Resisting social death with dignity. The strategy of re-escaping among young asylum-seekers in the wake of Sweden’s sharpened asylum laws

Möta social död med värdighet: Fortsatt flykt som motståndsstrategi för asylsökande ungdomar i kölvattnet av Sveriges skärpta asyllagar

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ABSTRACT
This article examines experiences of ‘social death’, and the strategy of ‘re-escaping’, following sharpened Swedish asylum laws and practice. The arguments stem from ethnographic research with people who arrived in Sweden as ‘unaccompanied minors’ between 2014 and 2016. The participants have experienced step-by-step rejection processes from both the Migration Agency and social services, resulting in homelessness, pennilessness and a dependency on civil society goodwill. Some research participants remain in Sweden while others have re-escaped searching for asylum elsewhere in Europe.

It is argued that the treatment from the Swedish Migration Agency and the social services has contributed to situating these young asylum-seekers in a position of ‘social death’, a condition lacking hope and opportunities for agency where they are not treated as fully human or grievable. The aim is to analyse their experiences of social and legal ostracism in Sweden and the act of ‘re-escaping’ to other countries as a strategy not only to gain asylum, but also belongingness, self-control and dignity. While such handling of oppression may boost dignity and self-control, it may also lead to prolonged insecurity where individuals risk becoming permanent refugees stuck in precariousness within European borders.

KEYWORDS
Unaccompanied minors; re-ageing; re-escaping; social death; hope

NYCKELORD
ensamkommande ungdomar; åldersuppskrivning; fortsatt flykt; social död; värdighet; hopp

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position of ‘social död’, ett tidrum som berövats hopp och handlingsmöjligheter, där de behandlas av myndigheter som inte fullt mänskliga eller sörjbara. Syftet är att analysera deras erfarenheter av social och juridisk uteslutning i Sverige och självhållande handlingen att ‘fly’ till andra länder som en strategi inte bara för att undvika deportation och få asyl, utan också för att nå tillhörighet, självkontroll och värdighet. Även om fortsatt flykt kan öka känslan av värdighet och självkontroll, kan den också leda till långvarig osäkerhet där individer riskerar att bli permanenta flyktingar som fastnar i utsatthet och förtryck inom Europas gränser.

Introduction

In 2015, Swedish politicians from right to left began to refer to the asylum situation as a ‘system collapse’ (e.g. Strömbäck, 2017) marking a radical change in political rhetoric and the beginning of a temporary asylum law that nearly eliminated opportunities for permanent residency and family reunification. Border closures, internal border controls, medical age assessments, and expansion of detention centres have since characterised the Swedish asylum scene (e.g. The Swedish Government, 2016; The Swedish Police, 2018). While marking a tangible shift in politics, the growing mistrust and discredit of refugees and asylum seekers in Sweden did not come as a surprise. Researchers speak about a step-by-step criminalisation of refugees, constructing asylum-seekers as threats, and consequently as illegal and deportable, legitimising an increasingly harsh treatment of them by Swedish authorities that began long before the increase of refugees in 2015 (e.g. Barker, 2018; Djampour, 2018; Khosravi, 2010, 2016).

Under-aged boys and girls, so-called unaccompanied minors arriving without parents or other legal guardians, have been the centre of attention, and the boys, constituting the majority, have received ample negative coverage, both in traditional and social media (Djampour, 2018; Herz, 2018). Of 163,000 asylum applicants the year 2015, approximately 35,000 arrived and registered as unaccompanied minors (Migrationsverket, 2018). A majority were Afghan citizens. Three years later, in 2018, Sweden became one of the least generous among affluent states in Europe for asylum-seekers from Afghanistan, granting residency to only 30 per cent of the applicants according to the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE, 2018). These circumstances have forced thousands of youngsters into a precarious time-space of rejections, lack of financial support and reliable accommodation.

Urgent research questions arise related to how these young people caught in a plethora of unfavourable circumstances handle their situation and how social services have contributed to their precarious state. This article is based on findings from research analysing these young refugees’ coping- and resistance strategies in relation to the Swedish authorities’ handling of asylum cases, political debate and racist rhetoric. The focus here is on one such strategy, conceptualised as ‘re-escaping’, a choice with both negative and positive consequences. The term re-escaping or continued escape relates to the mind-set of those asylum-seeking youngsters who yet again cross borders of Europe’s nation-states searching for a new place to seek asylum. In doing so, they escape both the dire conditions of the rejection-permeated waiting in Sweden and the threat of being deported to the country from which they or their parents once fled.

