



Protect

The Right to International Protection

Relativism, Absolutism, and «Cultural Difference».

Vulnerability and Boundaries Making in
International Protection in Eastern Sicily



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Relativism, Absolutism, and «Cultural Difference».

Vulnerability and Boundaries Making in International Protection in Eastern Sicily

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Abstract

Vulnerability came to be a cardinal term for the humanitarian politics of life. On the one hand, it is naturalised as a shared condition and, at the same time, as it is linked to the recognition of specific needs, it becomes a condition for accessing certain rights. As a concept vulnerability tries to conjugate a theoretical aporia: all human beings are vulnerable, but certain subjects or groups are more so. This dilemma becomes particularly relevant in the field of international protection, where obtaining the label of vulnerable constitutes a crucial stake in accessing the right to stay. Through fieldwork research in eastern Sicily, the article moves from the recognition of certain discontinuities in this field. On the one hand, the margins for declaring vulnerable all actors involved in the field of reception, including so-called natives, have been extended. On the other hand, the possibilities have been reduced, through an attempt to improve the efficiency and quality of assessment procedures, which should include a transcultural sensitivity. The article, therefore, engages in an analysis of vulnerability policies within contemporary asylum governance, considering both those deployed by public service providers and by migrants themselves. Showing that the institutional allocation of the status of “vulnerable” is the result of complex and ambivalent practices, involving different actors, logics and discourses, the article explores the institutional will to both relativise and absolutise its work. Also illuminating the dimensions of political economy and structural vulnerability, the text attempts to articulate three levels that are implicated in the use of the category of vulnerability in immigration policies. The article concludes by offering some considerations regarding the controversial opportunity to continue to involve anthropology within this field of study.

Keywords: vulnerability, migration and asylum, humanitarianism, Italy, European Integralism

Preface: the Drowned and the Disembarked

The days of mobilisation that there were in August 2018 at the port of Catania, in eastern Sicily, are remembered in the city as the last moment in which the inhabitants took firm action in a large number for the rights of migrants. Under the slogan of *Catania città meticcica e solidale, nessuno più al mondo può essere illegale* (Catania a mestizo and solidarity city, no one in the world can be illegal anymore), protesters demanded that the 177 people illegally detained on board the Coast Guard ship “*Diciotti*” be made to disembark. The government led by Matteo Salvini considered that its priority was to «defend the borders and the Italians» and had blocked the docking «until it was certain» that the people «went elsewhere»¹, namely i.e. distributed in other European countries. Some NGOs operating on the ground, as well as some institutional representatives, stressed the particular condition of minors on board, vulnerable subjects who should be immediately placed in safety².

¹ <https://www.avvenire.it/attualita/pagine/nave-diciotti> [19/11/2021].

² https://www.redattoresociale.it/article/notiziario/nave_diciotti_ancora_ferma_a_catania_l_appello_sbarcare_i_minori_subito_ [19/11/2021].

With the subsequent criminalisation of NGOs engaged in Search and Rescue operations in Italy, and with immigration policies that increasingly expose people to death, what power does humanitarian and political action have in this area of the world? In September 2021, Abdallah Said dies in the hospital of Catania of encephalitis, as his tuberculosis had not been taken into consideration. He was seventeen years old, came from Somalia, and had spent the days before his death confined on a quarantine ship. Since April 2020, several cruise ships have been rented by the Italian government and anchored off Sicilian harbours. Rescued people are kept in those ferries for a period of roughly 10 days, depending on logistical needs, under the control of the Red Cross. This humanitarian actor is entrusted with the task of taking care of survivors granting health care assistance, cultural and linguistic mediation, psychological support, and vulnerability identification. Yet, their work did not prove to be sufficient.

It will take the death of Abdallah and another boy, Abou Diakite³, as well as the mobilisation of civil society⁴, to make the government explicitly declare that minors will no longer be detained in this type of facility. Nevertheless, this continues to happen⁵ in eastern Sicily. Besides, the death of Bilal Ben Massaud, a 28-year-old Tunisian man who also in 2020 drowned after trying to escape from the quarantine ship and swim to the coast, does not seem to have raised as much concern. Moreover, the fact that quarantine vessels are often experienced by migrants as a period of forced detention on a ship at sea and that this exacerbates the suffering of people who are survivors of shipwrecks and have previous experiences of detention in Libya is rarely acknowledged in the public sphere.

Thus, we could ask who are the vulnerable subjects deserving protection? Just the minors because they are the unaccompanied migrant minors who are targeted by a specific law in Italy – the Zampa law⁶ – and special national and transnational guidelines? Or rather all disembarked people because they are all vulnerable? Moreover, why are they all vulnerable? Because they are as exposed as everyone else to Covid-19 syndemic, or because they have passed through a dangerous journey and survived? Are they all vulnerable because they are equally exposed to the necropolitics of the sea border? Above all, why would vulnerability be the term through which violence and injustice are articulable (Taussig 1999) and rights can be obtained? And what does this entail in terms of recognition of migrants' subjectivity?

³ A 15-year-old boy from Ivory Coast, initially passed eight days alongside the other 200 survivors on the NGO ship –which remained waiting to receive the permission to dock–, where he received initial medical aid because of fever and dehydration. He entered into the Quarantine ship with a drip; ten days afterwards his comrades desperately called the Red Cross doctor, as he had not been eating for three days. Two days afterwards he was carried to the hospital, where he died.

⁴ <http://www.vita.it/it/article/2020/10/16/fate-sbarcare-i-minori-dalle-navi-quarantena/157014/> [22/07/2021].

⁵ <https://www.borderlinesicilia.it/monitoraggio/respinti-e-bloccati-i-cortocircuiti-dellaccoglienza-in-sicilia/> [22/1/2022].

