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**Civil Society Organisations  
and the Local Governance  
of Asylum. Resistances,  
Alignments and Unspoken  
Imbrications**

1. *Introduzione*

Starting in particular from the widespread perception of a 'refugee crisis' in 2015, the issue of the presence of asylum seekers and refugees in Europe has been taking a central place within international and national political agendas, media information, public debates as well as within the scientific domain. The latter has mainly focused on public policies analysing "immigrants' policies" (Campomori 2008, 20) through the study of national reception systems and often underlying some elements of confinement and exclusion as their characteristics or rather investigating "immigration policies" (*ibidem*, 20), through political, geographical and sociological analysis of European borders control devices and logics. More in general, the scientific domain has been more and more interested in the dynamics of de-nationalisation which have been involving the decision-making processes concerning migration and asylum management in Europe. Despite representing an extremely important level of analysis, the focus on institutional policies, though, neither exhausts the subject of asylum seekers and refugees' experience in Europe, nor one of the 'Multi-levelled governance' of their presence. In fact, it is by now widely agreed that the rescaling of State powers towards supra or sub-national public authorities is frequently coupled with the more or less formal and official involvement of private actors within the concrete dynamics of management and inclusion/exclusion of asylum seekers and refugees, especially at the local level, and regarding integration processes. In this sense, some scholars have recently recalled that

“the diversification and plurality of actors contributing to the govern is a very common trend among European cities starting from the 1990s” and that “this multiplicity of actors sometimes supports local public authorities, sometimes it substitutes them” (Andreotti and Les Galès 2019, 21).

Added to the mentioned ‘supportive’ and ‘substitutive’ options, other researchers have also underlined the possibility of a resistant approach among individual and collective private subjects of the civil society that may try to “escape, subvert and criticise forms of rationality and regulatory practices” (Ong 2003, 24) implemented by public authorities.

The identification of ‘supportive’, ‘substitutive’ and ‘resistant’ modalities of action of civil society organisations (CSOs) in relation to public authorities in the field of welfare provision allows to dust off the never-ending question concerning the borders between the different classical spheres of society (the State, the Market and Civil Society) in the light of contemporary societal and political dynamics, applying it to the domain of migration and asylum studies. Indeed, most of the literature about the local governance of migrations refers to the important role of non-state actors, in particular civil society actors approaching the issue from a strict institutional and overtly optimistic conception of it. It only rarely wanders about “the ambiguity of this participation and about the risks for the democratic nature of the system” (Busso and Gargiulo 2016, 119), failing almost completely to account for dimensions of conflict and power that should not be excluded.

In this perspective, the article aims to provide an updated and original contribution to the analysis of the relationships existing between CSOs supporting asylum seekers and refugees among themselves as well as with public authorities in the shape of the institutional organisation of reception and integration services at a local level.

The main argument raised is that CSOs may represent the places where the deficits and top-down dynamics of institutional reception, as well as the structural barriers to inclusion raised by a chaotic and slow bureaucratic machine, may potentially be challenged and counterbalanced. Though, many contradictions and criticalities arise from the attempt of undertaking this role. In particular, CSOs may struggle to find a balance between the attempt to satisfy asylum seekers and refugees’ urgent needs, while simultaneously trying not to align uncritically with state institutions. In this sense, the article argues that CSOs often find themselves in the middle of a ‘civil dilemma’ from which they struggle to exit separately and that un-

dermines at both their capacity to professionally support asylum seekers and refugees' paths of inclusion and their own potentially transformative strength vis-à-vis institutional devices, mechanisms and interpretations. The paper further suggests that CSOs unsystematic networking dynamics complicate their positioning within asylum local governance, whereas structuring them would help them making their service provision more effective as well as developing a collective civil discourse strong enough to incisively advocate for alternative policies and practices. To deepen and support the mentioned arguments, the article is organised as follows: in the first paragraph, the main theoretical premises will be presented, while the second paragraph will be dedicated to the brief explication of methodological choices and the introduction of fieldwork. Subsequently, two empirical paragraphs will detail the main results of the study. The last paragraph will provide the reader with conclusive interpretations and with suggestions for future research perspectives.

## *2. Applying the notion of integration and governance to CSOs engagement with asylum seekers and refugees.*

The notions of civil society, integration and governance are at the core of the theoretical reflections that gave birth to the study presented in this article and have been constantly feeding it. Indeed, the main subjects taken into consideration in my observation and analysis are the collective actors of civil society, their roles within the local reception system and their position within the inclusion/exclusion dynamics of asylum seekers and refugees in terms of integration (or non-integration) into forms of governance.

Hereafter, a brief literature review of the three main concepts above evocated will be provided to inform the reader about the scientific positioning lying at the heart of this work and to provide a shared understanding of the meanings that they will take in this framework.

### **2.1 Integration**

Despite its polysemic and controversial nature, the notion of integration still represents a resourceful instrument to observe and understand the experience of asylum seekers and refugees in a specific western ur-

ban setting, which represents the starting point of the PhD thesis from which this paper generated. The notion is useful not exclusively in terms of their attempts to 'find their place' but also to understand the positioning of different city's actors that deal with their presence and needs within the local scenario of institutional and non-institutional reception. Actually, the concept includes two main versions. The deepening and deconstruction of the 'ethno-cultural version' of integration, since the 1960s the mainly used in the public and institutional debate to describe the insertion process of non-national citizens into national societies, is certainly fundamental when trying to investigate asylum seekers and refugees' reception and inclusion processes. Nonetheless, this will not be the focus of this article. Instead, it is the Durkheimian 'societal integration version' that needs to be bothered to understand if, how and why civil society organisations form an integrated system among themselves and if, how and why they integrate the institutional dynamics of local governance related to asylum seekers and refugees' reception and inclusion. To avoid confusion about the two versions of the concept, from now on whenever the "ethno-cultural" one will be at stake, the concept of integration will be substituted by the one of inclusion, although it shall be mentioned that the two have slightly different meanings.