Theoretically, the paper draws inspiration from the concept ‘social death’ (Cacho, 2012; Vigh, 2006) when describing the participants’ position in the Swedish margins, a segregated time-space where they must wait while having become ‘dehumanised’ and ‘un-grievable’ (Butler, 2009) by Swedish authorities and racist discourse. The concept encompasses the condition where some young asylum-seekers have become devalued, in a ‘right-less’ position where authorities, including the social services, ignore, exclude and take away their opportunities for interaction, self-protection and self-control leaving them with severely restricted possibilities to master their situation.
The participants represent a group of youngsters who have fallen between the cracks in the Swedish asylum and welfare system finding themselves homeless, without money and support, with limited opportunities for self-care and for voicing their perspectives and needs. Much research attention has been paid to the situation for unaccompanied in Sweden (for overviews see Brunnberg, Borg, & Fridström, 2011; Djampour, 2018; Söderqvist, 2017). However, with a few exceptions (e.g. Khosravi, 2016), less has been written about the group of youngsters who have not received permission to stay, who wait following a chain of rejection processes, hide, or escape once again to avoid deportation.

It will be argued that in the precarious time-space just described, hope, as both a social and individual ‘anticipation of the “not yet”’ (Bloch, 1986/1995; Kleist & Thorsen, 2017, p. 1) and a chance that something desirable will eventually come to those who persevere (e.g. Stockdale, 2019), risks becoming worn out and exhausted. In this time-space of (near) hopelessness, many negotiate between endless waiting and continuous escaping from Sweden and some actually do embark on a search for asylum and a new chance to a life with increased self-control and dignity.

This paper addresses an urgent need to account for the experiences of young people who have been profoundly excluded and marginalised from Swedish society, following rejections from both migration authorities and social services. Based upon the theoretical framework accounting for the connection between social death, agency, and hope, the aim of this article to call attention to their experiences of structural constraints at the hands of Swedish authorities, such as the Migration Agency and social services, and their efforts to resist constraints by re-escaping from Sweden to other European countries. The act of re-escaping is then analysed not just as a way to avoid deportation but also as a move towards self-control, hope and dignity. The insights are essential to social work as they identify the participation of the Swedish social service in creating the precarious lives of these young people and challenge the image of social work as professional work based on fundamental human rights.

Arguments are based on ethnographic research among asylum seekers who have lost all or nearly all societal and legal support in Sweden during waiting periods that have lasted for three years or more. Some of them have ended up homeless in the streets of Swedish towns, Rome and Paris. Others have found temporary accommodation. The focus in this article is on their experiences related to the Swedish context of social death that they are either still in or that they have left behind and on their search for hope and dignity in Europe following their Swedish experience. Focus is not on the actual structural constraints in Rome or elsewhere but on how being there is experienced by youngsters who fled from Sweden.

The Swedish context – temporary laws, re-ageing and rejections

In 2016, the new temporary ‘law (2016:752) on temporary restrictions on the conditions for obtaining a residence permit in Sweden’ was passed. Among several new implemented restrictions, this law made it nearly impossible to receive permanent residency even upon receiving refugee status. The exception to this new rule was that children, such as unaccompanied minors and children in families, could still be granted permanent residency if they had arrived no later than 24th of November 2015 (e.g. Barker, 2018). Increasingly, the age of asylum-seeking young people became the pivotal point. If they were found by the Swedish Migration Agency to be eighteen at the date of the first decision, they would face at least three aggravating circumstances. Firstly, they would not be able to get permanent residency if granted asylum at all. Secondly, their asylum case procedure would be treated as if they were adults and no longer deserving the particular attention and consideration that must be applied by authorities when children are involved (e. g. Djampour, 2018; Lundberg, 2017). Thirdly, their living conditions and rights to support and social care would be severely restricted. Upon arrival in Sweden, adult asylum seekers and families are offered some type of accommodation in camp-like and isolated conditions administered by the Migration Agency and spread out all over the country. However, youngsters classified as unaccompanied minors are received as children in need of particular safety and homelike environments. They are provided with accommodation in
family homes or at residential care units run by, or on behalf of, the social services. Later, if not re-aged by authorities, they are commonly provided with ‘support homes’ as the next step towards adulthood and independence from authorities (e.g. Söderqvist, 2017). They also get a legal guardian, basic financial support for food and clothing and are enrolled in the Swedish school system. Meanwhile they build social ties and connect to the local geographic and social area.

