# Administrative Disappearances
## Undocumented Asylum Seekers and the Italian State

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**Abstract**    By examining the case of Milan, the paper studies the way the Italian state, in the last four years, has been managing homeless asylum seekers and refugees. It focuses on the frictions among different state institutions and the managerial 'cultures' they rely on. As expulsions from the so-called reception system have been raising, the Milanese municipality-run reception centres closed, and a reorganisation of the Immigration Office brought to the shutdown of a department explicitly oriented to asylum and reception. The analysis makes some dilemmas arise. The first one is related to the way policies interact and collide at different levels. As centralisation and decentralisation are constitutive of every process of state formation, in the case presented here it paradoxically brings asylum seekers outside the reception system to disappear as such. The second dilemma lies at the moral core of the state and raises issues of entitlement to receive aid from public and private institutions. As asylum seekers and refugees are perceived as unwelcomed guests by both the central state and the local authorities, institutions consider themselves not responsible for their care.

**Keywords**    Humanitarianism. The state. Homelessness. Milan. Asylum seekers.

**Summary**    1 Introduction: A Death on the Street and the Problem of (In)Visibility. – 2 Looking after Institutions: An Analytical Framework. – 3 Expulsionism as Governmentality. – 4 Disappearing in the Humanitarian Apparatus. – 5 Conclusion: A Couple of Dilemmas.

# 1     Introduction: A Death on the Street and the Problem of (In)Visibility

Nica Tudor was found dead the morning of 5 December 2019, near a metro station at the North-Western fringe of Milan. The so-called *Piano Freddo*, a municipality-driven plan to provide shelter to homeless people during the winter, had been launched only a couple of weeks earlier. It was a student in her way to the university that, around 8 am, called the emergency number 118 to report the presence of the man.[1] Tudor was in his wheelchair, a couple of wool blankets protecting him against the cold. A 64-year-old Romanian citizen, he was well-known by the operators working in the field of extreme marginality as he had a longstanding 'carrier' as a homeless. A few hours before he died, he had turned down the possibility to be hosted in one of the municipal homeless shelters spread all over the urban territory to face the cold season. "The place was available", a young man[2] working for a renowned humanitarian organisation told me. "We could have accompanied him there, but the man said, 'No, I'm not coming, go away'".[3]

Death on the street is always a failure; nevertheless, what I intend to stress here are the consequences of the episode for some asylum seekers sleeping outside. What happened after Tudor's death sheds light to some dimensions related to an ongoing ethnographic research on the relations among the state, humanitarianism, and homeless asylum seekers and refugees.[4]

Immediately after Tudor's body was found, the news spread to all the agencies putting the work of the Department of Social Policy under scrutiny. A famous TV program broadcasted by the private channel *Rete 4* sent its employees to Milan to produce a journalistic report, thus pressing the City Council to react. Some politicians belonging to the right-wing Milanese parties criticized the whole emergency system for homeless people and denounced the conditions of the night shelters, defining them as inadequate for the task and

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[1]  https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2019/12/05/news/milano_freddo_clochard_morto_su_carrozzina_molino_dorino-242627122/.

[2]  Given the delicacy of the topic and the requests of anonymity that I have received, I decided to not mention personal names of interlocutors and associations.

[3]  Interview, Milan, 20 December 2019.

[4]  The paper is mainly based on interviews realised between October 2019 and February 2020 among social workers, educators, and social services coordinators working in the reception system, the caring system for homeless people, and the municipality-led institutions. Besides interviews, other data stems from the visits I realised at homeless shelters in Milan and the 'hotspot' located near the Central Railway station, as well as reports and inquiries on the topic by NGOs and private institutions. The research is part of a broader collaboration as a post-doc fellow in Anthropology with the Polytechnic University of Milan.

sites where micro-crime could prosper.[5] The City Council's response was immediate: on the night between 5 and 6 December, volunteers of humanitarian agencies, in cooperation with the local Police and Amsa,[6] headed to a tunnel running under the Central Rail Station to convince some thirty homeless people to accept the accommodation in a shelter. "The situation in the underpasses was degenerating, it had become a sort of camp with a worryingly low level of hygiene", a humanitarian operator told the journalists. "We also had to remove the mattresses so that they wouldn't come back".[7] Among the people 'rescued' from the street and given a bedroom, many were rejected asylum seekers or applicants for international protection who had not found a place in the local reception system for asylum seekers and refugees.

Why were those latter sleeping outside? Weren't they supposed to be hosted within the reception system? What happened that night is beneficial in delineating a peculiar governmentality directed to managing a growing population of homeless asylum applicants, rejected asylum seekers, and refugees moving and living in the urban territory of Milan.

Because, in my opinion, the topic shows a character of history-in-the-making, I choose to apply a narrative (Tedlock 1991; 2004) and reflexive approach to my fieldwork data. Therefore, and before outlining the structure of my paper, I will position myself with regard to the issue at stake. Between 2017 and 2019, I worked as an educator within the Italian reception system for asylum seekers in an urban area North of Milan. As the time passed, I was confronted with a wave of expulsions issued by the local authorities charged with running the system at the local level. I started wondering where the people who left the centre were going, thinking that, in the following years, a growing population of asylum seekers and refugees would have been forced to find shelter without the help of public and private institutions. When, in September 2019, the social co-operative for which I was working decided to reduce the activities for asylum seekers, I thought that the time had come to make my interest an object of research. The paper is a first attempt to systematise the data collected so far.

