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## Utilitarian and exclusive humanism

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**Project:** Making it Home: An Aesthetic Methodological Contribution to the Study of Migrant Home-Making and Politics of Integration (MaHoMe)

# Utilitarian and exclusive humanism



**Conditioned welcoming through  
state-sanctioned migrant home-making**

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In the current situation of Ukrainian people fleeing war, we can observe how the European nation states are queuing up to welcome Ukrainian refugees and provide them with protection and shelter. Only two weeks after Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, on 4 March 2022 the Council of Europe activated Article 5 of Directive 2001/55/EC, acknowledging the existence of a mass influx of displaced persons from Ukraine and facilitating their temporary protection. In stark contrast to the problems associated with the Dublin 111 Convention of July 2013, protection can, in the current circumstances, be offered by any member state. However, we also see many of the same nation states struggling with their own legal frameworks which have been developed in recent years to restrict the intake of refugees.

In this short paper, we engage with this contradictory situation by using home and homing practices as a prism through which to pose critical questions about migration management and migrant/refugee<sup>1</sup> integration. We will draw on the preliminary findings from the research project, *Making it home: An aesthetic methodological contribution to the study of migrant home-making and politics of integration*<sup>2</sup>, we address how notions of home and homing are configured in immigration and integration policies in Sweden and Denmark between 2010 and 2019.

Our objective is to contribute a few selected reconstructed policy narratives that can shed light on the conditioned welcoming of refugees and how that plays out as forms of utilitarian and exclusive humanism in the two welfare nation states of Denmark and Sweden.

We hope that this analytical approach will encourage critical dialogue among Nordic decision-makers and civil servants as to what view of humanity and democratic welfare society should be defining the reception of refugees and migrants in a globalised world.

## Why home?

Observing home and home-making in a migratory perspective destabilises the nationally romanticised narrative of home as "associated with stasis, boundaries, identity and fixity (...) as a purified space of belonging" (Ahmed, 1999, p. 339). Similarly, Boccagni argues that "home is the deep-rooted and institutional marker of the boundaries of legitimate membership and belonging. In this sense, migrants and foreigners are by definition antithetical to home" (2017, p. 88) – possibly because of popular notions of homeland/nation-as-home. Using home as an analytical prism through which to reveal socio-political configurations vis-à-vis migrants alerts us to the ways of establishing divisions among "those with whom we feel at home from the rest" (Duyvendak, 2011, p. 106).

The analytical deployment of the notions of security, familiarity and control as key elements of the political regulation of migrant home-making allows us to investigate how their opposites in terms of insecurity, estrangement and abandonment function as political regulatory means of creating unhomely places of discomfort (Darling, 2011, p. 269), such as those seen in migrant accommodation conditioned by way of race, income or citizenship tests.

## Reconstruction of policy narratives

In order to unpack how migrant homing is discursively, emotionally and practically activated in national policymaking in response to the presence of migrants – and in particular refugees – in Denmark and Sweden, we have undertaken a narrative analysis of policy documents such as government manifestos, bills, parliamentary commission reports, expert reports, acts, and guidance notes.

- 1 We are, of course, acutely aware of the fact that significant differences exist between the categories 'immigrants' and 'refugees' in legal as well as socio-political terms. However, in the MaHoMe project we have chosen to blur this distinction for analytical purposes and to include as many facets as possible of policies that address home and home-making vis-à-vis any kind of person crossing the state border.
- 2 The research project has been generously funded by NordForsk under the joint Nordic-UK research programme on Migration and Integration in 2019. The project runs from January 2020 to June 2024.

This entails an identification of narrative elements, that is to say characters (subjects), problem definitions, solutions, visions (Bansel, 2015) – together understood as the normalising justification of the worldview that governs the "manifestation of a particular theory of action" (Freeman, 2017, s. 36; Czarniawska, 2010). Policy narratives do not necessarily present themselves explicitly in the empirical material but must be reconstructed.

Reconstructing policy narratives enables us to question the universality and neutrality of the legislation that conditions migrant home-making (Polletta et al., 2011).

### **Regulating migrant homing prior to the 2015 crisis**

Before we present two reconstructed policy narratives that pivot on the reception of refugees through state-sanctioned home-making in Sweden and Denmark post-2015, we find it important to provide some background knowledge of the more optimistic political narratives of refugee reception from before the 2015 crisis.

In Sweden, economic recovery and active labour market policies were high on the political agenda between 2009 and 2013. In this context, global migration was envisaged as a positive force that "opens the door to both economic and political freedom for more people in the world"<sup>3</sup>. Migrants and their descendants were rendered undisputable contributors to economic growth, even though "[c]ontinued improvements are needed to take advantage of the potential and drive that people with a foreign background possess"<sup>4</sup>. Such improvements were envisioned to provide migrants with the opportunity to maintain connections with their homelands; feeling safe to stay in their lands of origin for longer periods of time without risking their permanent residency/citizenship in Sweden. Allegedly, multiple homes would facilitate integration in Sweden and create more resources for the welfare state in terms of new business connections, capital, cultural contacts and the inflow of skills and knowledge.

This was seen as a *triple-win*, since multiple homing benefits migrants, their receiving countries, and their homelands.

In Denmark, between 2011 and 2013, much in line with Sweden's active labour market policies, the new Social-Democratic led government reversed the Aliens and Integration Act prohibiting asylum seekers from residing and working outside the reception centres while waiting for their decision on their asylum application. This revision was based on the logic that letting asylum seekers reside outside reception centres would improve their chances of integrating in Denmark if granted asylum, or better prepare them for starting a new life should they return home.<sup>5</sup> The regulation of asylum seekers' accommodation emerged as a means of maximising human potential, while sustaining the national self-image as a humanistic and benevolent nation state. The maximisation of human potential feeds into the double logic of integration and repatriation and builds on conditioned rights to dwell outside reception centres including a clear demand for the asylum seekers to both integrate and repatriate.