Thus, unaccompanied minors, as long as they remain minors, require more services in terms of, social, legal and financial support from the Swedish authorities. The age of young asylum-seekers has become a battleground, and the primary battle is fought on and around the border between legal under-age and maturity, the 18th birthday hallmark. The focus on age has led to a battery of methods being employed by the Migration Agency to question the trustworthiness of the asylum-seeking youngsters’ stated age. Asylum seeking people, as young as 15, have been re-aged by officers when arriving at the border. Others have been re-aged by officers who have never met them and based on the argument that the applicant has not provided accepted evidence of age, such as a passport that the Migration Agency allows (AIDA, 2017a, s. 36). Most, however, have been re-aged following a medical age examination performed by the National Board of Forensic Medicine (Rättsmedicinalverket, undated).

Despite harsh criticism from scholars and experts addressing the medical age examination as unscientific, misleading, based on statistical fallacies, and unethical with a high risk of imposing adulthood on minors, these activities have continued (e.g. AIDA, 2015, 2017a; Lundberg, 2017; Malmqvist, Furberg, & Sandman, 2018; Mostad & Tamsen, 2019; Noll, 2016). Although comparative studies are not readily available (AIDA, 2017b, p. 33), the information hitherto provided by AIDA suggests that Sweden may have x-rayed more young migrants than any other country in Europe in the last few years. 9617 medical age assessments were performed on asylum-seeking youngsters in 2017 and 1252 in 2018 (AIDA, 2017a, p. 37; AIDA, 2017b, p. 33; Rättsmedicinalverket, undated). With a ‘capacity to carry out up to 500 assessments a month’ in each of the six Migration Agency regions (AIDA, 2017a, p. 37) the bone measuring on asylum-seeking youngsters has become systematic and institutionalised. This institutionalisation is a sign of increasing use of ‘bio-politics’ to control migration within the national territory (e.g. Djampour, 2018; Fassin, 2005) and the implementation of technology in (internal) border control management (e.g. Muller, 2009).

The Swedish asylum application process consists of three consecutive legal instances starting with the Migration Authority processing, and moving on to the second level, the Migration Court, through to the final level, the Migration Court of Appeal. Both the Migration Authority decisions and the Migration Court decisions have been criticised for inaccuracies and not adhering the rule of law (e.g. Hedlund, 2016; Johannesson, 2017). They appear permeated by what Khosravi (2010, p. 112) describes as a ‘culture of disbelief’, marking an ‘environment of scepticism’ where the authorities ‘aim to discredit asylum claims rather than establish their substance’ (c.f. Daniel & Knudsen, 1995; Fassin, 2013 for international perspectives on similar issues). Also, the Migration Authority itself has testified to finding more or less severe shortcomings in fifty per cent of their investigations (SR, 2017).

Several thousands of young asylum-seekers (Rättsmedicinalverket, undated), have become re-aged and adultified in connection with their first rejection from the Migration Agency. Often, the date of the denial and the new birthdate have purposely coincided and have followed upon a medical age assessment (AIDA, 2017a, p. 36).

When this happens, youngsters become adults overnight. As soon as they become re-aged (or turn eighteen before rejection), several social service offices have chosen to expel them immediately from their residential care homes and, subsequently, from accessing support homes in the future (Djampour, 2018; Nordling, 2017). Despite the social services’ right to make independent age assessments and plan support measures based on these, they usually accept the Migration Agency re-aging and reject the youngsters from their homes and support. This practice has been the case for most of the project participants with some being allowed as little as a few hours to pack up and leave or else the police will be called in.
Subsequently, re-ageing leads to yet another rejection as when they turn or are made eighteen, they also lose their right to a legal guardian who should care for the child’s best interests. This adult, who could have supported them in their efforts to stay in social service care, in schools, and near their social networks, typically disappears just as suddenly as the youngsters’ status as minors did.

Upon rejection from social service care, these young people are required to move to Migration Authority facilities for adults, usually located far away from schools and social networks, to wait while going through the subsequent stages of the asylum process (AIDA, 2017a, p. 36). However, to be able to continue school and remain with friends, many have stayed near their schools, ‘couch surfing’ or depending on civil society support for housing while, commonly, receiving 61 SEK (5.9 Euro) per day from the Migration Agency to cover costs for shelter, food and clothing.

