[8]. With reference to the CAS system, data were col-

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8 The information was collected in an informal way during a group discussion at the *Regione Toscana* local government and a workshop organized by the University of

lected on four facilities and their contractors were interviewed; the research group used three criteria to choose the facilities: size, proximity (or not) to urban contexts and management skills related to immigration reception. The purpose was to evaluate if and how these features produce different types of reception. Some observations were conducted in one of the bigger CAS facilities. The period of observation was eight months (with an average frequency of three times a week). The observations detected some structural information on the institution's location (centrality or connection with the city) and its environmental conditions (cleanliness, safety, lighting and size), and socio-demographic information on the residents (number, age, sex, nationality, kind of distress, living conditions and organization of a typical day in the institution) and its professional team (number, age, sex, qualifications, nationality, working conditions and typical organization of their working days).

The main purpose of the field research was to detect whether and how the different standards between the SPRAR and the CAS system influence the type of day-to-day reception offered within them. Structural, organizational and professional factors can indeed produce dynamics of power and subjection between staff and the hosted migrants which are typical of so-called "total" institutions.

A stratification of traumas: could the Italian reception system increase psychological distress in asylum seekers?

According to psychologists and psychotherapists who have worked with asylum seekers in recent years, it is possible to trace in them a stratification of traumas: in particular, those related to departure (*pre-migratory trauma*, concerning the motivation for leaving and the *push factors* in the countries of origin context); those involved in the migration itself and the difficulties encountered on the way (*migration trauma*, linked to the migratory routes and today increasingly due to the dramatic situation in Libya); and *post-migration trauma* due to the problems and the distress emerging after arriving in the hosting country (Bonanno 2004, 290–298; Medici Senza Frontiere 2015).

Post-migration traumas are often linked to the impact of the Italian reception system, which – as we stated above – has been structured, especially

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in recent years, based on an emergency approach. *MEDU* (Doctors for Human Rights) psychotherapists working in the Psyché counselling service[9] have pointed out that many of the critical issues found in the structural and organizational architecture of the reception system could become re-traumatizing factors: long waiting lists and uncertain waiting times, inability to plan the future, disinformation, discrimination between refugees and asylum seekers, and so on. These factors can also operate through the everyday practices and face-to-face relationships that take place inside the hosting facilities (Agier 2009).

All in all, these characteristics could lead to a potentially pathogenic model (Nyers 2006; Fontanari & Ambrosini 2018). In the preceding paragraphs we underlined how the legislation in recent years has led to a closed and controlled system. The more segregated and "institutionalized" the facilities are, the more likely it is to encounter pathogenic dynamics.

The type of structure and the rules that frame the context inside the facilities influence the behaviours of the operators and the hosted people (Faso & Bontempelli, 2017). Following Philip G. Zimbardo's social experiment at San Francisco University, it is possible to say that the relational atmosphere conditions personal behaviours, independently from the cultural background or personality of the individuals inside the facilities. The more the context is closed and kept under watch (such as a jail or a psychiatric hospital), the more the behaviours of the people hosted are influenced towards an institutionalized model. Moreover, if the asylum seekers feel segregated and controlled inside the reception facilities, their relationship with the operators could be compromised.

The skills of the reception operators thus become essential in this context and necessary to avoid overtly unbalanced power relationships that could lead to a deeply stressful psychological situation in migrants and further exacerbate their vulnerability.

The arrival in the "safe place": disorientation and lack of information

From the migrants' arrival in Italy, a purely welfarist approach characterizes the reception system, and only in very few cases can we find exceptions. In

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9   A counselling service supporting asylum seekers and refugees in Rome. In particular, psychologists and psychiatrists working in the centre help people who have been tortured or victims of degrading and inhumane treatment.

the first phase after their arrival in Italy, especially, migrants are not involved in the proceedings or in planning their immediate future. As mentioned above, asylum seekers are distributed over the national territory based on a calculation that allocates them according to the "reception capacity" of cities (MI Directive issued on 11 October 2016). For this reason, migrants are forced to live in an unknown context, surrounded by an unknown language, without any role in decision-making about their final destination (Manocchi 2012, 101–102).