The issue of CSOs integration into local governance dynamics is quite thorny. Indeed, despite the existence of more than one scientific perspective about civil society, most of them actually agree in advocating for the importance of civil society to defend its autonomy from the State and the market in order to accomplish its role of defining a "third way" between 'the atomization of competitive market society', on one side, and 'a state dominated existence', on the other" (Kumar 1993, 380). At the same time, though, some critical scholars have been trying to deconstruct such consensual conceptions of civil society and to find a balance between the dogma of an absolute autonomy of civil society and opposing arguments about the inevitable domination of state and market powers over it. In this view, Marion Young's perspective is particularly inspiring insofar because while she agrees with the idea that civil society should be considered as a separate sphere from the State and the market, she additionally argues that it does not mean to represent it as a social entity completely independent from them, but to correctly identify its specificities in terms of ways of co-ordinating actions and kinds

of activity (Young 2000). Despite and because of differences in these domains, “each social aspect – state, economy, and civil society”, she states, “can both limit and support the others” (*ibidem*, 156) and this reciprocal limitation and support is what is needed for achieving social justice. Young particularly insists on the relationship between civil society and the State, which, she argues, needs to exist and to be balanced in order to counterweight the ability of “profit- and market-oriented economic processes to impinge on the ability of many people in most societies to develop and exercise capacities” (*ibidem*, 184). The importance given to the existence of a relationship of mutuality between civil society and the State certainly adds relevance to the attempt of investigating and understanding the role of CSOs in terms of relations with State institutions (do they integrate the institutional system of governance?) as well as among themselves (do they represent a comprehensive integrated civil system?) and it allows to introduce and make a bridge with the concept of governance, which cannot be excluded when analysing contemporary modes of governing.

## 2.2 Governance

Since the 1980s, the notion of governance has been playing a major role in both the scientific and political debate concerning the new mechanisms of management of social unrest and assistance. It has widely established itself as the most adequate tool for facing the growing fragmentation and differentiation of social problems. The notion was firstly used in management theory during the 1970s for underlying the need to control and limit corporate managers through the adoption of a “decentralised, non-hierarchical, fluid organisation” as “the model now and for the future” (Eagleton-Pierce 2014, 16). It then rapidly proved to be inspirational and it was appropriated by other domains, including the institutional political world that picked it up to promote the idea of new modes of governing. It involves multilateral actions and the collaboration among different levels and entities of both public and private social spheres for the achievement of a common political, ethical and governmental aim. The whole dynamic of rescaling of power and competences gains clarity if it is replaced into the wider scenario of the evolution and crisis of the Welfare State in Europe during the xx century. Indeed,

starting from the end of the 1970s, “structural changes undermined the functioning of welfare institutions” (Kazepov 2008, 247). The myth of the unconditional trust in the capacity of the State of ensuring the well-being of its entire population, including legally resident foreigners, while adopting an open and encouraging approach in relation with neo-liberal dynamics and globalisation processes, came to terms with important economic difficulties that led in few years to a generalized stagnation (Ranci and Vanoli 1994). Hence, as both a cause and a consequence of the incapacity of national States to autonomously and independently govern their more and more complex societies, external forces have been regaining more and more relevance. It is in this scenario that we witness the trigger of a process of redistribution of the legislative and regulative power that had been until then a prerogative of national governments, including responsibilities and competences concerning asylum seekers and refugees’ reception and inclusion. This dynamic of government reorganisation moved both vertically, towards supra-national (i.e. EU Institutions) and sub-national political and administrative entities (i.e. Regions and Municipalities); and horizontally, with the gaining of importance and power of non-governmental actors and their frequent formal involvement into national Welfare States, which have been progressively transforming into ‘local welfare systems’, conceptualised as “dynamic arrangements in which the specific local socio-economic and cultural conditions give rise to different mixes of formal and informal actors, public or not, involved in the provision of welfare resources” (Andreotti and Mingione 2013, 242).

### 2.3 CSOs integration into governance dynamics

It is important, though, to underline that the existence and intervention of civil society’s collective actors concerning local populations’ social needs and claims isn’t anything new. Admittedly, far from representing merely a marginal complement and/or support to national Welfare activities, the private organisations of civil society have historically anticipated the State, starting from religious institutions and private charities no less than during the 16th century, followed by the first mutual-aid associations born in the early 19th century, which progressively underwent a process of “functional differentiation” (Busso and De Luigi 2019, 271)

giving birth to co-operatives, trade unions and many other specialised organisations (*ibidem*). Hence, what we have been witnessing is more like a redefinition of their role and of their relationship with public institutions, a “renewed interest in something that never really disappeared” (Jessop 1998, 32). And though, the institutionalisation of the participation of CSOs brought about and supported by official governance dynamics is the main worry raised by scholars applying a critical approach to the study of the latter. Indeed, what they strongly warn against is the risk of the “cultural consequences of an integrated system” (Busso and De Luigi 2019, 283) of governance, which, because of the internalisation by civil society actors of “the dominant, more traditional communicative norms of the process” (Gaynor 2011, 499), materialises into the “narrowing of the discursive space and a reduction in the plurality of voices and claims” (Busso and Gargiulo 2019, 283), thus into an inoffensive and aligned civil sphere where everyone “ends up ‘talking the same language’” (*ibidem*). Though, some interesting scientific contributes<sup>1</sup> refer to the reciprocity of civil society-State relationship allowing to assume that while the hegemonic power supporting State structures may find its most fertile ground into civil society, the latter is also capable of challenging it through counter-hegemonic forces<sup>2</sup>. Hence, associational life can actually foster the emergence of “subaltern counter-publics” (Fraser in Young 2000, 171), essential in my view for democratic societies to carry on evolving instead of remaining static and loyal to anachronistic State structures and bureaucratic functioning. And though, Michael Foley and Bob Edwards urge to point to an important question, namely to what extent and how “the formation of ‘habits of the heart’ conducive to cooperation and collective action” enhanced by associational life within civil society may actually translate into “‘macropolitical’ outcomes” (Foley and Edwards 1996, 47), thus concretely playing a role for social change. The issue is not a minor one. Indeed, asking that question, Foley and Edwards suggest that it is not enough for social transformation