However, not all have had the option of moving to Migration Authority facilities. For some of those who had received all three rejections on their asylum applications, the situation became increasingly worse when yet another new temporary law, the ‘law (2018:756) on amendment of the law (2016:752) on temporary restrictions on the possibility of obtaining a residence permit in Sweden’, was proposed and finally passed in the summer of 2018. This law offered a first opportunity of thirteen months of studies in upper secondary school to rejected young and re-aged adults under certain conditions. For those who had received all three rejections on their asylum applications while waiting for a decision on their application to stay for upper secondary school, a new problem appeared. LMA, the ‘Law (1994:137) on the reception of asylum seekers and others’, stipulates that the Migration Agency provides housing for asylum-seekers, but not for people applying for permits to study.

Consequently, these youngsters could neither receive shelter and financial support from the Migration Agency nor from the social welfare offices. Many young asylum seekers have thus become both homeless and penniless, being tossed, involuntary, into the hands of Swedish civil society and the benevolence of charity (see Khosravi, 2014).

Meanwhile, asylum-seekers have repeatedly been the target of racist societal rhetoric framing them, and particularly those from Afghanistan, as liars and criminals. Sweden, like the rest of Europe, is becoming increasingly racist, less prone to acts of solidarity and more set on criminalising and othering ‘them’, the refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, while protecting ‘us’, the Swedes, from the alleged threats of border invasion (cf. Dahlstedt & Neergaard, 2019; De Genova, 2018; Djampour, 2018; Khosravi, 2010; Schierup & Ålund, 2011). In public debates, young males are framed as ‘cunning strategists’ (Djampour, 2018; Stretmo, 2014) and perpetrators of sexual assaults (De Genova, 2018; Herz, 2018).

Subsequently, a ‘deportation machinery’—complete with external and internal border controls, detention centres and transport systems of buses and planes for smooth deportation—has become discursively normalised (e.g. Barker, 2018; Djampour, 2018; Khosravi, 2016; see also Fekete, 2005). This machinery is legitimised through descriptions of migrants as ‘undocumented’, ‘illegal aliens’, ‘irregular’, as strangers from outside forcing themselves through borders and into the Swedish nation. It is through this legal and discursive nationalistic framework that people who are seeking asylum, like the participants in the project, become criminalised and deportable.

**Theoretical approach – social death, hope and individual agency**

The legal, social and rhetorical circumstances just described have forced many youngsters into a position aptly described as social death (Cacho, 2012; Kleist & Thorsen, 2017; Vigh, 2006). Social death, as a state of social valuelessness, is a consequence of structural constraints where their claims to justice and social rights are silenced by rhetorical, legal, and material exclusion processes. Exclusion is obtained through a combination of racist and criminalising discourses, asylum application rejections and banishments from their homes and sometimes their schools. This marginalised position can be experienced by people whose legal and social manoeuvrability and right to a decent life are sharply curtailed or entirely removed.
Social death is characterised by degrading and dehumanising processes that neglect people’s social and individual needs. These processes are commonly plaguing (the rights of) minority groups and refugees who eventually may find themselves trapped in a position where they are unseen and unheard. Dehumanised people are also constructed as ungrievable, not worthy of the tears and the protection that the others, society’s grievable, deserve (Butler, 2009; Djampour, 2018). Dehumanisation, ungrievability, and social death are interwoven and manifest as lived experiences of structural constraints. As concepts, they help to analyse and understand the shackled situation of many migrants in Sweden whose asylum stories have been deemed untruthful, identities not accepted and voices not acknowledged.

However, while social death follows upon structural constraints, it is not left unchallenged, neither on social nor on individual levels. Kleist and Thorsen (2017, p. 3) point at the connection of social death with suffering and emotions such as shame, but also with issues of hope and agency. Experiencing social death following an incapability to act towards self-preservation and towards life goals may lead to both suffering and shame, and loss of hope. Loss of hope appears when people understand that the uncertainty in which they dwell only offers anxiety and lack of manoeuvrability, not anticipation and probabilities (cf. Brun, 2014; Kleist & Thorsen, 2017). However, this insight does not mean that individuals caught in social death circumstances must lose their abilities to act and challenge these structures (cf. Brun, 2014; Kleist & Thorsen, 2017; Vigh, 2006).