This contribution will propose insights on different aspects of the issue at stake. The first is related to the role of the state. I identi-

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fy what I call 'expulsionism', i.e., a set of laws, guidelines, and daily practices that have been endangering the right of the asylum seekers and refugees to obtain or maintain some basic protection measures. As I will explain in section 3, this expulsionist dynamic descends from the central Government to be implemented by the Prefectures and Police headquarters (*Questure*) all over the national territory including Milan.

Secondly, at the local level, the response of the Milanese institutions is based on humanitarianism, i.e., the compassionate work of taking care of the bodies and satisfying the most basic needs: eating, having a disease treated, and not dying on the street. I shall analyse how different levels of the Italian state (that is, different institutions) contribute to transform asylum seekers and refugees leaving the reception system into homeless. Lastly, two final remarks will be outlined over the consequences and the effects of such a complex scenario.

## 2　Looking after Institutions: An Analytical Framework

The fieldwork that I have been carrying out, and which is set out in this contribution, is part of a line of study that looks at the State both as a 'moral' institution and the result of trans-local dynamics and global processes. Didier Fassin (2010, 2013) is perhaps the most prominent exponent in the analysis of the moral role of the State and its ability to define who is worthy of support or punishment; the author also studied how State institutions exercise a mix of compassion and control when addressing the most vulnerable sections of the population.[8] On the other hand, in the last twenty years, anthropology have underlined how the State should be studied as a complex system that, while exercising power over a given territory, is also influenced by transnational dynamics.[9] The outcome of this assumption has been a renovated attention to the state as trans-local, dispersed in the micro-physics of power (Foucault 1977), constantly perpetuated by state officials at the local level, and contested by the communities at the centre of the research.

All those studies, and others focusing on different countries in Africa and elsewhere, remind us that centralisation and decentralisation are core dynamics within state institutions; this is particularly clear in the margins of the state (Puddu 2016). This remark leads us to analyse what lies behind the overt multi-level organisation of the

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[8]　I shall return on this topic in the following sections.

[9]　Ferguson 2007; Ferguson, Gupta 2002; Hansen, Stepputat 2001, 2005; Khron-Hansen, Nustad 2005; Sharma, Gupta 2009; Trouillot 2001.

state. If studying a 'vertical slice' (Nader 1972) of the state apparatus helps us see how policies and governmentalities affect the life of specific populations, and which effects they produce, looking after those institutions will help us understand their very functioning and the work of those charged with implementing public policies. In the case I present here, looking after institutions means not taking for granted the control of migration by the state (Alpes 2013) and shading light on the frictions, conflicts, and different governmentalities that constitute the work of what we call "the state".

On another level of analysis, the concept of 'battleground' proposed by Francesca Campomori and Maurizio Ambrosini (2020) is useful in grasping the complexities of the policies over asylum seekers and refugees. In their article dedicated to the Italian reception system, Campomori and Ambrosini propose an analysis of state institutions that is both vertical and horizontal. As the vertical line of study is capable of showing the lack of coordination among different state levels (particularly visible in the Italian case), the horizontal approach sheds light on the (often) conflictual relations among public and private players involved in reception programs. Although my contribution mentions some criticalities inherent to the 'horizontal' relationship among public and private players, I have decided to privilege here a vertical approach to the topic.

This analytical framework will help to recognise that there is never one and only way of dealing with immigration: different state institutions can have different ways of tackling it. In the case I present here, it is possible to note a collision among state representatives at the local level (the Prefecture and the Police precinct), the local authorities (the city of Milan), and the private organisations running the homeless shelters and the centres for asylum seekers and refugees.

## 3 Expulsionism as Governmentality

Analysing change is always demanding, especially when it comes to how societies define themselves in relation to issues of marginality and human rights. Producing theory on social dynamics when they gain momentum requires the researcher to critically reconsider the scientific literature produced so far; this is the case when we think of how the Italian state responds to requests for protection and asylum.

In the last thirty years, a broad literature on refugees and asylum has focused on the legal basis and the daily practices of aid that take place in different regions of the world. This puts into question the categories of humanitarianism and governmentality: many authors have pointed out that the 'national order of things' tends to create the

image of refugees and asylum seekers as victims and to transform a right (i.e. protection) into a concession given to 'worthy' guests. [10]

From the first works of Liisa Malkki on (see for example Malkki 1996), social scientists have shown how asylum seekers' image has been constructed as ambiguous and suspicious; while they are perceived as victims fleeing their country to have their life saved, people forced to migrate are depicted in the public space as tricksters trying to build a better life at the expenses of the host country. In this sense, Italy is no exception. In the last years, analysts and politicians have increasingly spread discourses in which 'good applicants' (i.e. those fleeing the war) were divided by those who were considered as coming to Italy to exploit the country's wealth. The saying 'We cannot host them all' has become part of the public discourse on forced migration, crosscutting ideologies and political positions.