⁶ The Zampa Law (7 aprile 2017, n. 47), named after its first signatory, contains “Provisions on measures for the protection of unaccompanied foreign minors”. This law states that minors are defined as such on the basis of their own statements. In other words, the label of “presumed” associated with a minor, and therefore any procedures for socio-sanitary verification of age, must proceed by “progressive invasiveness”, with the so-called “social interview” being identified as the first method of verification.

All Are Vulnerable? None Are Vulnerable? Humanitarianism in the Age of European Integralism.

This article interrogates the frontiers of vulnerability, namely the social boundaries (Fassin 2010, 2019) and the inequality of lives that are produced by biopolitical uses of the concept of vulnerability in the field of international protection. It does so by trying to intersect a broader debate on the links between humanitarianism and securitarianism (De Lauri 2019), building on ethnography in eastern Sicily⁷, which is considered as a place of disembarkation, transit and reception of mainly young men and women coming by sea from Africa to Europe. The analysis focuses on the ways in which vulnerable status is allocated, negotiated and denied in asylum seekers' encounters with public institutions and among migrants themselves. The research involved all the actors implicated in the governance of international protection⁸ and resulted in ethnographic observation⁹ carried out in multiple social arenas where the notion of vulnerability is described, certified, evaluated, promoted, contested and silenced. The discussion will not exclusively address one phase of the encounter that people who arrived through the Mediterranean sea have with Italian institutions. Rather, considering the different logics and practices implicated, I want to adopt an interpretative stance drawn on migrants' perception of the overall process to obtain a *permesso* (residence permit). Thus, the uses of vulnerability I refer to concern both the sea-land continuum, the subsidiarity in giving health and social care, and the articulation of administrative and juridical power.

A renewed focus on vulnerability is necessary because two novel, interwoven and seemingly contradictory dynamics are participating in the redefinition of vulnerability in the field of international protection. The first seeks to extend vulnerability to previously unforeseen subjects and spheres, such as so-called "autochthonous" subjects or "receiving communities". The other reduces the possibilities of attributing the status of "vulnerable subject" and is based on the securitarian turn taken by immigration policies in the era of European integralism (Holmes 2000; Kallius & Monterescu & Rajaram 2016). The

⁷ The research has been carried out as part of the UE-funded project «PROTECT. The Right to International Protection» (grant agreement n. 870761). I would like to thank the PROTECT research team at the University of Catania, and in particular Mara Benadusi and Francesca Longo, for their scientific suggestions and human support.

⁸ A total of 46 semi-structured interviews and less formal conversations were conducted with: public officials; social workers operating in the SAI reception system and in other forms of reception; NGO operators involved in specific programs aimed at minors, "trafficked" women, people diagnosed with stress-posttraumatic syndromes or exposed to gender-based violence, migrant agricultural labourers, even undocumented; cultural-linguistic mediators who intervene both in landing situations and on quarantine ships, in Territorial commission hearings, in socio-legal counters; UNHCR and the National Guarantor of the Rights of Persons Deprived of their Liberty staff; members of Territorial Commissions; lawyers; people involved in assisted repatriation programs; psychologists and ethno-psychiatrists; staff of the social service of the municipality; activists and volunteers; people seeking asylum or holders of international protection or undocumented, including members of migrant associations and religious leaders.

⁹ The ethnography was carried out in online and offline mode, starting in February 2021. The online mode involved: a mapping of the associations and public services present on the territory of eastern Sicily, an analysis of their websites and social accounts; participation in seminars or press conferences organised by these same realities and also by those operating on the regional and Italian territory. The offline ethnography focused more on the local context and consisted of participant observation carried out: in seminars and awareness-raising meetings on the living conditions of migrants promoted by local associations; in a socio-legal study, observing the interactions between migrants and operators and lawyers; in an association that provides social and legal support to asylum seekers and those excluded from the reception system; in some meeting spaces of migrants in the cities of Catania and Syracuse (streets, squares, parks, churches).

articulation between these two approaches is exemplified in the two UN Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees (UN 2018; UN & UNHCR 2018), which epitomise the logic behind the global reform of migration governance. This new transnational policy is in fact aimed at interweaving human rights enforcement - the reduction of migrants' vulnerabilities - with the defence of states' sovereignty; thereby promoting the security and prosperity of the receiving communities. The global consensus around the right to a humanitarian approach to migration has been sought by the UN thanks to a discourse arguing for a universalised and shared vulnerability. This international soft-law regime (Sandvik 2011) prompts the idea that all migrants can face situations of vulnerability due to «the circumstances in which they travel or the conditions they face in countries of origin, transit and destination» (UN 2018: 13). It would therefore appear evident that humanitarianism has achieved the opening of institutional spaces for acknowledging the route taken, and the situations of vulnerabilisation encountered, as elements compelling international protection. However, we are not facing a transition to “migrants welcome”, after coming from «‘refugees welcome’ to ‘migrants unwelcome’» (Sigona 2017: 2; Kallius & Monterescu & Rajaram 2016). Conversely, I argue, we are in a further phase of the historicity of humanitarian involvement in European immigration policies, which entails its relation with political integralism (Holmes 2000). In this sense, what is happening in eastern Sicily is seen here as an articulation between global and local scales, where new forces intervene in the distribution of the vulnerable label.

These political trends have been compounded by the COVID-19 syndemic which has opened up further legitimacy for declaring “everyone” vulnerable, without distinction. Yet forms of social boundaries have structured the impact of the syndemic. In the aftermath of the first COVID-related lockdown, Roberto Beneduce provocatively asked: is the sense of vulnerability now experienced by European citizens «the reflex of that evolution of the West toward Africa about which the Comaroffs (2012) wrote?» (Beneduce 2020). By examining the quarantine ship as a device, we can speculate on the answers to this question. Quarantine ships can be read as offshore spaces in which humanitarian intervention shows all its ambivalence in interweaving itself with securitarianism (De Lauri 2019). They target only particular kinds of migrants, reinforcing the regime of (im)mobility (Salazar & Glick Schiller 2014). At the very same time, this way of hampering migrants to reach the Italian soil is precisely built upon a racialised notion of contamination. As we know, the metaphor of the invasion «implies a metaphor of war and attendant processes of militarization, and helps to frame responses accordingly, i.e., one has to fight back» (Ticktin 2017: xxii). It is the vulnerability of the “autochthonous” population that must be protected from the “vulnerable” people who arrived by sea. Thus, what happens when “all” seem to become vulnerable? How does the biopolitical understanding of vulnerability reconfigure when it extends far beyond the specific humanitarian field itself and overtakes the overall political discourse and imagination around migration? What drives this article is therefore also a theoretical interest in the processes of re-signification of the condition of vulnerability that structure the existence of a boundary between subjects and citizens (Solinas 2019).