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<sup>1</sup> See Chandoke 2001; Young 2000.

<sup>2</sup> As it stands quite clear, I assume a Gramscian perspective about civil society. For deepening the issue and concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony see: Carroll 2010; Ferrarotti 1984; Fontana 2008; Gramsci 2014; McNally and Schwarzmantel 2009; Smith 2010; Ungsuchaval 2016.

that civil organisations provide alternative services, imagine innovative social practices or facilitate the voice of otherwise aphonic individuals or groups, if these actions remain limited to their internal and microsocial universes. In order to decisively act their counter-hegemonic power, civil society organisations must make their discourses inclusive and understandable at a higher level of generalisation in order to make them flow onto the dominant public sphere and to actually influence and transform the hegemonic power of the State. Starting from a scientifically-based personal political positioning about the essential role of civil society for feeding, though constructively, the social conflict – which I consider necessary to social change aiming at social justice – one of the empirical challenges which gave birth to this article has precisely been to observe and understand if CSOs intend, and are able to, resist the co-opting state power and to exercise a subaltern force concerning issues of asylum seekers and refugees' inclusion, reception, rights and dignity. In addition, I was interested in understanding if and how they succeed in catalysing and valuing the mentioned counter-hegemonic power in order to exploit its transformative potential, which, I argue, can only be done by forming an integrated compact system among CSOs. In this sense, I could mobilise a version of the notion of governance different from the above-mentioned widespread institutional and technocratic scientific conceptions of it. Indeed, the idea of “new modes of governance” gives primacy to the private sector and to informal mechanisms of self-regulation and it accounts for “less hierarchical and more network-like structures” (Conzelmann 2008, 1), which is helpful when trying to identify and to understand the networking dynamics at play among CSOs. Finally, the issue of the dual nature of social justice and integration in terms of self-determination and self-development (Young 2000) was particularly relevant as it allowed me to reflect upon if and how CSOs want and are able to give answers to both the aspects, without becoming instruments of the hegemonic power.

I have asked myself: can the concept of governance be actually applied to the action of CSOs concerning asylum seekers and refugees' local reception and integration processes? How? Should CSOs be defined as compliant actors of that governance or rather as “foci of resistance” (Cavaliere 2007, 100) affirming an alternative idea of inclusion? How do they get in relation with one another? What does this lead to?

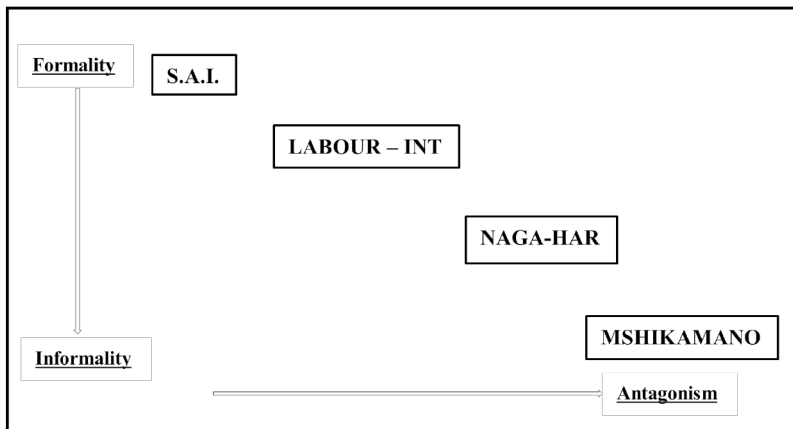


### *3. Methodology and fieldwork*

In order to empirically answer to the above-mentioned research questions, I have chosen to focus on a societal local level rather than a national or international one as by now wide agreement about the local dimension of inclusion processes allowed to echo and make use of the horizontal dimension of the concept of governance, and to investigate inclusion processes as caught within specific 'local welfare systems'. At the same time, I have decided to focus on an urban dimension backed up by those studies that consider cities as being "at the forefront of organising refuge and the arenas where new relationships between the relevant players from the public, private civil society sectors are fought out" (Mayer 2017, 14). Subsequently, I have chosen Milan as a strategic observation point based on an analysis of the positioning of Italy within the European scenario about asylum and, in its turn, of this city within the Italian context of reception. Indeed, although Italy has been representing since some time one the main entry doors of the continent and has been evolving in terms of policies and organisation of reception, according to many scholars, the country still witnesses a chaotic and emergency-based reception system and some integration policies have been talked about as an "implicit model of integration" (Ambrosini 2001), characterised by the inertia of national authorities. In this national framework, the city of Milan has been representing a key node of the internal migratory dynamics of the country, giving rise to an ideal-typical image about the city as a supposed 'Modello Milano' regarding reception and integration. The latter is though often interpreted as due to a better regional economic situation compared to other Italian regions rather than to a virtuous management of reception per se and, more importantly, as supported by the important contribution of a historically dynamic civil society.