Once they arrive in the hosting structure, rules and guidelines on how to behave within the facilities are defined and communicated in different ways. For instance, in the CASs observed, the facility's regulation document is drawn up by the managing body, and guests are not always informed about it in their mother tongue but in English or French, usually as soon as migrants arrive in the host structure (after the very traumatic days of crossing the Mediterranean sea, when asylum seekers are often still shocked and confused about the environment). By contrast, in the SPRAR centres, we observed more attention to sharing rules with linguistic and cultural mediators and to arranging regular meetings with asylum seekers to foster their closer involvement in the organization of the centre. As an example, we can compare the practice of organizing community meetings to discuss the rules and procedures with a legal advisor in the SPRAR centres and the practice of giving a brochure (with only general information, sometimes from international organizations such as OIM, UNHCR or EASO) to the new arrivals in some CASs.

We detected another important element concerning the quality of information received which increases the asylum seekers' condition of disorientation. The lack of clear and precise information not only on the Italian system but also on the European and international asylum system, its phases and timing, replicate a very similar situation of vagueness to that experienced by migrants on the routes to Europe and in the Libyan detention centres. The endless waiting, without information, while being treated as livestock after entering the Italian reception system reproduces de-humanizing logics and dynamics typical of the trafficking network operating across the Sahara desert and the Mediterranean Sea (Medu, 2016). This critical aspect often continues to be a distinguishing feature within the CAS reception facilities, while in the SPRAR centres it is attenuated by the presence of a legal operator.

Towards the (re) conquest of autonomy?

Some authors (Faso & Bontempelli, 2017) underline the divergence between the purpose of the system and the daily practices that take place inside the reception facilities: the declared objective is to help make refugees autonomous and socialized in Italian society, but some observed dynamics could instead lead to dependency and isolation. This disconnection between purpose and daily practices, as well as victimizing or humiliating behaviours, is often enacted without a real awareness of the actors involved (Faso & Bontempelli 2017).

The view of asylum seekers as victims (deriving from a categorizing process that distinguishes between economic migrants and real refugees) and thus the necessity to assist and guide, and even to educate and "civilize" them, often involves an infantilizing dynamic (Minotakis & Avramidis 2017). Giuseppe Faso and Sergio Bontempelli (2017, 48) use the expression "forced regression" to depict a situation in which asylum seekers are treated like children that need to be socialized and educated, as if a their entire life and past has been removed, forgetting that many of the paths to Europe are characterized by important and difficult choices. What we observe is a deprivation of decision-making autonomy and an external direction on the migrant, who has no history, identity or own world-view (Manocchi 2014, 392); migrants are considered only in terms of their immediate needs and have no ability to plan their future.

In our research, some practices which can hide infantilizing processes were found. For example, we observed how operators and managers used the tool of "pocket money", the little amount of money given to asylum seekers in order to enable them to buy everyday supplies. The payment of pocket money, far from being a means for guests to acquire autonomy (and to familiarize themselves with the local currency, choosing how and when to use the money, or save it as remittance), could trigger dependency dynamics that define a condition of subordination. In this context, too, we can underline differences between the situations in the CAS or SPRAR facilities. In the CAS system the pocket money is distributed by reception operators in an informal context within the structure, while in the SPRAR it is distributed in an institutional place such as the municipality, by employees working in the accounting office. Furthermore, in the SPRAR facilities, to prevent the pocket money distribution from becoming a charity, the frequency is agreed with the guests, taking their necessities and requests into account.

Similar conditions of power asymmetry, which fuel various forms of dependence, may occur during migrants' entire stay in a reception centre, without conscious reflection by the reception operators. For example, sometimes the practice of replacing the guests' autonomy with the operator's skills is perpetuated. Lack of time, the greater speed and ability of the social operators to move within the Italian context, the less effort required to perform tasks and the difficulties in explaining what to do, and how to do it, to asylum seekers often results in CAS operators carrying out tasks instead of letting the guests move autonomously (Sorgoni 2011, 22–27).