Vulnerability, etymologically, refers to the possibility of being exposed to harm, either physically or emotionally. During the 21st century, this notion has been intersected with the human rights agenda. Standardised vulnerability-assessment procedures followed, instituting universally vulnerable subjects or groups, in need of specific protections provided by public

policies and laws (Merry 2007). Vulnerability came to be a cardinal concept for the modern (Rabinow 1995) politics of life (Fassin 2007) in the West, taking shape as a figure of a universal human condition and as a condition in social and political life. Vulnerability has been naturalised as a shared condition and, at the same time, as it is linked to the recognition of specific needs, it became a condition for accessing certain rights. As a concept, vulnerability tries to conjugate a theoretical aporia: all human beings are vulnerable, but certain subjects or groups are more so. Part of its critical genealogy refers to the feminist attempt to overcome victim politics, which are drawn upon a fixed and passivising ascription of victimhood (Brown 1995). It is under this logic that feminist scholars, particularly those in philosophy, draw upon vulnerability to refound the possibility of political action (Butler et al. 2016). Adopting vulnerability itself was a way to denounce inequality by prompting anti-stigmatisation and anti-essentialist visions of the offended subjects, thereby retaining the possibility to assert radical human equality. It is also under this logic that, at the beginning of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, some anthropologists argued towards the methodological adoption of the idea that *all people* were vulnerable in relation to the pandemic (Marshall & Bennett 1990). While others, as Schoepf, wrote that «homogenous construction of ‘vulnerability’ obscures its causal conditions and thereby robs the social critique of its power» (Schoepf 2001: 347). Subjects «experience different types of privations and different levels of risk. Thus researchers must disaggregate their data» (*Ibidem*). In the field of international protection, I argue, disaggregating around vulnerability is particularly challenging both from an ethical that a theoretical point of view.

International protection is a part of immigration governmentality, and not a severable aspect (Noiriel 1991) and this becomes clear if we look at it from a legislative side. In Italy, vulnerability is a condition for the issue of a national residence permit that widens the rules of international protection, taking on specific characteristics compared to the European scenario. The Italian legislation¹⁰ articulates undeportability with vulnerability. Furthermore, it does not present a closed list of subjects defined as eligible for a residence permit because they are vulnerable, but rather identifies areas of vulnerabilisation¹¹. This constitutes an open list of the conditions why people can have access to this permit, leaving to the Territorial Commission, the *Questura* and the judges to assess whereas the repatriation of the foreigner could lead to “situations of vulnerability”.

Since 2011, the «Mediterranean imbroglio» (Ciabarra 2020) has meant that the discursive frames of “emergency” and “crisis” have blurred some theoretical distinctions. First, the differentiation between refugee and migrant, which has a meaning where it makes the historical-political subjectivity of migrants more intelligible (Li Causi 2013). Maintaining this perspective has become troublesome since asking for asylum in Italy has become almost the

¹⁰ Art. 19 of the ‘Consolidated Immigration Act’ (*Testo Unico sull’Immigrazione*). <https://www.altalex.com/documents/codici-altalex/2014/04/09/testo-unico-sull-immigrazione> [20/10/2021]

¹¹ The law identifies as legitimized risks of persecution in the country of repatriation the ones related to “race, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, language, citizenship, religion, political opinions, personal and social conditions”. Undeportability is directly granted to unaccompanied minor migrants, and pregnant women or in the six months after the birth of the children. Persons with disabilities, the elderly and “victims of serious psychological, physical or sexual violence” may be entitled to an individualized assessment of whether they should be repatriated and thus whether they are eligible for a “special protection” residence permit (Art. 19 of the ‘Consolidated Immigration Act’, *Ibidem*).

only way to obtain regularisation. The other devices for issuing documents are in fact increasingly weak and unreliable¹². Accessing the national quota system – which is aimed only in part at those who are not already present on Italian territory – or benefiting from a *sanatoria* – a sort of extraordinary amnesty aimed at a mass regularisation of undocumented migrants who can show a regular work contract – is more and more difficult. So, the State – and even the humanitarian (Cabot 2013; Singona 2017) – patrolling of the boundary between “migrants” and “refugees” (Fassin & D’Halluin 2005; Rozakou 2012; Sorgoni 2019) made the allocation of the vulnerable label the stake in one’s access to the right to stay and move.

The porous border between regularisation methods that the legislator and the politics would like to keep distinct and which migrants’ agencies try to manipulate becomes significantly evident in the words of an immigration office chief who, during a public event on the rights of refugees and migrants, said:

The forcing of the application for international protection at all costs, which clogs up the commissions and the courts during appeals, is jamming the public administration machine. I have just learned that I will have to be at the port on Monday. I will be at the port to sign the information sheets and refoulements, if there are refoulements. And I will not be in my office to sign the residence permits of those who have come spontaneously, even those summoned by me. This is a problem that nags me at night (eastern Sicily, July 2021).