Methodologically speaking, I have chosen a comprehensive approach operated through some related qualitative methods, which allowed to gather the subjective perspectives and experiences of those met and solicited. First, for trying to grasp the multiplicity of approaches and practices existing among civil organisations regarding the support to asylum seekers and refugees, I have decided to put ethnography in practice within four different civil sites: the reception service for immigrants of the

Caritas of Milan (SAI), a trade-union project aiming at the professional inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees (Labour-Int), a voluntary association offering to asylum seekers and refugees Italian classes, info desk and socialising activities (Naga-Har) and a mixed-association falling within the category of the ‘social movements’ organisations’ aiming at developing regular residential and professional opportunities through self-management, mutual-aid and collective demonstrations. These CSOs were selected considering the typologies of actors identified by contemporary literature dealing with the civil support to asylum seekers and refugees in Italy and ranging on a hypothetical scale from the most antagonist one to the more compliant with the institutional system and from the most informally organised to the more formally structured.



Observation lasted 1 full year (2018), even if it differed in intensity and duration depending on each studied civil organisation. In fact, the multi-situated nature of my fieldwork has brought with it some issues in gathering data homogeneously. Indeed, I had to constantly negotiate my presence and my legitimacy within the different ethnographic sites and, depending on the moments and people, I was allowed to more or less participate and to develop a direct relationship with the migrants participating in the proposed activities. The depth of the exchanges with people on the field and the level of my active participation in each site have been the result of a co-construction between the subjects of the research and me, empirically confirming that while doing ethnography, the

researcher is “involved in some intersubjective relations that oblige him/her to negotiate roles, places and statuses” (Campigotto *et al.* 2017, 9), where the term negotiation implies a non-full independence regarding its positioning. Observation was enriched by 32 in-depth interviews to asylum seekers and refugees and 11 to civil organisations’ members, which have provided me with additional data.

The complementary use of observation, participation and in-depth interviews has been useful for putting the spotlight on people’s subjective accounts, while paying attention to those dynamics of power and influence which could mask their authentic personal point of view. In this sense, I am urged to underline that the analysis produced on the fieldwork and provided in this article is based on the subjective perspectives and experiences of those met and solicited. For this reason, my theoretical interpretations do not aspire to offer a generalised reading of the issues addressed, but rather to provide insights about the complexity of the processes of societal integration based on a more intimate knowledge of a smaller slice of reality” (Korac 2001, 4) from some specific points of view.

For reasons of anonymity, the names used in the drafting of this work do not correspond to the real names of the asylum seekers and refugees met and interviewed. Civil organisations’ members, instead, will be referred to by using their initials.

#### *4. The civil dilemma: CSOs swinging between resistance and alignment*

Literature concerning the annihilating nature of institutional reception is, by now, very rich. Along its line, fieldwork proved that migrants’ precarious conditions at the arrival in Italy are coupled with and worsen by a procedural and disorganised reception machine and a complex and chaotic bureaucracy. Indeed, the narrations of many interviewees delivered to me the picture of a national reception system often incapable of healing the physical or psychological wounds accumulated through complicated and dangerous migratory paths and or providing the basic conditions for them to recover their health and resources and in order to put them to good use for building a dignified, stable and autonomous future. The fulfilment of reception norms at their minimal stan-

dards, which has proven to be the main functioning of most of reception centres, produces a feeling of not being seen or heard among migrants and concomitantly undermines their chances to enforce their rights and make autonomous decisions, as Salim witnesses through his account:

Three months after commission, I had the result: negative, they didn't accept my request, they are not convinced. What next? "You have to find a lawyer", they (reception social workers) told me. I was confused, I didn't know anyone... They told me not to worry, they would have given a lawyer to me, but... it is something that really hurts me... a lawyer should defend his client, right? A lawyer usually doesn't seat looking his client losing. I really don't understand... mine didn't even understand French... I told them all this, that the lawyer is supposed to listen and to understand what I have to say. Nothing, as always, they just told me that these are the rules, to calm down and to not worry, they told me that the lawyer would have taken care of everything. They kept me out, understand? Telling that I don't have to worry... Tze (Salim, Ivory Coast, September 2018).

The careless, procedural, normative, sometimes repressive, often alienating national reception which interviewees pictured is coupled with a chaotic, slow and aseptic bureaucratic machine that erodes asylum seekers and refugees' social rights as well summarized by the experience of Muneer, who has been recognised as a political refugee, but actually received his permit only 3 years after the decision of the Commission:

I had my first interview in 2011, and the commission answered positively the same year. But Questura gave me my permit in 2013. I went there immediately after having received the answer and they asked me to go back 6 months later because I hadn't the *marca da bollo*<sup>3</sup>. Then I went again, and there were too many people so they postponed by 3 more months, then 4 more months...finally it was almost 3 years. And now I am in it again. My permit has expired, and I have an appointment in 6 months. Meanwhile, I have to squat a friend's place as I cannot work... well, I am working a bit, but it is illegal work (Muneer, Afghanistan, October 2018).

Hence, interviewees' experience of institutional reception has proven to be often characterized by standardised procedures and typified paths,

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<sup>3</sup> Revenue stamp.

without them perceiving any consideration for the specific needs, inclinations and plans of each individual. The latter, beyond making them feel harmless, concretely hinders a sound stabilisation of their life conditions and produces a dangerous difficulty in enforcing those rights to which they are theoretically entitled. Subsequently, asylum seekers and refugees often feel the need to turn to external organisations in search of voice and for filling those holes left by institutions, in order to find some foothold and chances of carrying on with their lives.