An ethnographic approach to lived experiences

For the arguments and analysis in this article, I have used ethnographic data from recurrent formal interviews with twelve young male asylum seekers once having arrived in Sweden in addition to informal interviews (small-talk) and repeated participant observations in environments with a large number of young asylum-seekers for more than two years. The focus has been on their experiences of the asylum context and their ways of dealing with waiting and rejections. Nearly all arrived between 2014 and 2016 as unaccompanied minors, while all today have become adults either following the process of re-ageing or after having waited long enough in Sweden to turn eighteen naturally. They have received one or several rejections, and several have been re-aged and lost their rights to housing and social support. Thus, they belong to a group of young people severely affected by the temporary laws and systems of refusal described above. Most of the youngsters still wait in Sweden where they have spent the last couple of years in quarantine-like conditions such as run-down cabins and hostel-like conditions too far away geographically, legally, and socially to be able to make empowering changes to their situation. Ten youngsters who have participated through recurrent formal interviews or during participant observations have left Sweden for other European countries such as Italy, France and Portugal. Their re-escaping from Sweden to elsewhere has turned this research into a multi-sited rather than confined ethnography (Boccagni & Schrooten, 2018) where research that started in various Swedish contexts has extended into other settings in Europe, wherever participants decided to go. So far, the study has involved two fieldwork trips to Rome, Italy, while participants who have moved on to France and Portugal recently have not yet been interviewed in their new asylum contexts but remain in contact through digital media.

While formal interviews have been essential to the arguments, the extended time spent doing participant observations has become crucial for the understanding of the participants’ coping and resistance strategies. Close to one hundred participant observations, usually lasting between three hours and a full day, have been carried out in environments where the participants live, study, or engage in leisure activities mainly in Sweden. Meanwhile, three weeks of fieldwork have been carried out in Rome.

Trust and mutual respect are vital aspects to building relationships between researcher and project participants and even more so in vulnerable, unstable and changing environments such as migration contexts (Boccagni & Schrooten, 2018). When initiating this work, I already had established relationships of trust with some of the participants. As a former legal guardian and later a caretaker in
a voluntary family home for young people from Afghanistan, I have an extensive acquaintance network with young asylum-seekers that has facilitated access to the participants’ rather secluded and marginalised environments and friendship networks. The established mutual trust between some of the participants and me has been transferred to other young people within their networks, creating a chain reaction of rapport with a continually increasing number of people who approach the project with a wish to participate. Besides, my participation in their activities and lives has sometimes spilt over from research into volunteer work as when I have supported participants in contacts with the authorities or provided a temporary home.

While in ethnographic research close connections, everyday-life participation, and involvement are seen as desirable or at least not improper, they call for a continuous awareness and reflexivity over researcher positionality and situatedness (cf. Haraway, 1988). Although inequalities manifested in the relationship between researcher and those subjected to research are difficult to overcome, efforts have been made to minimise epistemic violence and Eurocentric biases. Reflecting on our relationship as researcher and participants and recurrently addressing the importance of consent have become continuous topics in meetings with participants. In addition, given the longstanding relationship with the participants, there have been numerous opportunities to talk about findings together and let the participants contribute to research questions and project design.

**Results: From shame and coping to continuous escape and search for dignity**

The participants have described years of waiting as a time-space where they have had almost no opportunities to defend themselves against the authorities’ decisions. One by one, the legal gateways to asylum have closed, and they have had to deal with becoming marginalised and excluded from Swedish society, leaving the participants to either remain in Sweden or escape to elsewhere.

**Coping with the loss of hope under social death conditions**

According to participants, the rejections and treatment they have received from Swedish authorities, both the Migration Agency and Social welfare offices have been so painful that they have lost all hope for a future in Sweden and even a life per se. Amir, now living in Rome on a five years’ refugee visa, arrived in Sweden at the age of sixteen. He received his first rejection a few months before his 18th birthday and was adultified simultaneously following a medical age examination stating that it is plausible that he can be 18 years old. The rejection started a chain reaction where the social services quickly expelled him from his home, and the school board from his school, despite his legal right to continue. His legal guardian also withdrew, and he had no one who could support him in his efforts to continue receiving support from the social services. He was even forbidden by the social workers at his former residential care unit to come to play soccer with his friends. He recalls the painful social isolation that followed the rejection:

The tone changes. Everything changes like, for example, that woman on the bus. Before, she came and said hello to me and talked to me, and the time that I got negative, she never came to me to ask how I feel. (…) And also, the staff working there, they completely changed towards me. (…) When I got negative, they didn’t come to say to me “come eat food”. I couldn’t believe that they changed like that. And also, when I went to play FIFA or play cards, they didn’t come to play with me. I was waiting for my next decision. I was completely broken. That’s why I came to the beach to cry and was like “God help me”. I didn’t know why this was happening to me. (…) I feel like that time was empty like, inside I didn’t have anything. And I felt like sometimes … I tried to kill myself. I said, “why am I here? I can’t go back to Afghanistan. I can’t go to the Taliban; they kill me. So if I can’t stay here, it’s like … nothing.” So, I tried to kill myself. It was almost like … I was like crazy. ’Cause I did nothing. And like all my friends they continued to go to school and have support. They had a good life. But I was not. I was very alone all the time.