Those words arise a further dimension of this extension of the domain of vulnerability. Vulnerability is being used also to explain the fatigue and the burn-out risk of operators and professionals in the field (Altin & Sanò 2017; Ramsay 2020). What is unsettled is the distinction between the existential dimension of vulnerability and the historicised and political one, between precariousness and precarisation (Butler et al. 2016). One of the consequences of the “refugee crisis” narrative is that both *everyone* and *no one* is recognised as being exposed to distress, hardship and insecurity. Instead of opening spaces to articulate how immigration policies differentially allocate vulnerability, this latter seems to be naturalised (Duffield 2019). Consequently, we have to involve anthropology with the politics of vulnerability (Ferrarese 2017) in international protection, to explore the means by which «the biopolitical incorporation of a species-life» (Duffield 2006) – the vulnerable subject - is prompted and how this affects political imagination and anthropological knowledge.

Vulnerability is a concept that has been interrogated for several decades in the so-called «Western» bureaucratic world (Herzfeld 1992). In the field of refugees studies, the humanitarian association of refugeesness with vulnerability mainly followed the political economy of the UNHCR refugee’s governance in the Souths. Initially, particularly in Africa, the groups marked vulnerable people were the ones needing the life in camps because the others could try to get work and income by taking part in the local economic life. The camps, then, were considered the places for the ones who do not qualify for or “deserve” mobility, due to their dependency on humanitarian intervention. At that time, a clear distinction was kept among refugees: not all of them were vulnerable. Furthermore, vulnerability was

¹² <https://www.ismu.org/dati-sulle-migrazioni/> - 1615198712036-9f0ecb44-0ab7 [20/10/2021].

entangled with immobility itself. However, partly due to the crisis of legitimacy of the UNHCR and the increasing need to attract funding, humanitarian discourse has begun to produce a regime of hyper-visibility of the vulnerable (Harrell-Bond 1992), and at the same time in-audibility, in terms of refugee experiences and voices (Malkki 1996). Under these premises, a further discourse arose: one asserting that all migrants were vulnerable, or in need of humanitarian intervention. Consequently, some people were declared more vulnerable than others, and vulnerable groups therefore could be hosted in separated sections, even in dedicated camps (Agier 2004). In the 1990s, UNHCR consolidated the assessment list for being considered a vulnerable beneficiary. Issues pertaining to physical conditions, psychological ones (survivors of violence), and a kind of age and social-related ascription, were considered as relevant. This identification has been broadened under the intervention of “gender mainstreaming”, which incorporated dimensions related to gender and sexuality, and was eventually transferred to Northern countries.

In light of this, anthropology extensively investigated the social and political uses of these universalised vulnerability identifications. Fieldwork-based studies brilliantly illustrated the means by which lives are placed within hierarchies, and that social and political exclusion is the necessary implication of any political prioritisation among subjects so declared vulnerable (Malkki 1996; Fassin 2005; Ticktin 2006; Freedman 2019; Pinelli 2019), even when these social poetics of vulnerability are co-constructed (Cabot 2014). Such prioritisation entails a politics of life necessitating the idea of deservingness, that evaluates the worthiness of protection by adherence to essentialist representations. In exposing the biopolitical understanding of vulnerability to a form of ethnographic verification, the “vulnerable” label appeared as being issued from dynamic performances, thereby engendering different social and semantic uses for the term. Being vulnerable can be then revendedicated by both the “beneficiaries” (Agier 2004; Minelli & Redini 2012) and the humanitarian actors (Gerbier-Aublanc 2019) in order to struggle against the biopolitical humanitarian use of vulnerability itself: a principle which is «generic for the external legitimization of the humanitarian action, exclusionary for its internal management» (Agier 2004: 128). Furthermore, people appropriate standardised methodologies «in order to carve out a space of visibility in the circuits of humanitarian action» (Benadusi 2013: 436). The “humanitarian vulnerable subject”, thus, is far from being apolitical. Still, this politicisation depends on the existence of the humanitarian definition itself, as well as on its specific understanding and assessment of who can be considered as a vulnerable group. Scholars have therefore focused in particular on institutional attempts to improve assessment procedures and to extend and make the list of vulnerable groups more articulate and inclusive – separating “women and children” to include women, transgender, and sometimes men (Turner 2021). In light of this literature, I have therefore decided to consider the discontinuity of method that is being promoted within the field of governance on international protection in southern Italy. Here I have in fact recorded discourses that seem to argue that the bureaucratic interpretive labour (Graeber 2012) around migrants’ vulnerability is increasingly inspired by a transcultural, *that is*, strictly professional, sensibility.

The Will to Verify *and* Relativise

By doing a job in which we are confronted with radically different cultures, the concept of vulnerability must be very relativised. What may be a vulnerable person to me is not vulnerable in another person's culture. That is, an 18-year-old is vulnerable to me and has enormous vulnerabilities if I compare him with Italian 18-year-olds. Within his culture, he is not necessarily vulnerable, or, at any rate, he does not necessarily perceive himself as vulnerable. Therefore, it is also important to be able to place these concepts within the cultural difference (eastern Sicily, January 2021).

This is what a member of one of the Italian Territorial Commissions for the Recognition of International Protection explained in 2021 during an interview on the matter of identifying and reducing asylum seekers' vulnerability. In 2017, the Territorial Commissions, which is under the authority of the Prefecture, underwent a reform integrating the European directives to harmonise the granting and withdrawal of asylum. A public exam was conducted to hire highly qualified professionals, with the broader goal of reinforcing staff, speeding up procedures and reducing the waiting time for asylum seekers to be heard. Since then, European Asylum Support Office (EASO) employees have been involved in Italian procedures, both in the necessary administrative matters and in juridical ones, which can follow after a denial. EASO has thus been training Territorial Commissions members and acting as a consultant in the Central Commission in Rome, in *Questura* and in civil courts dedicated to evaluating appeals against negative decisions. At the same time, the Ministry of Interior has asked to «make a rigorous examination of the circumstances of *effective vulnerability*»¹³.