There is also a historic reason behind those statements. Italy ratified the Geneva Refugee Convention on asylum in 1954, embedding in its Constitution the right to asylum for all those prevented from participating into democratic regimes. Nevertheless, the Italian asylum system implemented strictly the 1951 Refugee Convention, which "protects a substantially smaller category: those with a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group" (Fullerton 2015, 22). From there, as the construction of the European Union ran alongside with the closure of its external borders (Papagianni 2016), an ambiguous image of displaced migrants gave momentum (Colombo 2018). To the Italian public, those not falling under the strict categories of victims of war or persecution have become either a threat to national stability or fraudsters.

This public image has affected the measures for reception. Much of the scholarships has referred to the reception centres as camps (Feldman 2015) where cure and control shape the subjectivities of those who have been placed there (Marchetti 2006; Campesi 2015; Schapendonk 2018) and can ultimately produce social marginality (Cuttitta 2017). Within the reception system, control is exerted to produce docile bodies that will be prone to the labour market (Vailati 2011). As Barbara Pinelli pointed out for the Italian case, moral control and surveillance shape the daily life of the asylum seekers through a mix of assistance, control, and abandonment (Pinelli 2017). In her words, "surveillance and the intent to control is strictly related to the moral and disciplinary project" (Pinelli 2015, 12) implemented by humanitarian agencies and set up by local and national authorities. Accord-

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**10**  Candea and Da Col 2012; Kleinman and Kleinman 1996; Scheper-Hughes 2002; Malkki 1995; Fassin 2005, 2006; Fassin and Rechtman, 2009; Beneduce 2010.

ing to this literature, in those 'permanently temporary zones' (Rahola 2003) time concurs in socialising their guests to waiting, being patient, and avoid contesting the authorities.[11]

I first relied on this literature when I started researching on those asylum seekers and refugees expelled from the reception system. If the rationale of the reception centres was to produce docile migrants capable of entering the labour market and following the normative integration path that had been set up for them, then, I argued, those expelled from the system were the ones whose 'initiation' to the hosting society had failed. Yet, as the research went on, I noticed that expulsions could tell me something different. At least since the end of 2018, expulsion decrees were reaching people who found a regular job and could therefore be considered as having a 'successful' integration path. This made some questions arise: Why were asylum seekers expelled because of their work? If the expulsions did not respond to a logic of control, which governmentality (Foucault 2005) did they implement?

Before attempting an interpretation of this emerging logic, some data about the scale of the phenomenon are necessary. When I started my research in the Fall of 2019, my first aim was to assess the number of people expelled from the local reception system in the last three or four years and compare the data with those referring to the broader national context. I found that it was not possible to gather precise information on the quantity of people sleeping outside, and that for different reasons.

First, Milan has become more and more a place of transit for people moving around the country and an attractive destination for those who entered the reception system in the surrounding provinces. Milan is perceived as having a vital and diversified economy if compared to the national average; people come here to find shelter after spending the summer in the Southern agricultural fields or to find a place in the gig economy as delivery men. Many others pass through the city heading North (at the border between Italy and Switzerland) or west (to Ventimiglia and, from there, France). Besides those people, asylum seekers and refugees formerly living in the surrounding provinces of Monza, Como, Lecco, and Bergamo move to Milan searching for employment opportunities and some hospitality, especially on winter. At the local level, the lack of centralised databases is a longstanding issue (Marras 2008).

Furthermore, there is not a national database counting the asylum seekers and refugees expelled from the reception system, and the

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11  For an analysis on time and control in the refugee system, see also Griffiths 2014.

local Prefectures[12] are not eager to release such information; therefore, experts, researchers, and social workers can rely only on little more than their perception of the phenomenon.

Nevertheless, some enquiries shed light on the phenomenon. A report realised by the Openpolis research centre has estimated that around six hundred thousand undocumented migrants would be living in the Italian territory; over forty thousand of them would be rejected asylum seekers expelled from the reception system during 2019 (Openpolis 2019). According to another study published on the Italian magazine *Altreconomia*, the Italian Prefectures would have released around one hundred thousand expulsion decrees on a national scale in four years. The journalist Duccio Facchini, who has realised the enquiry, states that a mapping among the 106 Prefectures has brought to light about forty thousand expulsions in the years 2016-17; however, since only sixty Prefectures have released their data concerning that span of time, it is likely that, in that period, the expulsions have been at least sixty thousand. For the same reason, the article states that, since only forty-nine Prefectures have released their information concerning the years 2018-19, the twenty thousand expulsions detected over this period could be forty thousand if parameterised on the total number of the Prefecture headquarters. Therefore, as mentioned above, the journalist makes an esteem of at least one hundred thousand people expelled from the reception system in four years (Facchini 2019). Even if it is not correct to assert that the totality of those expelled from the reception system find themselves without shelter, the enquiry of the magazine still depicts a growing social issue.

