

Asylum seekers and refugees' tactics vis-à-vis labor integration programs in the Italian reception system

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The Italian reception system for asylum seekers and refugees is characterized as a field in tension (Schmoll 2020), a place traversed by power dynamics and asymmetries, within which the institutional injunction is continually confronted with the tactics and strategies of the received population. If the power and control acted by the institution in structuring the daily life of the beneficiaries within the centers has been the subject of several studies (Fabini, Firouzi Tabar, et Vianello 2019; Pinelli 2017; Sorgoni 2011; Vacchiano 2011), this communication intends to highlight how this tension is manifested in a specific aspect of the reception system intervention: work. Either in the form of volunteer programs or professional insertion paths through apprenticeships, these forms of free or semi-free work (Simonet 2018) are strongly encouraged and are presented to asylum seekers and refugees as a necessary step towards achieving good civic integration. The relationship that migrants have to such programs is thus complex and multiform, their participation is strongly interconnected with the power relations that characterize the reception system and concretely shape the living conditions inside the centers, but also with the characteristics of the labour market, and migration policies. Specifically, the communication is based on two different qualitative researches studying the unpaid or semi-free work placement of asylum seekers and refugees promoted in the context of the Italian reception system. Starting from the data collected, the communication intends to illustrate how the relationship of beneficiaries vis-à-vis labor integration programs is configured as a continuum of tactical uses that encompass, sometimes within a single trajectory, several, even contradictory strategies. The objective is thus to show why and how the beneficiaries' adhesion to being put to work is configured despite non-remuneration, assignment to devalued tasks and poor employment prospects. In order to recover the complexity of the relationship between beneficiaries and "put to work programs", we will try to avoid a dichotomous division between resistance and adhesion, but rather to give space to the variety of positions, tactics (de Certeau 2005) and everyday (micro)practices of response to unpaid work, and to let them interact with the trajectories of beneficiaries. It is also important to understand if and how individual strategies are conjugated in a collective dimension, as well as to maintain a diachronic view: in fact, subjective positions can change and be challenged during the same trajectory. In most of the cases studied, adherence is followed or alternated by moments of rupture and opposition, resulting in "misbehavior" (Thompson 2016) that takes the form of disengagement from one's pathways to work, partial rejection of free work, but also manifestations of verbal or concrete dissent, abandonment, radical rejection of work placement, up to forms of collective dissent and conflict. Highlighting the multiple reasons that drive beneficiaries to adhere to the programs also shows the processes that go beyond the sphere of reception and yet participate in turn as an injunction to work placement, framing new forms of "humanitarian exploitation" (Dines 2023) but also resistances against it.