The EASO's involvement in Italy's governance of international protection can thus be read as a further step in the state's need to use qualified knowledge, be well informed on the context of departures and detect where the moral economies of lying (Beneduce 2015) are *effective*. The “culturally sensitive” tips, such as asking, «How many springs have you seen?» instead of «How many years have passed?» (eastern Sicily, April 2021), are part of the same institutional effort to assess claimants' credibility (Sorgoni 2019). Expertise is sought to reinforce the possibility of the State regime of veridiction before asylum applications and, more generally, before all documents and certifications that are presented in seeking regularisation. Institutional certification of vulnerability is, in other words, a kind of perturbing procedure in which public officials relentlessly seek truths in the face of seeing themselves as continually exposed to falsification. It is for this reason that hierarchies of authority and trust are enforced: an NGO doctor can be suspected of exaggerating vulnerabilities, as some interlocutors explained to me, while psychiatric or ethno-psychiatric medical certificates from public services, reports from social workers and sometimes anthropological attestations may be accepted. But it is up to the state authorities to assess how, when and by which expert “cultural difference” can be assessed, and thus what role

¹³ https://www.camera.it/application/xmanager/projects/leg18/attachments/upload_file_doc_acquisiti/pdfs/000/001/792/APPUNTO_audizione_prefetto_11_GIUGNO_2019.pdf [20/10/2021].

anthropology could play before asylum courts (Good 2006). The ethnography of an anthropologist who worked as a consultant for Territorial Commissions (Sbriccoli 2019) shows how our discipline can successfully use its dynamic understanding in this field and at the same time illustrates its limitations. When academic anthropologists have voluntarily sought to take part in asylum governance to counterbalance it, they have had to manage complex ethical dilemmas (Saitta & Cutolo 2017; Mugnaini 2019).

The above-mentioned words of a *qualified* member of the Territorial Commissions express that being professionally culturally sensitive in assessing vulnerability has become an indicator of the proficiency of the institutional approach towards asylum seekers. But what is implied by the idea that the concept of vulnerability should be relativised because of cultural differences? Cultural differences, as we know, are socially and politically attested in ambivalent fashions. Culture can be interpreted in various ways: following an anthropological understanding of cultural relativism, that is, attention to subjectivities, power relationships and their dynamic historicity; or through vernacularised notions of cultural relativism, that is a «conception of culture sundered values and beliefs from institutions, practices, and political economy» (Merry 2003: 65). Considering how refugees are crafted into a biopolitical subject, Ahiwa Ong (2003) sharply shows us the role assumed by acculturation in fostering a neoliberal and secular understanding of personhood and gender. Her works inspired Italian anthropologists who highlight, from an intersectional perspective, how women asylum seekers are exposed through the “vulnerable” label to a particular type of humanitarian care (Pinelli 2013, 2019).

The productive effects (Grotti *et al.*) that such encounters with the paternalistic and culturalist label of gender vulnerability produce can also extend to the realm of regularisation. From a legal point of view, the culturalist device works not only because in the contemporary Integralist phase the so-called migrants’ “integration” has assumed crucial relevance in obtaining a kind of residence permit – the one for «special protection». In international protection, culturalism, which is not an accessory of the humanitarian reason but is one of its principles, can also have an inclusive effect. It is the case, for example, of the so-called “Female Genital Mutilation” (Fusaschi 2020; Cavatorta 2021); strongly highlighted by UNHCR guidelines as a form of gender-based violence, at least in appeal, FGM can allow women to get a refugee status. However, its certification entails several obstacles, including the necessity of staff of reception centres who know that this has legal relevance, a lawyer who is competent in migration legislation and who is also trained to adequately tackle the subject with her client, a medical staff who produces an adequate and well-detailed certification.

In the Sicilian context in which I inquired, almost no FGM-related applications have been treated for over a decade. On the one hand, this can be explained by the fact that between 2011 and 2019 the region hosted the largest hotspot in Europe (the Mineo Centre), which has appealed to many actors attracted by the profit possibilities, including lawyers. Not only anthropology (Cabot 2019), neither exclusive reception centres entrepreneurs nor the State (Costantini & Galié 2019), but also legal practitioners can participate in the accumulation by dispossession. On the other hand, we have to question the legal unpreparedness of the operators of the reception centres, as two lawyers interviewed suggested. This does not mean their lack of competence. In fact, in this area, I recorded a significant presence of

professionals working in public and private services for asylum seekers and refugees who previously worked in international cooperation or have done post-graduate studies in cultural mediation. However, unlike other Italian contexts where critical reflexivity (Pilotto 2019) and some forms of political mobilisation occur, social workers' familiarity with otherness – even literal as many are married to migrant partners- seems here to hinder rather than facilitate the problematisation of the post-compassionate neoliberal turn (Giudici 2021). A less politicised articulation between feelings and neoliberalism distinguishes this social world, as exemplified in the words of this reception centre employee:

This is a personal thing. If there is an event on Sunday or in the evening that I like, I bring the guys with me [...] I had the biggest laughs with them. It depends on how you manage your work, your stability. [...] When activities have been organised in my spare time, it was not a load (eastern Sicily, June 2021).

This impression of being all positively affected by the relationships that take place within those welfare spaces is «fictional» (Castellano 2017), since based on the multiple layers of silence and suspicion that “guests” have towards operators. When the last reform of the reception governance, which denied some previously acknowledged benefits to asylum seekers, arrived:

It affected our work by creating situations [that are] very complicated to manage. [...] The operator has problems because s/he has to face situations in which the guys ask, but why are you doing the traineeship for him and not for me? Why does he get the forklift licence, and I do not? Then, of course, you explain to them... Anyway, when the law changed, they signed a contract in which the types of services that were changing were indicated. But from an operative point of view, you have situations that are very unpleasant to handle (Group discussion with the staff of a reception centre, eastern Sicily, June 2021).