Expulsions have a legal basis in the Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and the Council, which set the standards for the reception of applicants for international protection on the continent.[13] Article 20 states that "Member States may reduce or, in exceptional and duly justified cases, withdraw material reception conditions". Among those 'exceptional cases' figure: abandoning the place that the local authorities have reserved for the applicant without informing those institutions; not attending the audition at the Territorial Commission for the assessment of international protection; or not submitting an application as soon as reasonably practicable after entering the first EU Member State. Other motivations can lead

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**12**   The prefectures are a peripheral body of the Ministry of Interior that represent the government on the territory of the Province or the metropolitan area. They are directed by a Prefect charged with the general task of ensuring the coordinated exercise of the administrative activity of the peripheral offices of the State, as well as exercising important functions in the field of public order and security, immigration, civil protection, relations with local authorities, social mediation, and the administrative penalty system.

**13**   https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32013L0033.

to a reduction or the complete withdrawal of the material reception conditions, such as violence, disrespect toward the norms of the reception system, or false declarations over one's economic condition. However, the Directive also warned the EU member states against endangering the applicants' access to the health sanitary system and decent living standards.

The way the EU Directive have been applied in Italy tells us something about the interrelations among different levels of power, on the one hand, and the possibility of adjusting the law to the specific situation, on the other. As we will see, as policies 'descend' into the various institutional levels, they mutate; from a set of directives aimed (at least theoretically) at protecting people, they become instruments of control and creation of the 'good' migrant.

The Italian government, then led by the centre-left Democratic Party along with some moderate right-wing parties, transposed the Directive in 2015 through Legislative Decree 142/2015.[14] The Decree did not foresee any possibilities of graduating the measures to withdraw reception, thus providing the Prefectures with a powerful instrument for control and surveillance within the reception system. At first, local state representatives started using the expulsion decree (or the threat of expulsion) as a tool to divide the 'good' asylum seekers, i.e., those who respect the norms, study the Italian language, and perform a certain level of autonomy, from the 'bad' ones. Any behaviour considered as not respectful and deferent to the Italian institutions would end up with the withdrawal of the reception measures.

I define this dynamic with the term 'expulsionism'.[15] The focus on the expulsion of people from well-being, welfare programs, and protection is not new; a well-known systematisation has been proposed by Saskia Sassen in her book *Expulsions* (Sassen 2014). Sassen refers to it as a set of emergent logics linked to processes of augmented complexity in economics, finance, and technology. The brutality of expulsions is a by-product of political economies that contribute to shape a world where economic growth coexists with a sharp deterioration in living conditions at a global scale.

The persistence of expulsions from the Italian reception system can be interpreted considering Sassen's insights; nonetheless, it is also possible to find specifics in the case I present here. What I refer to with the term 'expulsionism' is a set of political decisions, daily practices, and bureaucratic communications oriented to manage a population that is perceived as not deserving state support based

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**14**  https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2015/09/15/15G00158/sg.

**15**  A similar concept, 'expulsionscape', has been used by Pozzi (2019a; 2019b) in his survey on evictions in Milan.

on specific 'models' (in Geertzian terms) of society. Even though the logic did not change drastically, the drivers of its implementation have been changing in the last four to five years. A shift has been occurring in the actions that the Italian state implements when dealing with asylum seekers and refugees: a shift from a governmentality based on conduct control to one mostly oriented towards economic control.

As, at first, expulsions were mainly motivated by the guests' behaviour, in the last two years the reason has generally been different. I argue that a 'cultural' switch occurred in the way the central Government (and especially the Ministry of internal affairs, in charge of the asylum apparatus) see the issue. As Renato Ibrido and Andrea Terlizzi (2019) rightly claim, the Italian reception system is affected by fragmentation on both the legislative and the governance levels, which gives space for the central Government to manage migration policies based on specific perceptions of the phenomenon.

Just to briefly outline the change, I argue that, during the period when Marco Minniti was the Minister of Interior between December 2016 and June 2018, the withdrawal of the reception measures was mainly motivated by 'misbehaviour' and disrespect of the norms. That depended on the fact that the Minister interpreted the arrival and the presence of asylum seekers as a matter of internal stability. 'Control' was the keyword of a political action that, in his words, had succeeded in 'avoiding a democratic emergency'.[16] I directly experienced this governmentality between 2017 and 2018; at that time, I was working for a social cooperative engaged in the Italian reception system.

When Matteo Salvini took his place as Minister of Interior in June-July 2018, a different rhetoric gave momentum and became hegemonic. Along with other politicians, his political party Lega Nord stressed the idea that a crowd navigating the Mediterranean Sea or crossing on foot the Italian North-Eastern border was 'invading' the country in search of economic opportunities; among those people, according to Salvini, only a minority was composed of 'real refugees', defined as people fleeing the war. As asylum seekers were perceived as coming to Italy 'on vacation', the NGOs and social co-ops charged of taking care of them were accused of participating to a 'business' at the expenses of the state. The political consequence of this rhetoric is Law Decree 113/2018.[17]

The legislative decree revoked the so-called humanitarian protection, a form of legal status granted to those whose experience does not fit with the categories of political asylum enlisted in the 1951 Geneva

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**16** https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2017/08/29/news/minniti_sui_migran-ti_ho_temuto_per_la_tenuta_democratica_paese_–174164861/.