The combination of rejection, re-ageing and social ostracism nearly killed him. In several interviews, he describes manifestations of dehumanising activities. When staff and friends stopped talking and
interacting with him, he felt almost non-human himself. He was living a life of ‘stuckness’ (Kleist & Thorsen, 2017) not being able to move in any direction while suffering from ‘nothingness’, an experience of having nothing left inside.

Several participants say they have considered committing suicide. Some of them have spent time in psychiatric care because of depression and death wishes. Also, there are other ways to die besides physical death. Yar explained during a dialogue that followed upon a rather sad interview where we had talked about the repetitive rejections from the migration authorities and the social services and the decrease of hope that accompanies each step:

There are many ways to kill someone. In Afghanistan, you get blown up or decapitated. In Sweden, you are killed here [holds his hand at the place of the heart], bit by bit, says Yar. (Observation notes, 20180922)

Yar and his friend Sadat who also participated in the conversation had been waiting for more than three years, and still had only received their first rejections. In Sweden, the national election of 2018 was just over with no result as to what party would eventually gain control. Several of the participants had followed the debate closely, afraid that parties with a racist or nationalist agenda would put an end to their chances for asylum.

Meanwhile, they worried about the future of the politically contested law, potentially offering them the right to stay to complete upper secondary school. They could not feel joy or meaningfulness anymore. They felt no hope. Sadat said:

You can only have hope when you believe that there is at least a small chance that it will eventually be okay. There is no such chance anymore. Sweden does not want us to be here. They will find new things all the time that will eventually force us to leave. (Observation notes, 20180922)

Loss of hope is one experience connected to repeated rejections and long times waiting for life to continue (e.g. Fontanari, 2017). Another experience is the feeling of shame. Both Sadat and Yar had limited financial support, and they needed ‘the Swedes’ to help them find accommodation and deal with the authorities. Sadat explained:

They only listen when a Swede calls for us or comes with us. In Afghanistan, I could take care of myself. There I could be a proud person. Here I feel ashamed. I don’t want to feel ashamed anymore. (Observation notes, 20180922)

Being unable to care for oneself is reminiscent of childhood dependency, thus a manifestation of the infantilisation that permeates aid work and the asylum system (Fontanari, 2017, p. 34). The shame that follows evolves both from internalised oppression and lack of agency as pointed out by Sadat who used to be able to act on his own behalf.

Similarly, Amir, who tried to kill himself following rejections from the Migration Agency and the home run by social services, has spoken repeatedly about experiencing shame as a result of social exclusion and lack of self-control. As Guenther (2011, p. 23) argues, shame ‘operates as a mechanism of normalisation and social exclusion, installing or reinforcing patterns of silence and invisibility’.

Importantly, shame interacts with dignity. Where shame goes in, dignity, defined in line with Pritchard (1972, p. 301) as the capability to keep self-control and self-respect in the face of suffering, goes out. Sadat’s shame can be seen both as a consequence of social exclusion and as enforcing it as it made him step back and lose the self-respect needed to push forward. However, for him, like some project participants before him, the increasing shame and loss of hope became the spark to breaking loose. To regain self-control and dignity, he left Sweden after three years of social life erosion.

**Re-escaping towards belongingness, hope and dignity**

Participants in Sweden claim that countries such as Italy or France allow young Afghan asylum seekers from Sweden to re-apply in their countries without being sent back to Sweden based on
the Dublin Convention. It is also said that they have a much higher approval rate for asylum seekers from Afghanistan. These rumours are supported by statistics from Eurostat for the years 2015–2018 (Eurostat, n.d.), showing that these countries accept a far higher percentage of Afghan asylum seekers than Sweden and send few people back to the country where they first sought asylum. Accounting for age and gender effects, Sweden delivered first instance rejections to 88.6 per cent of men aged 18–34 in 2017, while France rejected 17.6 and Italy 7.5.