Indeed, civil organisations often represent themselves as providers of services and/or opponents that, in any case, aim at offering another kind of relational dimension to asylum seekers and refugees. Nevertheless, no matter how civil organisations struggle for keeping themselves outside the bonds of the institutional system, they finally find themselves navigating into them. Does this automatically mean that they finally integrate the institutional dynamics of governance of reception and integration? Fieldwork allowed to refute such hypothesis. Certainly, public institutions consider and recognize civil organisations as functional pieces of asylum local governance where to address asylum seekers and refugees whenever they cannot – or don't want to – assist them, as witnessed by the direct experience of most interviewees, well represented by the following excerpt:

I was in *Questura*, they kept me one night and then they gave me this paper. But I couldn't read it, so I asked to a man on the street. He told me that the paper said that I had 7 days for leaving Italy autonomously. I was astonished. So, I came back to the *Questura*, and they just add that if I didn't agree with this, I should find a lawyer. I told that I don't know any, but they answered that neither do they. The person in charge told me that I had to go. "But where? I don't know anything here" You give me this paper and then...? What should I do?", I said. "Just find a lawyer", he answered. I was desperate. A policeman told me that I just had to go out and find an association: 'there are so many that want to help immigrants, go ask to them'. This is how I arrived at the Naga (Hachem, Senegal, November 2018).

Indeed, the more manifest type of relational dynamic that I could observe, which links the selected civil organisations with public institutions is one of informal delegation on the part of the latter towards the former. Manifold have been the accounts about it from organisations' members, which complained the frequency with which institutional of-

fices and services orient asylum seekers and refugees towards them, because of their incapability or unwillingness to assist them, as well as the perceived absence of reciprocity in supporting them:

It is frustrating because they rely on us, but then when the request of support is on our part... they never stretch what they can do, or better what they decide that they can do. For example, sometimes it happens that I call the CASC<sup>4</sup>, maybe when I meet a 100% disabled homeless person and I do not have available places at the *Rifugio*<sup>5</sup>, and there it often comes the answer: "sorry, but the '*Emergenza Freddo*'<sup>6</sup> is closed for this year. He has his residency in *Lissone*<sup>7</sup>, send him there". And if I try to push telling that he is too weak to live in the street, they just answer: "Ok, but we cannot take care of him. We take care only of people that have their residency in Milan". It was not like this some years ago, but now, there are so many constraints, so many knots, so many "no, we do not do this" that it is almost useless to try. Finally, we often find ourselves supplying the public service when our objective is precisely to orient people towards such service. If it was up to them, they would address everyone here. But we cannot, it is not fair (Fieldnotes, SAI, March 2018).

However, precisely because of the unidirectionality of the relation and in the absence of an inclusive process of sharing of objectives, tools and roles, the existence of contacts between public institutions and civil organisations in Milan cannot be considered in terms of institutional governance. What I could observe has taken more the shape of a chaotic bouncing of responsibilities characterized by a top-down dynamic of delegation, where civil organisations try not to become the crutch of the system, while securing at the same time the assistance needed to asylum seekers and refugees. Here's where what I have been reflecting about in terms of a 'civil dilemma' starts to take its contours, represented by the seldom win-win choice between the valorisation of civil organisations' counter-hegemonic

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<sup>4</sup> (Centro Aiuto Stazione Centrale): Municipal help centre for the first orientation in Milan of people in need.

<sup>5</sup> "The Shelter": SAI's own dormitory for homeless people.

<sup>6</sup> A Municipal plan that on an annual basis, from the beginning of November till the end of March, organises a number of social interventions and structures (mainly functioning on volunteering) to provide to homeless people some shelter from the winter cold.

<sup>7</sup> Municipality in the suburbs of Milan.

power vis-à-vis institutional policies and practices and/or the concrete and punctual satisfaction of asylum seekers and refugees' contingent needs. Indeed, building my empirical observation on Maurizio Ambrosini's proposition about the '4 Ps' categorisation (Ambrosini 2016) concerning the specific typologies of action carried out by non-institutional intermediaries offering help to asylum seekers and refugees, i.e. Protest, Promotion of networks, Provision of advocacy and Production of services, I could understand that each observed organisation mobilises some nuanced and multi-faceted approaches that challenge widely conveyed social and political representations concerning their motives and ways of acting and that implies the implementation of more than one 'P' at a time.

If on one side, this certainly witnesses a capacity for adaptation and a degree of ideological flexibility that I wouldn't have expected, it also and often confronted organisations with the hard but existential choice between resistance to the institutional system and norms or alignment with them. Indeed, net of ideological orientations specific to each civil organisation and driving their way of relating to public institutions, together with the degree of their legitimation in the eyes of the latter, the observed civil organisations seem to struggle to find a balance and they often find themselves in privileging sometimes one, sometimes the other extremes of the dilemma, caught in a vicious circle according to which the accomplishment of an objective normally corresponds to failing the other.

Furthermore, the ceaseless rhythm of requests for functional and material assistance on the part of asylum seekers and refugees, frequently addressed to them by public institutions themselves, often squashes civil organisations on an immediate operability that demeans the social and political engagement of their actions and provokes at the same time high levels of distress and frustration among organisations' members which risk depersonalizing their intervention and detaching them from asylum seekers and refugees' conditions and requests, as per account of a volunteer of the association Naga-Har:

I am tired, sick of all this serial information one after the other, and always the same. We look like an office. The *sportello*<sup>8</sup> takes away from me the pleasure of

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<sup>8</sup> Naga's help desk concerning asylum procedures and potential troubles with reception centres.

living this place like when it was born, which is how it should be, because even when I take a break and I have some tea I am immediately surrounded by some pleading eyes asking for something, and it's always something linked to procedures or accommodations or whatever. I have this feeling of [she sighs as if she couldn't breathe]...that makes that I have never a quiet moment to enjoy this place and to make sure that they enjoy it too (E.B., Naga-Har, May 2018).