**17** Law Decree, 04/10/2018 no. 113, G.U. 03/12/2018.

Convention. A reduction of the powers of the SPRAR system (the protection system for asylum seekers and refugees), which saw its functions reduced,[18] and a draconian cut in public funds also endangered the work of the organisations and public institutions working in the field. The most immediate consequences of this political shift are two. First, those who had obtained the so-called humanitarian protection were not only impeded to enter the SPRAR, but also expelled from the reception centres in which they had been living. Secondly, the asylum apparatus was severely underfunded and growing numbers of expulsion decrees were mostly issued after checking the working position of the guests.

I found qualitative data that validated my hypothesis at the beginning of February 2020, as I met an educator working in the Milanese reception system. She had been working in a massive building opened in 2016 to host up to three hundred asylum seekers. Until the end of 2018, the Municipality had been directly running the building along with a few others in the city. The municipal management, independent of Prefecture control, implemented a smooth control protocol for the guest supervision.

Things differed when the centre passed under the direct responsibility of the local Prefecture. The woman told me that, after the end of the municipal management, "rules changed and became very strict, especially since the Salvini Decree passed".[19] The Prefecture asked the social co-op running the centre for the guests list and cross-checked it with the local Revenue Agency. Those who were employed, had been earning a salary higher than the social allowance (458 euros per month) and exceeded the minimum annual income of about 7,000 euros, were considered as no longer entitled to receive assistance from the state. People started leaving the centre. "In a few weeks, we have seen the numbers dropping from three hundred and twenty guests into two hundred and nine" she told me. "I think that, in a couple of days, there will be two hundred and six people. They leave [the centre] every day".[20] She confessed me the fear that, if things would go on like this, the guests would have been less than two hundred by the end of February.

I asked her if the expulsions were issued only for those who signed a permanent work contract. "No, it depends on the income" she re-

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18  When I began the research, in 2018, the security decree then converted into law (no. 77/2019) was in force, which had modified the requirements for access in second reception, reserving it only for protection holders, minors, and vulnerable persons (SIPRO-IMI). Subsequently, in the Fall of 2020, the security decrees (I and II) were modified by the entry into force of the new law (no. 173/2020) which re-established the criteria for entry into second reception and changed the denomination from SIPROIMI to SAI, *Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione* (Reception and Integration System).

19  Interview, Milan, 6 February 2020.

20  Interview, Milan, 6 February 2020.

plied. "They[21] sent us the names of the people who, in 2019, exceeded the salary cap of 458 euros per month for a certain amount of time, then they asked the guys to send work contracts and paychecks".[22] In case it turned out that some had been receiving a salary exceeding the national social income, plainclothes policemen sent by the *Questura* notified the withdrawal of the reception measures directly to the facility hosting the asylum seekers. The effect is immediate. The managers of the centre generally give the guests three days to pack their bags and leave. Left alone with a few hundred euros in a city where the average rent for a small apartment is 1,000 euros per month, and where Italian citizens generally do not rent rooms to migrants, these people end up asking the homeless shelters for help.

The dynamic inaugurated under Minister Salvini has not changed even when Luciana Lamorgese, formerly the Prefect of Milan, has been chosen as the new Minister of internal affairs after the political crisis that hit the central Government in the summer of 2019.[23] This dynamic is not typical only of the city of Milan, even if it has some peculiarities here; since it has been detected in the surrounding provinces, I can argue that a new logic, based on a political economy of fund shortages, has been siding an already effective governmentality oriented to create docile migrants.

The political nature of the expulsions from the reception system are more evident right now, after the COVID-19 pandemic that hit violently the Northern Italian regions, especially Lombardy. An episode sheds light on their trans-local dimensions. At the beginning of the Fall 2020, I met in Monza a former coworker of the times when I was engaged into the reception system. She told that, during the lockdown occurred in the spring of the same year, expulsions had been suspended. Yet, "as the lockdown was over, they [The Prefecture] have made the pending expulsions operational" she said. Before leaving after having lunch together, the woman told me she had an appointment at the City Council to assist a woman who had been granted international protection and was about to enter the SPRAR/SIPROIMI system. "She's a good girl, polite, and hard worker. She has become proficient in Italian language. You know, she has a job but during the lockdown she has lived on her layoff. She was lucky: in case she had a paid job, the [SPRAR/SIPROIMI] system wouldn't have accepted her query".[24]

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**21**   The chief of the Immigration Office at the Prefecture headquarters.

**22**   Interview, Milan, 6 February 2020.

**23**   Law Decree 113/2018 has been slightly changed by the current Minister of Internal affairs Luciana Lamorgese. https://www.internazionale.it/notizie/annalisa-camilli/2020/10/06/modifiche-decreti-sicurezza-salvini.

**24**   Field notes, Monza, 24 September 2020.

## 4 Disappearing in the Humanitarian Apparatus

The CASC, a help centre located not far from the Railway Central Station in Milan, is a three-room space on the ground floor of a former warehouse built under the railroad bridge. People can easily reach it from the railway station in a twenty-minute walk. Before opening under the bridge, the CASC was located on the other side of the tracks, closer to the station, and served as an emergency shelter and info point during the so-called *Emergenza Siria* (Syria Emergency) that exploded in 2013 (see Denaro 2016). Two years after the war erupted, the first Syrian asylum seekers came to Italy; as the weeks passed, the small groups and families turned into a crowd composed by thousands of people. Many reached Milan heading to the Central Station. The presence of a growing population made it necessary to set up a space where it could be temporarily hosted and receive the first information on asylum procedures and the Italian reception system. The city council led and funded the service, even though its actual management had been assigned, after a public call for participation, to a massive and well-known humanitarian foundation.