The signature of a formal contract with the asylum seeker becomes a way to dissolve the ethical troubles of the politics of inequalities that operators do enforce. When I asked if the problems in explaining the laws were due to language gaps, they replied:

I do not consider it a communicative gap; rather, [it is] the understanding of a system that is much too complicated in their eyes. In my opinion, [it] is simply in human nature to have expectations, and then when you crash into reality, you are totally disappointed. Regardless of our professional engagement, if the person decides that they have the right to the grant when leaving the centre, they discuss between them; they don't understand that one has a situation and another has a different one. They don't understand. [...] Sometimes, you have people from the same countries with two different statuses, so, for one, it is yes, but for the other, it is no. Explaining to them that under the administrative law his profile is not equal to his compatriot's is a real challenge (*Ibidem*).

In their words, operators dismiss the acknowledgement of migrants' subjectivities and the colonial situation in which they are immersed (Castellano 2017), disregarding structural vulnerability, in order to highlight their own distress (Altin & Sanò 2017). Migrants' disappointment with the unequal treatment towards them and the overall power relationships within the centres are read as «human nature», whereas the focus of operators' discourse is mainly the «unpleasant situations» they have to manage.

The boundary between a strictly culturalist interpretation of the notion of vulnerability and one sensitive to subjectivity is defined and shifted by how we understand the notion of “cultural difference.” But I argue that we also need to consider how this latter articulates with what I will define as “institutional absolutism” in defining vulnerability. This is not only an epistemic and pragmatical aporia, but it holds the public secret (Taussig 1999; Cavatorta & Pilotto 2021) around the State's use of vulnerability in international protection: far from being issued from a regime of verification, the allocation of vulnerability is a fictional, arbitrarily and basically authoritarian procedure. What is the place of “cultural difference” when young men seeking international protection for reasons of sexually related discrimination, exhausted by answering questions such as «Are you receiving or passive?», to attest the embedded truthness of their claims finally arrive at the hearings showing photographs and videos of their homoerotic intimacy and sexuality? These are precisely the situations in which collaboration with anthropologists could be useful, mobilising appropriate and non-essentialist notions of gender, sexuality, dependency, power and, finally, personhood (see Taliani 2011).

A further aspect to be considered about the *relative* institutional life of the label “vulnerable” is the political economy of vulnerability in im-mobility regimes. For example, since the establishment of EU-funded repatriation programmes, vulnerability has been considered a priority quality for access. Many people with psychiatric diagnoses have been involved in the programme, while in recent years the “vulnerables” have been excluded. The reason for this is attributed to the government's desire to maximise funding and increase the number of returns. The “voluntary” return programme for vulnerable people constituted a costly “humanitarian” practice, as it required several medical screenings and a health worker or social worker who had to accompany the vulnerable person to their home or wherever «the person wanted, had to return» (eastern Sicily, May 2021)¹⁴. Yet, one professional who worked in this programme at the time it «worked» argued that he achieved with «major success» in bringing home people with psychiatric problems, even those «who were not considered autonomous or independent enough, for physical or psychological reasons, to have a trip» (eastern Sicily, May 2021). The political economy of vulnerability allocation, then, requires apparent equal “vulnerable subjects” who are both self-governing and autonomous and dependent and needy.

Unpacking Vulnerability: Borders and Social Boundaries

Let's then come back to the first phase of vulnerability detection, namely the quarantine ships. Different professional roles are implicated in these humanitarian spaces: doctors, «oodles of»

¹⁴ This verbal switch used by an interviewed professional who has worked in recent years in this field is quite revelational of the opportunity to interrogate the continuum of voluntary-forced return (Cavatorta 2018) from the subjects' point of view.

psychologists,¹⁵ cultural mediators, and a practitioner dedicated to Restoring Family Links (RFL) activities¹⁶. However, the identification of vulnerabilities in this place remains de facto dependent on state control. On the one hand, although there are no clear directives, there is bureaucratic work that aims to certify the actual care work carried out. Thus, all kinds of interventions done on board are certified and traced (for example, at the time of disembarkation, some migrants are given a chart detailing the times they met Red Cross personnel: for medical examinations, for legal or psychological information, etc.). Yet, field research has allowed us to observe that minors are still detained on these ships, especially since the end of 2021 when resources for cultural mediation have been reduced. On the other hand, the training that is provided to operators includes guidance on how to interact with the people held on-board without creating alarm, anxiety and conflict situations.

The notion of “safe countries of origin”, which is structuring the geopolitics of asylum allocation, seems to de facto suspend the state’s duty to assess vulnerability towards citizens of these countries. People coming from Tunisia (one of the countries now composing this list) react to the effects of this classification by using their last, but now an irrelevant resource, the humanitarian reason, involving self-mutilation acts.¹⁷ This politics of life is embedded by *all* the actors involved, precisely because it is not only the governmental label of vulnerable at stake but a more complex vulnerabilisation that is invisibilised. When I asked a sub-Saharan-African cultural mediator working on the quarantine ships if there were angry people aboard, the answer was:

A lot. Lots of Arabs, principally. [...] They do not want to make ten days of quarantine [when they are negative]. And then the Tunisians, because they are not accepted. They always do things. [...] A few try to escape and reach the land. It happened, the boat was docked. We couldn’t do anything. It’s up to the police to intervene (eastern Sicily, May 2021).

This quote pertains to a person who arrived by boat some years before, who now has an Italian residence permit on the basis of international protection. It is from this standing point that he embeds and gives meaning to his current humanitarian role, evaluating both despite and because of this role, the past and the contemporary distress to which the survivors of the sea travel undergo. A little more compassion, but the same impotence seems to be displayed by this particular actor before people who come from Niger and demand why the police officers have assigned to them Nigerian citizenship. The same happens when other guests relate that officials do not register the self-declared age, or misspell names. These mistakes in the initial registration will entail several complications later during the administrative and legal procedures, ultimately affecting the very possibility of presenting the asylum application. On the other hand, these fallacies show the incompetence of the public officials

¹⁵ The expression used by an interviewee who is working as cultural mediator on a Quarantine ship.