Hence, besides differences among organisations and despite their unanimous insistent claim about the non-willingness to substitute public services and institutional responsibilities, all of them finally end up focusing mainly on producing services to put some temporary patches to institutional holes. This raises what Niamh Gaynor has called “the ‘what’ problem” of associative democracy, which, she argues, often includes “only distributional issues, with all other nonmaterialist issues remaining exempt” (Gaynor 2011, 503). The latter seems to erode organisations’ conflictual energy thus hindering a collective counter-hegemonical discourse about reception and inclusion powerful enough to influence the dominant public sphere and to produce some social change. At the same time, they also seem to usually fail in offering to asylum seekers and refugees some structured long-term solutions for their inclusion as they lack the resources, and sometimes the willingness, to equip themselves with the necessary professional competences and internal organisation, as shown by the following account:

As you know, the main objective of the association is to lobby for the existence and well-functioning of public, but even private, services through which migrants can concretely enforce their rights. We don't want to be those services; we want to make pressure on them. If the Naga was structured in the form of a social cooperative with its own services and its own professionals, this tension towards extinction would have disappeared. I know that many services that we provide here would be better provided by paid professionals, but this would not be the Naga. This is what we are, a volunteer association aiming at disappearing. Then of course, we screw many things up. Obviously this is not your job, you do it one afternoon every week, you don't have so many competences... In addition, while being a profession you would maybe solve a situation in five minutes, we need dilated times to intervene (D.B., Naga-Har, October 2018).

Hence, no matter how civil organisations struggle against this, their daily interaction with different kinds and levels of institutional entities and offi-



cers makes them non-immune from the powerful and subtle action of structural representations, which push them in quite unconsciously reiterating those same relational dynamics that they firmly condemn when it comes to examine the institutional reception machine. Though, they always and however relate to it trying to get some distance. To go even further, it is precisely thanks to the way CSOs represent themselves and their relationship with institutions that they are able to keep an off-setting role and to implement actions, each in their own way and nuances, to contrast, challenge or modify the institutional impact on asylum seekers and refugees' life. In this sense, it is possible to consider CSOs as actors of a complex battleground, refuting the hypothesis of their complete absorption into institutional governance dynamics. Hence, the element of autonomy characterizing conceptually civil society seems to be secured by CSOs' ways of acting. To get started, all the selected civil organisations have wished from the beginning to underline that they consciously and repeatedly chose to stay out of "the market of reception and immigration" (Fieldnotes, January 2018). The crystal-clear and rational choice not to take the place in public institutions and services clashes though, in some cases, with the frequently mentioned eternal dilemma of civil organisations. Indeed, if on one side they wish to keep their position of "historical blamers" (D.B., Naga-Har, October 2018), on the other side the social and humanitarian feelings that feed their action sometimes force civil organisations to soften their political integrity in order to immediately increase asylum seekers and refugees' resources and to concretely improve their conditions. The following excerpt from fieldwork explains this tension quite well:

During the assembly, volunteers discuss the possibility to organise some leafleting moments in front of the CAS<sup>9</sup> to spread the information about the new national directives and the consequent restrictive attitude of the *Questura*. Some of them are against it, as it would mean to replace the municipality, which is responsible for giving information to asylum seekers and refugees hosted within the centres in a clear and prompt way. Some argue that a dose of realism is needed: information often lacks, and asylum seekers and refugees pay the price of it. At the end, they decide to do it, considering it in terms of an action reinforcing asylum seekers and refugees' capacity to self-defend (Fieldnotes, Naga-Har, November 2018).

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<sup>9</sup> Extraordinary Reception Centres.

This episode is particularly interesting as it shows how civil organisations succeed in keeping their claimed position, objectives and ideals untouched by modelling the conceptual representation and the external communication of their action, while not modifying its content. The collective representation and explanation of the reasons for acting justifies in this sense even those interventions that could be otherwise considered as substitutive, collaborative or compliant with institutions, restoring among civil organisations' the intrinsic and deep sense of their engagement.

Hence, the social and political choice lying at the heart of their actions allows civil organisations not to limit themselves to passively work as the crutch of the system, but to imagine alternative paths and solutions that often challenge institutional functioning and norms. For these reasons, I claim that, despite the fact that CSOs do not succeed in representing a concrete and encompassing counter-hegemonic force that balances and opposes the institutional mechanisms of reception and inclusion, they do keep a partisan attitude alive. In this sense, it may be said that they swing between attitudes of alignment with the system and resistance to it.

##### *5. An implicit system of partisan civil governance to be strengthened*

Despite the recognition of CSOs' ability to stem the co-opting power of institutional governance, as I have anticipated, the reflection about the inexistence of a disruptive countercultural collective civil discourse about reception and integration has encouraged me to investigate the relational mechanisms among civil organisations. In this sense, thanks to my transversal observational position, I could remark the traces of what I have called 'an implicit system of civil governance': an off track intricate and lively civil network, where different collective actors, despite their differences and apparent autonomy and isolation, influence each other and act chorally, even if implicitly, to provide exhaustive answers to asylum seekers and refugees' needs. This network, which is activated whenever is needed mainly through personal relationships, word-of-mouth and migrants' movement, is built on an implicit 'shared horizon of meaning', namely, to ensure asylum seekers and refugees with the right to reception, survival, autonomy and recognition beyond and in place of institutional structures.