About two years ago, the service the CASC was supposed to provide was redesigned to tackle issues of extreme marginality. Two new social co-operatives took the place of the former one and brought in different specialists: educators working in the so-called 'filter', a room where those in need can submit their request, and social workers charged with designing and ensuring the follow-up of individualised interventions aiming to help the applicants in domains such as housing, access to psychological or psychiatric services, or school-to-work programs.

I visited the centre for the first time in October 2019 looking for information about the upcoming *Piano Freddo*. I was not aware of the changes occurred at the service; I expected to find cots lying on the floor, and the sight of a completely different situation surprised me. "The working space belongs to the city", a head of service told me. "There is such a complex organisation chart here".[25] The head of service briefly described the structure of the CASC. The two teams worked jointly but referred to different coordinators, one for the educators and the second for the social workers. Besides them, a social worker directly sent there by the city was charged with working as a transmission hinge between the service and the municipality; a fourth coordinator, hired by the city council, had started working there only a few days earlier.

After the reorganisation imposed by the Department of Social Policy, the CASC has found itself at the core of a complex and po-

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25 Interview, Milan, 10 October 2019.

rous network of state agencies operating at the district level.[26] Some three hundred beds are available in homeless shelters open all year-round. The aim of the operators at the CASC is that of creating a contact between the applicant and the district where s/he lives, collecting information about the person, and, eventually, designing an individualised social intervention tailored to the needs of the applicant.

However, the chances homeless asylum seekers and refugees have to receive a long-term help from the CASC and the local institutions are extremely limited. "Yes, we also deal with asylum seekers", the head of service told me during the interview. "Mostly, it is about people who have been sent back to Italy in accordance with [the] Dublin [Regulation]".[27] The problem, the man told me, is represented by those undocumented who seek help at the centre. "If they lack [residency] papers, there is nothing we can do. Theoretically, one has some rights, but how can one access the service without documents? The only reference is the police headquarters".[28]

Documents are maybe the biggest issue when it comes to homeless asylum seekers and refugees. As already stated, Milan is destination for hundreds of people leaving the reception system, whose administrative position differs greatly. Undocumented asylum seekers are part of that larger crowd. The chances of being enrolled in one of the programs implemented by the Department of Social Policy strictly depend on the type of documents one has and the peculiar rules the city council adopted.

Usual residence is a prerequisite for being enrolled in social programs. Under Italian law, residence is defined as the place where a person has his or her normal home. That address on identity documents is the essential prerequisite for exercising fundamental political, social, and civil rights. Access to schools, kindergartens, or local health services is linked to it. However, homeless cannot prove they have a usual residence, since they live in places that cannot be recognised as such. In order to partly overcome these problems and guarantee equal rights to all citizens, the so-called fictitious (or virtual) residence has been active in Italy for years. That is essentially a residence address which does not correspond to the actual place of residence; still, it allows people living in a precarious housing situation to access the services in a given territory. Four urban dis-

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26   Milan is structured into what have been called Municipi, urban districts composed by one or more neighborhoods each served by sanitary, social, and educational institutions. The presidents of the Municipi are elected.

27   Interview, Milan, 10 October 2019. For a critical analysis of the Dublin Regulation, see Brekke, Brochmann 2015; Bugge 2019.

28   Interview, Milan, 10 October 2019.

tricts in Milan implemented the service, which, however, is hard to access for homeless asylum seekers and refugees.

When I was trying to understand the functioning of the institute of fictious residence in Milan, I found the existence of a principle of rootedness being a prerequisite to access the registry office (Gargiulo 2019). The municipality-led social programs addressed to homeless people (such as the Housing First program)[29] require the applicants to document the existence of a continuous relationship (i.e., at least six months) with the territory in terms of interests, relationships, and affects through a report redacted by the institution looking after the potential recipient of the benefit (generally, social workers at the CASC).[30] However, only those with long-term residency papers can start such a continuous relationship with an institution. If we look at the population this paper describes, it means that refugees and people who received international or national protection are included, while those still waiting to know if their application will be accepted are excluded.

The consequence of this situation is that the only social program that everybody, almost theoretically, can access is the *Piano Freddo*. That, the head of service at the CASC told me, is the 'great divide' that places different activities into specific periods of the year: whilst the dynamics presented above take place during the warm season, the *Piano Freddo* usually lasts from November through March. The latter is open to all the homeless population on the Milanese territory, including undocumented asylum seekers. "This is what we do during the winter", the head of service told me. "From now to March, from an administrative point of view it's all about emergency".[31]

People can activate a contact with the CASC in two ways. The first option is going directly to the centre asking for help; there, an educator will interview the applicants, schedule a medical visit, and reserve a place for a week in a transitory and less-than-formal 'night shelter' located under the Railway Central Station. After the medical exams, a bed within the emergency housing system operating during the winter will be available. Nevertheless, people can be inserted in the list even when they are found sleeping on the street or when a citizens report a case at the emergency phone number opened by the city council: in that case, an emergency procedure will allow the homeless to find a place for the night. The following day, there

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**29**  Differently than other, more 'scalar' approaches, the Housing First program is intended to help homeless people by providing them with an accommodation in a flat (usually a public property). There are no deadlines, and the person included into the program is 'shadowed' by a social worker.