¹⁶ This latter service denotes the importance acknowledged by this humanitarian action to qualified life and social existence. Besides, the lack of this latter point has been already acknowledged as an increased situation of vulnerability by humanitarian refugees’ governmentality in the Souths (Agier 2004).

¹⁷ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/06/quarantine-ships-italy/618712/> [20/10/2021].

working at the border, shedding further doubt on this institutional claim to have made asylum governance more professional.

I think these details reveal a further framework for thinking about the production of vulnerability within this apparatus. The concept of structural vulnerability has been elaborated as a heuristic enhancement of the more famous “structural violence”. Vulnerability, instead of violence, has been proposed because it is more able to include «social hierarchies buttressed by symbolic taxonomies of worthiness» and «historically distinctive discourses of normativity and ethics» (Quesada & Hart & Bourgois 2011: 341). The hierarchising and moralising order of vulnerability is not only a univocal governmental logic pursued by the only public authorities. Numerous moral economies about deservingness and injustice and different historicities around symbolic capital are intertwined. Furthermore, there are multiple ways of assessing humanitarian transformations, which are also influenced by the hierarchising power of symbolic capital acquired through migration. I suggest that it is for this reason that the speaker emphasises in the narrative the “good” aspect and not the persistent securitarian power of these surreal and endangering spaces.

The ones who arrive on the ship, in respect of how I arrived, are very fortunate. RFL was not there. Neither legal information [...] I see this ship as a good thing. On the boat, the guys can understand a lot of things [...] It’s important to know before arriving. When I arrived, I knew nothing, but really nothing. Yet, they have ten days on the ship, and we explain to them those kinds of stuff.. I.. disembarked directly from an NGO ship, which brought us directly to the harbour. Then, we directly went to the reception centre. And then, after a month, they sent me to the Commission. I knew nothing, really nothing. The procedures about *documenti*, I knew nothing. How to find documents, to be prepared [...] At the reception centre, we were 2000 (May 2021).

The three levels of structural vulnerability are revealed by those words: the biopolitical one, the epistemological one and what we could define as the situated one. All the three levels are cultural processes theoretically necessitating anthropological cultural relativism to be appropriately understood: one pertains to the vulnerabilisation produced by the bureaucracies’ interpretative work on vulnerability, which is self-presented as fair, and yet arbitrary; the second refers to a notion of personhood, which is far from being universal; the third is the experience of vulnerabilisation. All these levels intersect but have to be kept distinct. While aiming to discern and explain cultural and historical specificity, and critiquing identity categorisations related to vulnerability, anthropologists have often constructed their research questions from biopolitical categories, including gender-based violence, trauma, camp forms, and distinctions between refugees and migrants. Less attention has been given to the ways in which migrants themselves identify forms of vulnerability, which may further make complex the analysis of how vulnerabilisation occurs.

Aisha is an Eritrean girl who arrived in Sicily as a minor. She may look like someone whose vulnerabilities have been perfectly taken into account by the system that received her. She easily obtained subsidiary protection and now works as a linguistic mediator in public services. Yet, a specific and for her significant form of vulnerability, unseen and unaddressed,

marked her life as an asylum seeker. Before leaving Libya, she called her mother to tell her that she was «entering *into* the sea» (June 2021). Four months later, she was alive but relegated to a hospital on the Sicilian coast, where she was placed after the rescue. She was conscious in the three months she spent on that bed; only her legs were blocked. Yet, she could not call her mother, as nobody allowed her to make and receive calls. «That time has been even scarier than Libya, where at least I had my friends,» she told me, still enraged. « Still, I do not understand why the doctors, even the woman who came to take care of me (the social worker), prevented me from communications» (*Ibidem*). Her emotionally dense words suggest even more the need to decentralise the analysis of what makes vulnerable from a Eurocentric perspective.

Yet, in this analytic effort, I consider that theoretical trouble persists: in disclosing the experienced-vulnerability and in showing the ways this exceeds and disproves the governmental definition of vulnerability, how can we avoid reproducing a universalist, i.e. a culturalist, notion of vulnerability? Rephrasing the question: how to avoid projecting our own understanding of vulnerability –and our moral economies- in accounting for migrants' subjectivities? It is the analytical articulation of these three dimensions of vulnerability without omitting the discernment of their emicities (Olivier de Sardan 1998) that, I argue, is the challenge anthropology faces in accounting for the social life of vulnerability in the field of international protection. That is, in a field where humanitarianised governmental encounters constantly produce an «indistinct mass of vulnerables» (Costantini 2021: 64).

Veena Das seems to indicate an answer when she problematises the necessity of opposing «a universal ontology of the human versus the social-historical conditions under which some are made more vulnerable» (Das 2020: 60). Her analysis of political violence acknowledges that not all societies locate human vulnerability in the same way. However, Das argues, we must inquire into these differences considering that a vulnerable form of life «may be described under the sign of cultural particularity as it might be simultaneously seen as a human form of life» (*Ivi*: 5). A new theoretical reframing of vulnerability seems thus to emerge, which could take a transformative relevance in the field of international protection. This would not reproduce a culturalist-universalist approach, but would rather be oriented towards understanding the different ways in which regimes of im-mobility make people «to live in the face of the unknowability of the world» (*Ibidem*). That is with «a withdrawal of trust from words and a special vulnerability to the signifier» (*Ivi*: 48). In our case, I suggest, the signifier is precisely “vulnerable”.

Listening to migrants' voices can make the anthropological view of the production of injustice by humanitarian intervention even more complex and less dichotomous, sometimes even ethically perturbing. I was in a small square frequented by racialised migrants when I witnessed a conversation that a man with a permit was giving to his younger compatriot, who had recently arrived in Italy. In the identification at the time of disembarkation, a few days before, Saidou had been given a rejection notice because, coming from a safe country of origin, he had been given a different age than he actually was, making him an overage. However, the boy seemed doubtful about declaring his real date of birth, because he was afraid of the restriction of his autonomy that would result from entering a centre for unaccompanied minors. His moral economy of lying (Beneduce 2015) was expressing itself in an unexpected way, while still expressing his postcolonial subjectivity. Their conversation

was mixing English and Mandinka. But then an Italian world appeared. «You are a *bambino* (child), you cannot say that you are not», the permit holder kept repeating to the new arrival.