During the survey, very different situations were found: in the SPRAR centres, a more balanced relationship between the number of staff members and hosted migrants allows better care to be taken of guests with a multidisciplinary approach and closer attention to relationships and capacity-building. In the CAS system, depending on the type of facility, there is greater variability. In our observation and interviews we found many differences: for instance, between a facility near to the city centre and one far from it. In the former case, it is likely that the staff give bus tickets to guests, letting them move autonomously, while on the other hand, if the building is isolated and not served by public transport, it is easier to organize private transport to take guests into the city for commissions (to the police station to renew documents or to the hospital for a medical examination). This leads to a decrease in the migrants' autonomy to move in the area and to use Italian services, and to a general loss of capacity-building and independence.

Another finding from the survey is the SPRAR projects' preference for small apartments with a few guests; instead, among the CAS included in our research, and specifically the one in which the observations were conducted, up to 100 persons were hosted in a single facility. In such facilities, it is obviously more complicated to manage all the services that should be delivered to guests. For example, in some cases it is preferred to provide external cooked meals instead of giving access to the kitchen; Italian language lessons are provided within the centre because it is thus easier to reach all of the guests. This kind of organizational detail deeply affects the level of autonomy that migrants can achieve (for example, the possibility of shopping and cooking independently). Moreover, the delivery of meals and the organization of language lessons within the centre contribute to the isolation of asylum seekers, who are confined to the building and unable to move autonomously. It also fosters processes of ghettoization, helping to isolate and separate migrants from society, which is one of the characteristics of a total institution (Campesi 2018).

A clear tendency towards a control strategy is traceable in the recent local legislation; indeed, in November 2018 the *Prefettura* of Florence introduced the obligation for asylum seekers to remain within the CAS facilities from 8 pm to 8 am.

The reward-punishment dynamic and the duty of gratitude

In the process of the unconscious substitution of the migrants' personalities, guests cannot choose to comply with imposed rules and conditions, because of a lack of information about the overall system and its methods and goals, and about the hidden social rules of the context. Asylum seekers act and fail, not because they do not want to comply with the rules, but because they often have scant understanding of the situation (Pinelli 2017, 15–16).

In this setting, it is easy to use a reward-punishment logic typical of a subordination relationship. This is something we mainly observed when reception operators used measures (e. g. the withholding of pocket money) to impose rules instead of discussing and sharing knowledge with migrants, in a process of exchanging ideas about life in reception facilities. Some observed practices to punish the misbehaviour of migrants were to stop giving them pocket money (as parents would do with their children to educate them), or to threaten suspension from the reception services (following the logic "if you go on behaving like this, we can kick you out of the host structure"), which ranged from informal rebukes to formal communications to the *Prefettura*, meaning the end of the right to live in the host facility.

We identified these asymmetric power relationships both in the CAS and SPRAR facilities, though the more qualified and professionalized SPRAR reception operators are more likely to be able to reduce these effects.

These reward and punishment measures, used to educate and correct migrants, have the effect of asserting the authority and power of those who provide assistance, and of affecting guests' identity construction in a dependency-based context of which control is a fundamental part (Whyte 2011). It is also a means of avoiding institutional critical issues about the organization of the structure and its effectiveness, as well as on how reception operators act and behave.

The reward-punishment logic tool that can be used in total institutions to underline the workers' authority is also used as a subjection mechanism that reinforces the idea that migrants are inferior. We can find some devices of this kind in very different and apparently opposite practices. Indeed, by

framing these dynamics within the "gift theory" propounded by Marcel Mauss (1925), we can easily understand how migrants remain trapped at length in a profoundly asymmetric help relationship, in which unbalanced powers constantly reinforce their status as victims and passive actors. The lack of reciprocity in assistance relationships puts the *givers* in a powerful position and the *receivers* in a subordinate and undervalued one. The gift defines the relationships of status and power that exist between the donor and the person who receives the gift: it does not entail an obligation but creates a sense of indebtedness when there is no intention to reciprocate or possibility to do so, putting the recipient in a condition of inferiority towards the benefactor. The unrequited gift, however, degrades those who have accepted it, especially if it cannot be reciprocated (Harrell-Bond 2005, 30–48).

It has been observed that this approach to the reception system as a donation instead of a guaranteed right is far from rare. This thankfulness logic is characterized by the request that migrants should respond with obedience and gratitude for what has been given, under the conditions imposed by the *donor*.