**30**  For an analysis of the problem of residence and the consequences for homeless, see Gargiulo 2019.

**31**  Interview, Milan, 10 October 2019.

will be the interview at the CASC. Those cases are considered as predominant over the others. After obtaining a place, the applicants are asked to sign a code of conduct that, if not respected, will end up in losing the right to reside there.

As I proceeded in the research, I started thinking of Didier Fassin's (2010) definition of humanitarianism. According to him, the concept indicates a mixture of care, cure, and control. The specific set of humanitarian practices enabled by the city of Milan does not seem to fit this definition. In Milan, humanitarianism seems more based on care, cleaning, and concealment. The preoccupation of the local authorities seems that of 'cleaning' urban spaces from homeless, especially when the phenotype of the people found on the street is clearly non-white; an example is the police putting concrete barriers in places where homeless people (among whom, undocumented migrants) sleep at night. Furthermore, what happens next is that those people are put in half-hidden rooms with few indications for those arriving from the street, such as the metro station under the Central Railway Station. As a young man working for a humanitarian organisation, who was present the night of 5 December 2019 told me, "these initiatives clearly respond to a need of making those people not visible anymore". According to his experience, the places for the warming centres were chosen with the intent to hide people 'in plain sight'. "They are there, but hidden" he told me. [32] On the contrary, as many interviewees told me, police do not control identity documents on the streets. When outside of the boundaries of reception, and despite the will of the operators, people simply disappear and face great difficulties in accessing the reception system.

It is the case of a young man from Pakistan I meet in one homeless. The man was among the people removed from the street on the night between 5 and 6 December 2019. After entering Italy at the North-Eastern border after spending over a year walking through the Balkans, he was given a train ticket and some information about the protection system in Milan, where he arrived on mid-August 2019. Without any reference, he slept outside for months until December. When he found a place in the shelter, he had not submitted any asylum application yet. An educator working in the centre, who is also active in a reception centre for asylum seekers in Milan, took care of the case and drove the man at the Police headquarters. For some reason, the Police accepted the submission but refused to forward the file to the Prefecture. Since the man had come to Italy by land instead of crossing the Mediterranean Sea, she had found out, there were no chances for him to be sent to a reception centre. I met the woman just a few days after the trip to the *Questura*.

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[32]  Interview, Milan, 20 December 2019.

Her working experience in two different services had gave her a particular stance toward the functioning of the social services for asylum seekers. She did not understand why applicants for international protection or refugees would stay in a warming centre. "The problem" she told me, "is that now there are people here who don't even have the C3[33] or have just received it, while in the seven apartments where I've been working there are four available places".[34] The woman felt like she was actually carrying out the work of a reception centre and wondered whether that was the task of the shelter. Things had changed around August 2018, she told me. Previously, an agreement among *Questura*, Prefecture and the city council permitted those entering Italy on the ground to contact the CASC, which produced a document that the Police headquarters relied on to formalise the request for protection. The Prefecture would then evaluate the person's inclusion in a reception centre. The process had been working for a while until the Prefecture stopped it.[35]

In fact, the years between 2017 and 2019 are the time span for a major change in the organisation of the Milanese social services, especially those dedicated to asylum. As we have seen, a first change is the passage of the city-led reception centres for asylum seekers under the responsibility of the local Prefecture; a second change is represented by the end of the agreement regulating the administrative condition of those asylum seekers entering Italy by land. A third, major event is the reorganisation of the Immigration Office and the new tasks the CASC has received. I talk about that with a social worker, hired by the city, who has been strictly cooperating with the CASC.

She started working for the Immigration Office in the 1990s, in a time when there were no desks explicitly dedicated to asylum. At the beginning of 2000s, local wars and political crisis erupted in Europe and Eastern Africa. People from Somalia, Albania, former Yugoslavia and other countries fled to Italy by the thousands. The pressure on the Immigration Office in Milan led to the creation of two specific desks, one dedicated to asylum and the second open to 'economic' migrants. Back then, the Italian reception system was not operating the way is does nowadays (Van Aken 2008). Therefore, the shortest way to seek protection was directly addressing the head of *Questura*; that was made possible by the Legislative Decree 286/98, which, on Article 18, sets up the measures for what had been called 'special

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**33** C3 is the document the applicants receive after submitting their asylum application at the Police precincts.

**34** Interview, Milan, 16 December 2020.

**35** Interview, Milan, 16 December 2020.

protection'.[36] "Milan issued hundreds of residency papers for special protection" she tells me. "We used to prepare a report and submit it to the *Questura*, which granted the protection".