Once I have decided to include the question of a possible network among civil organisations into my observation, the identification of the most recurring subjects was quite straightforward: CASC, *Saponaro*, *Opera San Francesco*, *Ortles*, *Tricolore*, *Casa della Carità* are just some of the names I could hear daily, while participating into the activities of the four selected organisations. Indeed, their action was frequently characterized by the mobilisation of other external actors through the redirection of asylum seekers and refugees towards them or by activating a direct communication with them on specific cases. It must be said that, although I could discern it thanks to my more or less foreign eye, no explicit reference has ever been made spontaneously about the actual existence of this hypothetical network. Nonetheless, questioned about it, the totality of interviewees confirmed the presence of a reticular pattern that serves as a base for most of their interventions and that allows to give an answer to the largest possible number of asylum seekers and refugees' needs. According to what I have observed and to what was claimed by interviewees, the mentioned reticular pattern seems to function through an ad-hoc activation on concrete cases that the first solicited actor cannot solve alone, as two workers at the SAI have witnessed:

The network exists only if you activate it. I know well who works where and how, I know Milan's available services, so it happens that I say to the person that I am helping: "go there, try to ask them, they could be a resource in your situation". Sometimes, when it is possible, I directly call another service and I try to make a bridge, before sending them there (L.C., SAI, April 2018).

There is some kind of collaboration, but it is not systemic, it works on specific cases. However, in Milan there are many different realities and we often collaborate asking what they can do to help us, or we call saying: "We have this situation that needs legal support, what could you do?" (E.C., SAI, May 2018)

Based on the nature of the request and on their actual possibility of intervention, civil organisations activate dormant relationships in order to provide the best suitable answer to the expressed needs, by supplementing the already provided help or by functioning as substitutes in case of the impossibility of intervening on the part of other knots of the network. This reticular pattern which tacitly supports every single organisation is considered of vital importance in making their action more and more efficient, as per account of a volunteer of the Naga-Har:

It is fundamental that all volunteers understand the importance of external networks, even if only because if we know the networks and realities existing outside, our intervention becomes more efficient. For example, if an asylum seeker arrives to us from Sardinia, and we know that there exists someone that do what we do here, then we can call and try to have more elements to solve the situation. But if we stay closed, if we don't know these networks, it is not possible (Fieldnotes, Naga-Har, September 2018).

This covered network seems though to limit itself to the satisfaction of concrete, basic needs. In fact, many interviewees claimed the lack of a collective cross-cutting reflection and project-design, as witnessed by the responsible of the SAI:

We are talking about a network that is mainly functional to the satisfaction of primary needs, such as accommodation, permits, health. There's no dialogical flow on a cultural level, nor a relation with subjects which are less oriented to the satisfaction of needs, at least speaking of the SAI (Fieldnotes, SAI, May 2018).

He was not alone in confirming my initial intuition about the existence of intense networked relationships among civil organisations, with an underlying lack of a stable structure of collaborations. According to much interviewees' accounts, in fact: "the actors are many, but more and more dispersed, without an overall vision" (L.C., SAI, April 2018). The "lack of common reflective spaces where different subjects doing the same thing on different fronts could talk to each other, communicate and discuss" (M.B., Anolf, April 2018) and "binding elements that may manage and stimulate collective reflections" (P.D., SAI, April 2018) are some of the common issues that were pointed out.

The issue of the dearth of reflective sharing dynamics has central importance as it could hinder that "shared horizon of meaning", identified as one of the fundamental elements for defining a governance scenario. It would thus risk to disclaim the hypothesis of "an implicit system of civil governance". Nonetheless, the observation of my research subjects' daily practices allowed to guess the existence of an unspoken "minimal comprehension about the models for the development and social change of society" (Pallottino 2007, 60), despite the absence of a formal regulative structure ordering and stabilizing civil inter-organisational relations. Indeed, all four organisations agree on the asylum institutional system's deficiencies and distortions and on the constant urgent need

for alternative supportive subjects. At the same time, despite inflected in different nuances, all four have a strong discourse about the importance and richness of intercultural miscegenation and about social justice in term of emancipation of the last of society. Nevertheless, the witnessed lack of a higher level of inter-organisational relations does not stop being a fundamental issue. In fact, if the daily practical work is not coupled with a shared forward-looking reflection, civil organisations risk to flatten themselves on the day-by-day patching of institutional holes, defusing that tension towards social change that characterizes them discursively and that keeps civil society's intrinsic autonomy untouched. On these lines, the chief counsel of the SAI has pointed to the difficulty of the observed civil organisations to actually “express themselves to a more general and indeterminate public” (Young 2000, 170), thus risking representing “only parochial separatist enclaves with little role to play in a process of solving problems that cross groups” (*ibidem*, 172), giving voice to something that preoccupies most of my civil interviewees:

Our biggest weakness is maybe that we are strongly engaged in the individual conditions of our users, maybe giving too much importance sometimes to what we can do in that specific situation. But the solving of a single problem should never be separated from looking for a more general social justice, which can hardly be achieved by simply giving an answer to individual and contingent needs. This is what concerns me the most (E.C., SAI, May 2018).

To be fair, though, since shortly before the beginning of my fieldwork, a blending of different membership areas has been arising. In this view, during an inter-organisational meeting about racism organised in February 2018, an activist of a well-known Milanese self-managed social centre claimed that “Solidarity is the only politics we need today” and that “we need to be able to find the lowest common denominator in order to communicate, even if through different languages, the same message. We need to break down our divisive barriers, because only networking different subjects we can try to deny prejudices and struggle racism” (Fieldnotes, February 2018).