One week after the conversation with Sadat about shame and loss of hope, he called to say he was leaving Sweden for France. I went to the bus station to try to talk him into staying at least until he knew more about his chances of staying through the proposed law to complete upper secondary school and for the Swedish election result to settle. However, he had passed the point of possible negotiation. Immensely sad I watched as he walked off with three years of a Swedish life-on-hold, of stuckedness, tucked into a backpack, the same size my children take to school in the morning. He had said:

I don’t want to go, but I must. I have to move on to look for a country where they will let me live. (Observation notes 20180930)

He had profoundly lost hope, realising Sweden was not the place to make a home. His pain was so intense not only because Sweden was no longer a place for him but because he had lost hope that it would be. He said he could not live without hope. In Sweden, he had lost his will to live, and it was clear that every word he said was permeated by painful experience. At the same time, he expressed a firm determination. Earlier, he had said that he had lost self-control and was entirely in the hands of the Swedish authorities and politicians. At the bus station, he told me that he had to leave Sweden to take over his own life again. Thus, his escape was also an attempt to regain control and to install new hope. He was back in charge, exiting the uncertain Swedish waiting space based on fear and doubt – a time-space that would not fulfil his hopes – and entering a different uncertainty, one of anticipation and potentiality – a time-space where hope was about to be reinstalled (c. f. Fontanari, 2017; Kleist & Thorsen, 2017).

A few weeks later, it became evident that he felt he had succeeded. He had started the asylum application process in France, and he felt better treated by both the authorities and the French people than by the Swedish. He explained in a message:

Life is good. You know, here I am not treated like a refugee. In Sweden, when I walk on the street or wait for the bus, everyone looked strangely at me. In Lyon, everyone can sit together.

Sadat’s strategy had worked at least initially. Through our communication afterwards, it appeared that he had broken loose from the shackles of social death in Sweden. His self-control was restored as was his pride and dignity. He felt listened to while applying for asylum, now as an adult and people in the street responded to him again. However, his future remains uncertain, as his application has not yet been approved.

A few days after Sadat’s sudden departure from Sweden to France in the autumn of 2018, I went to Rome to interview a few young men who, like Sadat, had left what they experienced as unbearable structural constraints in Sweden. They had received asylum rejections at all three legal stages in Sweden and decided to escape, crossing new nation-state borders and entering Italy by train, bus, car, or on foot, one by one or with a friend. After the long wait in Sweden, they arrived at their new destination as adults.

I also engaged in participant observations with them and their friends, which led to a bible study group in the outskirts of Rome attracting more than twenty young men, mostly from Afghanistan, who had converted from Islam to Christianity. It was there that I first began to sense the extent and precariousness of continuous escape from Sweden to other European states. Approximately half of them spoke Swedish and had arrived in Sweden in the past as either unaccompanied minors or young adults. At least two now had children in Sweden, while some had brothers or sisters and close friends who they had to leave behind to avoid deportation to Afghanistan. Most
of them had received a visa to stay in Italy for five years. Some had managed to find a job on the black market and a place to live while others lacked housing and work to support themselves.

Rather unexpectedly, most of the project participants in Rome had a very positive view of how they have been treated by the migration authorities in Italy, compared to Sweden. Their experiences ran counter to research findings about the asylum conditions in Italy that testify to asylum seekers experiencing marginalisation, racism and other hardships. In some cases, as in asylum camp confinement, the situation may be so severe that their position is best described as ‘bare life’, a life without any social extras (c.f. Agamben, 1998; Campesi, 2018; Fontanari, 2017; Pinelli, 2015).

Bilal, one of the youngsters in Rome, arrived as a fifteen-year-old minor in Sweden. Upon receiving rejections at all three levels in the Swedish asylum process, he left for Italy to avoid being deported to Afghanistan. In Rome, he met Hamid who had arrived in Sweden at the age eighteen and two years later escaped to Rome to avoid deportation. At my interview with Bilal, Hamid came along. They both had received refugee status (permesso per asilo politico) and five-year permits in Italy. I asked them to compare their experiences of the migration authorities in Sweden and Italy:

Bilal: He looked at me [the migration officer in Sweden] as if I am lying, you know. That I lie. After that, I felt stress. I couldn’t continue, but, in Italy, I had interview, and it was very calm. In Sweden, it was un-enjoyable [sic]. I couldn’t talk with calmness, talk … without stress … as, you know … they give you stress. At the Migration Agency [in Italy] (…) it is a very big difference.

Interviewer: Is that your experience too [turning to Hamid]? Can you tell me about the interview in Italy?