In 2017, the functions the two desks had been performing were centralised in a newly unified Immigration Office. The idea was that, once granted protection, the former asylum seekers would become long-term residents with the same issues as those whose migration path was rooted in economic reasons. However, the new organisation did not last for long. During 2019, the Immigration Office was newly reorganised according to three main functions. One desk was charged with managing the SPRAR/SIPROIMI system over the urban territory, the second one was dedicated to family reunions and voluntary repatriation programs, and the third one, run by the CASC, started focusing on extreme marginality and the emergency.

Why this decision? "In my opinion, that is a consequence of the Salvini Decree" one of the heads of service at the CASC told me. "You know, the Decree has made it useless to work with the asylum seekers on the long run, because the great majority among them will become irregular".[37] The new SPRAR/SIPROIMI desk, according to the man, would operate exclusively within the boundaries of the reception system. Therefore, the only institution a homeless asylum seeker or refugee can address is the CASC, with all the problems this solution brings with it. As we have seen, its activities depend on seasonality and offer different services in different periods of the year. While, during the warm season, it provides medium- and long-term inclusion programs directed to European citizens and those entitled with international protection, the centre offers shelter during the winter. As a result, since the operators at the CASC, when working for the *Piano Freddo*, deal with homelessness, asylum seekers and refuges approaching the centre cease to be as such to simply become homeless. This emerged clearly during a workshop I directed at the CASC on early February 2020. After explaining the first research data, I tried to understand whether there were any peculiarities in receiving a query from a man or a woman leaving the reception system. "We just simply treat them as homeless" one operator responded.[38]

I think that here lies a paradox in the way authorities in Milan tackle the issue of homeless asylum seekers and refugees. The decision of keeping the *Piano Freddo* open to anybody seems a reaction to the expulsionist logic inaugurated by the central government in the last two-to-three years; nevertheless, given the current legal and political framework and the choice of the city to shut down the asylum

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36  https://www.camera.it/parlam/leggi/deleghe/98286dl.htm.

37  Interview, Milan, 13 October 2019.

38  Field notes, Milan, 5 February 2020.

desk and other services for asylum seekers and refugees, this happens at the price of a homelessisation of the people who have left the reception system. Those latter disappear as applicants for protection or refugees to resurface as people without shelter; in this sense, the humanitarian response the city council has been implementing ('no one must die on the street') contributes to the dismantling of asylum as an individual right that includes measures aimed to give people some material protection. That humanitarianism can endanger and even erode the refugee protection is not new to social scientists; in this sense, its coexistence with a set of practices which violate its essence would be a feature of the Global North after the fall of the Berlin wall (Chimni 2000). What is striking here, if we look at the way local and central authorities deal with asylum seekers in Milan, is that the economic-humanitarian apparatus I described is, paraphrasing Alessio D'Angelo (2019), a homelessness factory.

## 5    Conclusion: A Couple of Dilemmas

The data presented in this contribution are preliminary to a broader research; nevertheless, I argue, the effort to "look after institutions" helps highlight two central dilemmas related to the way the Italian state deals with immigration and undocumentedness.

The first dilemma is about the complex intertwining of top-down decisions, policies promoted by different players, and local practices. As we have seen, all those initiatives may appear consistent (if we look at the central government) or contradictory (if we focus on the local level). Both assumptions contain some truth. As we have seen, it is possible to recognise a set of indication and directives that connect supra-national institutions with the work of those engaged in its implementation; at the same time, a closer look at the Milanese city council makes it clear that professionals and workers try to cope with a situation that is not always easy to understand. Furthermore, the "frictious" relationship among levels of government makes room for professionals and state representatives to act with a certain degree of autonomy while, at the same time, they are required to strictly follow rules and procedures. This leads to a situation where a city council can challenge state instructions with the idea of helping people, but with the paradoxical result of enhancing those indications they are intended to fight back.

The second dilemma is closely linked to the moral issue of the unequal condition of people's life (Fassin 2017) and the state's evaluation of a life worth saving. At the foundations of this dilemma lays an economic issue: Who is in charge of dealing with the population living outside the reception system? Who is responsible for funding the social programs dedicated to the protection of those people? On

the one hand, the central government has been stepping back from its tasks through a policy of control and expulsions aiming to cut the ministerial funds. On the other hand, the withdrawal of the central government means neither a privatisation of the service (Hibou 2004) nor a way to 'reject into death' (Mbembe 2003), since the people excluded from the reception system are reluctantly taken over by the services of the Milanese municipality (which is, therefore, forced to use the municipal funds). This happens in the very moment when the Department of Social Policy has been reducing the services for asylum seekers and refugees. The city's reluctance has been clearly expressed by the social worker the city council had sent at the CASC. After my workshop at the centre in early February 2020, she approached me with an expression of disappointment on her face. "You must understand" she told me "that the management of those people does not pertain to us. Asylum seekers are a matter of the Prefecture, they should deal with that!".[39] Once again, the effect of this friction among different state institutions is the process by which those leaving the reception system can find a little help only when 'framed' as homeless, thus transforming the material and legal protection in a scarce resource that people have to fight for.

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**39** Field notes, Milan, 5 February 2020.

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