The necessity of making unspoken networks emerge and to give voice and shape to the collective ‘shared horizon of meaning’ that already exists, even if hidden, has thus been recognized as the only way to point to a structural change of asylum seekers and refugees’ conditions in Italy.

Hence, it gives empirical substance to theoretical interpretations suggesting that “there must be a process of interaction and exchange through which diverse sub-publics argue, influence one another, and influence policies and actions of state and economic institutions” (*ibidem*). In this sense, what was quite transversally felt by civil interviewees is the urgency for keeping together the punctual supportive actions on a local and individual basis and the tension towards a more general change of the system, concerning not only asylum, but also other migrant categories and the issue of diversity in Italy more widely. At the same time, though, an explicit trespassing of the sharper borders between subjects pertaining to very different areas has not been mentioned as a real option yet.

We understand thus that to provide social services and to struggle to transform structural injustices and social dynamics at a time is way more complicated than sometimes theorised. As Jessop has stated, “‘invisible hand’ of mutual adaptation” (Jessop 1998, 29) does not seem to be enough to actually give life to an inter-organisation system of civil support and claim concerning asylum. A phase of deliberation or – better – of “integrative bargaining” (Baccaro 2006, 201) is needed. Indeed, in contrast to deliberation, where actors find an agreement “for the same reason” and whose outcome is unanimity and agreement, integrative bargaining “thrives on uncovering differences among the parties and exploiting these differences to create joint value”. Hence, with respect to integrative bargaining “there is no attempt by the parties at cancelling their differences, but an effort to understand them for the purposes of exploring mutually beneficial options” (*ibidem*).

In the case of the studied fieldwork, a network certainly exists and lies on converged collective purposes, but it seems to be largely built thanks to individual actions and personal social capital and not triggered by a collective phase of ‘integrative bargaining’, which is something fundamental to valorise and act a transformative political pressure on institutional practices, policies and interpretations. For this reason, it should be interpreted as ‘implicit system of civil governance’ that is activated for the sole purpose of rendering asylum seekers and refugees’ conditions less precarious by improving and increasing their social and material resources.

## 6. *Conclusions*

In a quite inductive way, the research work on which this article is based has involved a multi-faceted reflection about the relational dynamics at play between CSOs and public institutions, as well as among CSOs themselves, concerning asylum seekers and refugees' reception and inclusion.

On one side, I have understood how for civil organisations to value and exploit their transformative conflictual potential, while providing some concrete assistance to asylum seekers and refugees, is a very complicated task. In this sense, I have shown that many contradictions and criticalities arise from the attempt of undertaking it, giving shape to what I have called 'the civil dilemma', i.e. the seldom win-win choice between the valorisation of their counter-hegemonic power vis-à-vis institutional policies and practices concerning asylum seekers and refugees' reception and integration and/or the concrete and punctual satisfaction of the latter's contingent needs. Indeed, the difficulty of taking a net position on one or the other extreme of the mentioned dilemma produces some distortions that end up undermining both objectives. Actually, the insistent claim about CSOs' unwillingness to substitute public services and institutional responsibilities – coupled with the economic and normative limits of their action – hinders CSOs to equip themselves with the adequate organisational structures and competences needed to relevantly answer to asylum seekers and refugees' concrete demands. At the same time, the attempt of putting some temporary patches to institutional holes ends up weakening civil organisations' conflicting potential, and it counteracts their eventual transformative capacity at the level of society. For sure, what just said is different according to every specific civil organisation. One of the biggest limits of this research work is not having accounted enough for what differentiates the observed organisations, sometimes falling into the error of considering civil society as a homogeneous entity, rather than a heterogeneous, multi-faceted one. Nonetheless, what resulted clear from fieldwork is that the civil dilemma is actually experienced by all of them, in different extents and different reasons.

To this is added the reflection about the network's dynamics among civil organisations that, if structured and made explicit could actually strengthen the counter-hegemonical potential of CSOs allowing their

exit from the mentioned civil dilemma. In this regard, I could guess the existence of what I have called “an implicit system of civil governance”, building on Bob Jessop’s proposal about “heterarchic modes of coordination” (Jessop 2013, 14). Indeed, I was able to recognise the existence of an intricate and lively network among civil organisations, which is activated whenever is needed mainly through personal relationships, word-of-mouth and migrants’ movement and built on an implicit ‘shared horizon of meaning’ – namely to ensure asylum seekers and refugees with the right to reception, survival, autonomy and recognition beyond, alongside and in place of institutional structures – which actually stands among them despite their differences. Nonetheless, Jessop’s mechanisms of “regulated self-regulation” (*ibidem*, 16) have proven not to be actually at work, at least in their ‘regulated’ component. The unspoken and uncoordinated nature of the observed reticular pattern has not yet allowed neither the organisation of an ordered and comprehensive inter-organisational supportive system nor the development of a collective civil discourse strong enough to influence public policies, discourses and practices. In this sense, it often confines civil organisations to be either crutches of a fallacious system or claiming antagonists unable to stimulate the social change.

For these reasons, and in terms of action research, I believe that attempts of stimulating the emergence and consolidation of already existing, though unspoken, imbrication and convergences among different actors of civil society would have beneficial effects both for asylum seekers and refugees’ chances of inclusion and participation and for the well-being of single organisations. Furthermore, although my theoretical propositions about an ‘implicit system of civil governance’ actually flow from a rigorous observation of reality, the inductive nature of these reflections, coupled with the limited time of fieldwork, has not permitted to broaden the analysis to the multiplicity of other civil organisations engaged in supporting asylum seekers and refugees. In this sense, future analysis should be focused on the entire reticular system of civil support, which would provide a wider understanding of informal reception’s potentialities.



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