Confirmation of the above is provided by the conversion law of the so-called Minniti-Orlando Decree (Law 46/2017). The exchange approach to reception assumes that asylum seekers have to adapt to imposed rules and donate their time to the hosting community, as a way to lighten the burden of their presence. Indeed, the law establishes social voluntary work as the only form of social inclusion reserved for asylum seekers living in the Italian reception system. It is no more than the institutionalization of the practice – already in use in many municipalities at an informal level – of inserting migrants into unpaid jobs for the good of the public, justifying it with the aim of integrating them into the local community and as strengthening their language skills. This practice de facto reinforces the idea of the migrant's subservience and a utilitarian vision of their integration (Tarsia 2018, 97–121). The duty to host asylum seekers sanctioned by international obligations is therefore declined according to a "logic of concession" within which the "generously hosted" people are asked to reciprocate this benevolence by demonstrating their "usefulness" for the hosting context and thus prove they are worthy of this reception (Manocchi 2014, 394–395).

It must be stressed that such dynamics are common to all types of reception facility. We already underlined how the SPRAR operators are usually more qualified while, owing to the unspecified skills of the CAS workers, some behaviours were observed which resulted from a lack of professionalism. From our observations and interviews with operators and coor-

dinators of the CAS reception facilities, some notable behaviours emerged. For instance, there was confusion over roles: some operators were not aware of the power dynamics at play, and were sometimes offended by the guests' responses; they expected trust as if they were involved in a relationship of friendship. Usually this kind of logic is strongly linked to seeking gratitude, following the model "I did a lot for him/her and he/she betrayed me and told me lies"/"I did everything to become a friend but he/she still doesn't trust me", and a direct consequence of this feeling produces the reward-punishment dynamic.

A similar logic concerning this duty to show gratitude can be observed in the attempts to introduce migrants to the job market, through internships or looking for job offers. What we found is the tendency to propose any job, without trying to value the migrants' competencies or background of learning. This is a sign of an incapacity to imagine different, ambitious paths to integration, justified by a general levelling of all the asylum seekers and the need for them to accept what is available (Caroselli 2018, 156–166). Also within the SPRAR projects, as observed, proposals concerning employment are often apprenticeships for deskilled and casual work, following the mantra "we do what we can". Indeed, even though there is a dedicated space in the SPRAR for the creation of a curriculum and better labour market guidance, there are often very few available internships, relating to a few professional areas. This deskilling process follows the "logic of concession": asylum seekers have to accept what is proposed, independently of their previous experiences, working skills and expectations.

The displaced persons' apathy and the operators' skills

The literature on refugees interned in camps long ago highlighted the "displaced persons' apathy" (Bakis 1995) syndrome: a pattern of attitudes ranging from elation to aggression or depression due precisely to the condition of dependency and control, the inability to act and infantilization experienced in camps, added to uncertainty about how long this condition will last (Fazel, Wheeler & Danesh 2005). Given these studies and the "displaced persons' apathy" syndrome, we can assume that the most stressful factors for asylum seekers are not only those deriving from their traumatic past but also frustration with current life inside facilities (Medici Senza Frontiere 2015; Abbott 2016).

Sometimes, in reception facilities, we may also find inadequate preparation on the part of reception operators when it comes to reading the situation and the symptomatology that accompanies these forms of psychologi-

cal distress, which vary over a very wide range from somatic symptoms to depression and personality disorders due to PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Indeed, this can lead, as stated by psychotherapists working in Psyché, to an over-medicalization of guests inside host facilities. Especially for non-severe diseases (frequent stomach aches, headaches, muscle pain), the tendency is to resort to pharmacological therapies without investigating thoroughly whether a psychological problem could lie behind these symptoms (Medici per i Diritti Umani 2016).