I understand that you are not used to this, that in Africa you are a man, but here you must think of yourself as a *bambino*. You have to go to school, study. Yes, you will have to obey what they tell you to do, you will have that life... going to school, playing football, and that's it. But you have to be able to do the right things. You have to study, getting help, build a future, you can't choose the street (eastern Sicily, November 2021).

These words seem to be a counterbalance to those of the Territorial commission member reported earlier. Besides, it should be added that Saidou finally managed to reach a legal helpdesk to block the deportation order and apply for asylum. Yet, when he met the public authorities, in particular the police force, they, in defiance of the law, treated him as an impostor. What I think Saidou's story indicates is that we need to pay more attention to the situated willingness to circumvent, manipulate or seek government assistance. It is through these practices that the target subjectivities of asylum governance attempt to reduce their experience of vulnerability by using the "vulnerable" label to cope with structural vulnerability. It is in making their unforeseen reasons for seeking or not seeking humanitarian intervention audible and intelligible that anthropology provides one of its best contributions.

If Anthropology Persists In Engaging, So Much The Better

In 2019, Heath Cabot wrote an article in which she examines the increased interest of anthropological scholarship in refugees at European Mediterranean borders. Amongst her arguments, she highlights that anthropology, particularly when it runs after European funds – such, it could be stated, in my case-, is in collusion with the very idea of the existence of a "refugee crisis". In Italy, a complementary debate emerged approximately during the same period in the journal *Antropologia Pubblica* (Altin & Sanò 2017). Inverting the title of Cabot's text, we could provocatively summarise the Italian debate by the caption "The business of refugees and the anthropologists' employment regime". This is related to the fact that the majority of anthropologists who have written about asylum in the last decade in Italy are PhD holders who, given the austerity in academic recruitment, have spent part of their professional lives as employees in the reception system. Besides, in a subaltern way, as their expertise is not contractually acknowledged. Passionate debates amongst Italian scholars ensued when this peculiar configuration was problematised. In particular, the question has been raised whether a third way was possible between collaborating with, and rejecting, a governmental life which, as the same ethnographies showed, produces foreclosure, social suffering, exclusion and oppression (Saitta & Cutolo 2017).

Subsequent studies have shown how anthropology can be allowed to become embedded in the field of international protection. The recent collective research project coordinated by Barbara Sorgoni and Paola Sacchi (2019) in some prefecture-led Italian reception centres is quite clear in showing how the exercise of *critical* anthropology is hampered by institutions. Indeed, what do we intend here – i.e. within this field – to be critical? To be critical means neither decreeing the impotence and irrelevance of anthropology in this field (Meillassoux

2009), nor letting it submit to “governmentalist configurations”, but not losing epistemic rigour (Olivier de Sardan 1995: 247).

Both Cabot’s article and the Italian discussion interrogate the different aspects of the awkward dimensions in which anthropology is entangled with asylum. We can use Pilotto’s words to summarise them as follows: «why hospitality should be considered a sector in which anthropology is particularly exposed to the danger of enslavement» (Pilotto 2019: 163)? With respect to vulnerability, we might say that such subjugation is linked to the fact that, in showing the inequity and inconsistency of the uses of the category of vulnerability and the injustice they produce, certain anthropology risks adopting the humanitarianised notion as its own heuristic tool. Pilotto’s proposal is to adopt a «cross-eyed point of view, which proceeds from migrants to look at the scientific discussion that has them as its object» (*Ibidem*). In my understanding, this implies moving beyond the sole analysis of how refugees’ rights are denied, which could reflect a compassionate moral economy in research, but exploring the multiple ways to experience, give meaning, locate and evaluate “structural vulnerabilisation”. All these differences equally deserve to be made intelligible, without fear of accounting of apparently disturbing voices. Otherwise, we would imitate in the research the same features of the humanitarian politics of life, that is, reproducing the distinction between lives (Fassin 2007: 516) with higher or less political and scientific interest. Besides, this is a crucial approach if we consider the colonial implications in European regimes of international protection (Beneduce 2015; Mayblin 2017).

It could be argued that this article explored the vulnerable life of international protection. Instead, the analysis aimed to discuss the pitfalls in the fuzzing and relative uses of the adjective “vulnerable” within the institutional life of international protection and within anthropological research at the time of European Integralism (Holmes 2000). The contemporary literature on this subject considers it decisive to understand «the consequences of the rapidly expanding use of the designation of “vulnerable”» (Turner 2021), yet it does not sufficiently problematise which theoretical notion of vulnerability is mobilised. I thus rather proposed to shed light on the distinctive levels hidden behind that designation. It is in the muddled borderland between different heuristic dimensions – the anthropological interpretative concept, the subject positioned understanding, as well as the strictly governmental category – that, I think, anthropology should work, with the very goal, I argue, of keeping the possibility of distinctions being theoretically maintained. To advance beyond the mere remark that a paradoxical situation exists because biopolitical humanitarian vulnerabilisation make vulnerabilities indefinite, we have to take into account also people’s understanding of the vulnerabilisation they undergo. Otherwise, power imbalances will always remain partially concealed and unarticulated.

We need to develop inquiries able to show hidden and silenced ways in which structural vulnerability work and vulnerable forms of life are produced. Being aware of the theoretical and ethical challenges (Caduff 2011) in elaborating arguments on the fictional character of the institutional veridiction regime around vulnerability, this article constitutes a contribution to the discussion on the multiple roles that anthropology can have in prompting an authoritative and subjectivity-oriented understanding of what vulnerability really is and how subjects are *effectively* made vulnerable.

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