Hamid: In Italy, it was very easygoing. We drank coffee, and then I talked, I felt that she was my buddy.

Bilal: In Italy, where I had my interview, I talked very much. He who [did the interview] … “it’s enough.” [Bilal imitates the officer]. He said, “go and live”.

Others related similar conversations with the Italian authorities and how they offer coffee or tea and a comfortable chair when you arrive. It appears from narratives about interviews with officers at the Italian migration authority that they experienced being seen and heard, thus being met as grievable human beings, rather than ungrievable refugees caught in the hostile Swedish system (c. f. Butler, 2009). Amir recalls how the woman interviewing for the Italian migration agency cried when she heard him tell his story.

All but one of the Rome participants had received positive answers to their asylum applications in Italy, being granted five-year permits, some with refugee status and some with subsidiary protection. However, for many, these five years are permeated by hardship and distress since a future permanent residency may only be granted those with refugee status who are successful in the housing and job market. On a research trip to Rome in February 2019, the following was noted during an observation at a food handout outside a Metro station arranged by a charity organisation. At the time, I was chatting to three project participants when a fourth person, who I had seen at a leisure activity before, arrived. He was slightly older than the participants were and had years of experience from being an asylum-seeker in Europe.

He says (…) he has been on the run from Afghanistan for eleven years. In England, he worked as an interpreter until he was denied residency after several years in the country. Then he went to Sweden where he received rejection after two years. The same thing happened in several other countries. Now he has finally been granted asylum, for five years, in Italy. When I ask where he lives, he sweeps with his hand over the big open space outside the station:

- I live here, he says. (Observation notes 20190208)

Residency has not helped him get out of his precarious situation. His current homeless and jobless situation is shared or anticipated by several of the participants. Italy does not provide financial support, jobs or housing upon granting asylum. In consequence, many of the participants still lack a secure future. Still, they describe Italy, just as Sadat did France, as the country that has provided them with respect, restored self-control and dignity.
Conclusion: dignity restored?

Batteries of rejections and harsh treatment from Swedish authorities such as the Migration Agency and the social services have forced the young asylum-seekers in this research into a state of legal, economic and social precariousness and marginalisation fittingly described as social death. This time-space of waiting and stuckedness (Kleist & Thorsen, 2017) have severe consequences for their emotional life, giving rise to feelings of shame, hope drainage, loss of self-control and, for some, even suicide attempts.

Several youngsters in this project have strategies for confronting and resisting these energy-draining emotions by taking control of their lives and actions again. In this article, I have focused on re-escaping as a resistance strategy to regain self-control, dignity and the hope of finding belongingness. Their actions are expressions of individual resistance and agency, efforts to regain spatial justice, a place called home, as well as temporal justice, a constructive time that not wasted in the margins of Swedish society (compare Fontanari, 2017). However, re-escaping from Sweden to elsewhere in Europe is attractive not only because it may provide a potential time-place to live, but also arenas for agency, social acceptance and respectability. Some of the young men in this project seem to have succeeded in regaining hope and a piece of the dignity they say they lost in Sweden though being granted asylum and, importantly, by experiencing being met with more respect by authorities in Italy and France than in Sweden. Being treated with respect by authorities has been stated as a significant contrast to experiences in Sweden. That is their experience, regardless of the character of objective structures in the countries under comparison. Receiving asylum might account for some of these positive feelings towards the new country, yet, several interviews testify to an apparent qualitative difference between how individual officers have met them in the two countries.

Nevertheless, they have only received temporary residency. The requirements for getting permanent residency are hard to meet. By re-escaping they may become caught in a transnational space of expulsion, or what Khosravi (2016, p. 178) labels deportspora, a fluid, unstable movement of human bodies oscillating between time-spaces of hope and despair. Picking up, leaving, escaping as resistance towards petrifying structural constraints has become a way of life in Europe for asylum seekers in search of new hope and a future in the next country providing uncertainty with potentiality. They embody a ‘European apartheid’ (Balibar, 2004; De Genova, 2017, 2018). In this apartheid system, Europe’s external borders have been reinforced by internal borders to separate marginalised and exploitable groups from the privileged groups through divisions on the (black) labour market, access to housing, social aid, healthcare and so on. Expulsions and divisions are not just carried out by migration authorities but also by social welfare authorities in Sweden who urgently need to reflect upon and adjust their practices to avoid contributing to both social death in Sweden and the growth of inequality and exploitation of human lives and hopes in Europe.

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