At the same time, in the face of the many organizational, structural and relational criticisms that can be found in a reception facility, which can reduce opportunities to regain autonomy or favour gradual inclusion into local society, unprepared operators give simple explanations about the migrants' attitudes and failings. For example, we can cite the so-called "ethnic explanations" often used as a common-sense tool to reduce the complexity of the actual situation. In this case, simplification becomes categorization and stigmatization, where nationality is used to explain certain behaviours regardless of the individual personality and the context in which the person is living (Faso and Bontempelli 2017, 47). Some cultural explanations are: "Nigerian people are aggressive and hot-headed", "Bangladeshi people are calm and compliant", "people from French-speaking countries are more willing to commit themselves to study". The trend of explaining migrants' failings based on their origins can also be defined as an "ethnic explanation": "Africans don't learn Italian because they are lazy", "they do nothing but eat and sleep all the time", "Bangladeshi and Pakistani people only come here to work a few years and send money home". It is rare to hear explanations that consider these behaviours as a sign of distress, or as the result of the reception context and rules.

The power relationship and the risks of hidden or manifest violence

Ultimately, all these elements can increase the vulnerability of migrants living in reception facilities, instead of fostering their autonomy. Analysis of the relational dynamics between those who work and those who live in a reception system indeed highlights how, beyond the stated purpose of the institution, models of exclusion and de-humanizing practices can be perpetuated. It is therefore crucial to prepare and train specific professional figures in order to organize an effective service both for the subjects involved (guests, operators) and for the hosting societies (Schrijvers 1999; Mirza 2014).

We considered "concentration of decision-making", "standardization of activities", "strictness in the implementation of the rules" and "stigmatization processes" as characterizing elements of the organization which deeply influence the type of relationship that can take place within the reception facilities. The organizational context is at risk of affecting the behaviours of the operators, who are driven to use de-qualifying and humiliating practices, such as the punishment-reward logic or categorization. These factors can help transform reception centres into spaces of hidden or manifest violence similar to total institutions (Goffman 1961; Stark 1994; Diken 2004).

4. Conclusions

The research question was "Does the Italian reception system for asylum seekers and refugees, which intends to integrate and rehabilitate migrants, risk becoming a total institution, and if so, in what way?"

Under a regime of "permanent emergency", the CAS facilities that Italian law defines as "emergency" and "temporary" have rapidly become the ordinary places to host asylum seekers, while the decentralized and dispersed model sought in the SIPROIMI (ex-SPRAR) model remains a merely residual practice. In the same way, migrants' criminalization and the fomentation of the fear of invasion have legitimized the progressive structuring of the reception system – also through the law – into a space of confinement and segregation for the "forced migrant", as well as the production of an artificially defined hierarchy of "categories of migrants" to which increasingly stringent forms of access to rights are granted. In this way, the reception system has progressively moved towards a more institutionalized model, typical of institutions defined as "total".

Therefore, based on these assumptions, the Italian reception system has turned into a "non-place" for "non-persons", in which the exception becomes the norm and the practices of discrimination against the asylum seeker can only increase, in a situation of asymmetric power relationships legitimized by the institutional and regulatory framework. A "non-place" for "non-persons" where the State can compulsorily send subjects not belonging to its territory, to control them more than to protect them, until the authenticity of their condition has been proven. However, a reception system "without integration" risks making the asylum seekers' vulnerability permanent, rather than favouring processes of effective social reintegration.

The structural and organizational conditions of the reception system limit and influence the actions of the reception operators within it. Indeed,

the operators' everyday practices with regard to the migrant can continually oscillate between feelings of human compassion and claims to impose discipline, between piety and social control. The process of labelling asylum seeker as mere "physical living beings" or "civilizing" them, often without conscious reflection, influences the work of the reception operators, depriving the migrant of decision-making autonomy and reducing their subjectivity to a bureaucratic identity to be administered. Sometimes, even the duty to accept the asylum seeker can be declined according to the "logic of concession" within which the "generously hosted" person is asked to reciprocate such benevolence. Thus, such labelling processes can produce re-traumatizing relational dynamics, contributing to the development of aggressive and depressive behaviours or even psychiatric problems in the asylum seeker. In this way, asylum-seekers' vulnerability, produced by pre-migratory traumas or by the difficulties of the "journey", can worsen as a result of the contextual and relational conditions within which they are forced to live after arriving in Italy.

Ultimately, the critical reflection on the Italian reception system conducted in our study highlights numerous crucial issues related to the organizational and structural conditions of the facilities, and with regard to the professional skills of the reception operators. All these factors can turn the reception system into a segregating and institutionalized "closed regime" typical of institutions defined as "total".

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