Despite the similar interests in human capital maximisation, in Denmark, the Immigration Service and accommodation operators were assigned maximum agency and control of the asylum seekers' home-making. In Sweden, however, the state drew back from controlling migrants' homing and migrants were deemed capable of figuring out how to accommodate themselves in the societies encompassed by circular migration.

### **Swedish and Danish policy narratives from the 'last' refugee crisis (post-2015)**

Taking the 'refugee crisis' of 2015 as a watershed, it seems relevant to revisit the policy narratives responding to that 'past' situation to shed light on the policy responses to the current crisis of Ukrainian refugees arriving in Sweden and Denmark.

3 "Regeringsförklaringen" 18 September 2012, p.11. Translated by the authors.

All quotes from Danish and Swedish policy documents have been translated into English by the authors.

4 "Regeringsförklaringen" 5 October 2010, p. 18.

5 "Et Danmark, der står sammen", Danish Government, 2011.

### Sweden: From a triple-win to a triple-loss?

The governments led by the Swedish Social Democrat Party (2014-present) essentially continue the policies of their predecessors aiming to speed up the labour market integration of new arrivals who are expected to stay in Sweden for a longer period or permanently. The focus of discussions is on ensuring long-term sustainable policies and remedying "the lack of a holistic perspective in the reception system"<sup>6</sup>. However, in contrast to their predecessors, the Social Democrats have been keen to introduce more restrictive regulations which both discourage refugees to arrange accommodation independently and oblige all municipalities to accept them.

The basic post-2015 political narrative unfolds like this:

*The country is in an "exceptional situation"<sup>7</sup>. Too many newcomers remain in temporary venues provided by the Swedish Migration Board for long periods of time, which delays their 'establishment' (employment and integration into society). Municipalities are expected to show solidarity both with the refugees and with the state. Therefore, no municipality should be exempted from sharing responsibility for migrant reception. Restriction of municipal autonomy is in order. Although the local reception of refugees can be conditioned and negotiated, a no-option cannot be motivated. As recipients of Swedish welfare provisions, refugees are expected to limit their in-state mobility, avoid settling in 'problem-ridden' areas, and make themselves accessible to the authorities<sup>8</sup>. The quicker they come to the assigned municipality and the longer they stay there, the better their chances for a successful 'establishment'.*

Although it is admitted that housing of their own choice is beneficial for their well-being, refugees' own accommodation seems to be problematised as a risk to national order and security.

Adequate refugee homing is envisioned as assigned and "fixed" (Boccagni, 2017, p. 102). Consequently, the refugees' personal choice of home is good if it is in line with demands formulated by the state agencies.

### Denmark: From utilitarian accommodation to a minimum level of safety

The new right-wing government had only just been put in place when the European refugee crisis of 2015 reached Danish soil with refugees walking along the Danish motorways. The government did not hesitate to respond in line with their previous restrictive hard-liner policies vis-à-vis refugees and non-Western immigrants (Padovan-Özdemir & Moldenhawer, 2017; Suárez-Krabbe & Lindberg, 2019). The mass influx of refugees and migrants in the late summer of 2015 was considered a state of emergency, putting even more pressure on the Danish economy, culture, and social cohesion. There was an expressed concern that "illegal immigrants will run straight to gang members, Salafists and citizens, who wish to act as human smugglers for a day or a week (...) Islamists and terrorists can use and abuse the asylum system with the aim of settling in Denmark."<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the approach was to create as hostile a reception environment as possible, and even prevent refugees from arriving in Denmark by, for example, placing Danish government announcements in Lebanese newspapers explaining the restrictive Danish refugee reception policies.

On Danish soil, the policy narrative took shape like this:

*Extraordinarily, the Police and Immigration Services have established temporary accommodation in tent camps, but it is foreseen that the number of arriving refugees and migrants will put much more pressure on the accommodation facilities available.*

6 "Ett ordnat mottagande – gemensamt ansvar för snabb etablering eller återvändande", SOU 2018:22, p. 35.

7 "Ett gemensamt ansvar för mottagande av nyanlända. Arbetsmarknadsutskottets betänkande". 2015/16:AU4.

8 "Ett ordnat mottagande – gemensamt ansvar för snabb etablering eller återvändande". SOU 2018:22, p. 22.

9 "Betænkning over Forslag til lov om ændring af udlændingeloven (Håndtering af flygtninge og migrantsituationen)". Udlændinge-, Integrations- og Boligudvalget. 2015.

*The solution is therefore to permit exemptions from the Planning and Development Act in cases of properties, "which will be used for accommodation (...) or facilities for the purpose of detention"<sup>10</sup> of refugees and illegal migrants. Accordingly, these exemptions allow the Minister of Aliens, Integration and Housing to order local authorities to find, establish and run facilities to accommodate refugees and migrants. Non-housing facilities can be expediently transformed into and re-categorised as housing facilities and need only to meet minimum requirements for safety and sanitation. These measures should "make it less attractive to apply for asylum in Denmark." Accordingly, we can help more refugees in the regions neighbouring war zones "than by spending the aid on accommodating asylum applicants in Denmark."<sup>11</sup>*

Permitting exemptions from the Planning and Development Act serves as a double-edged sword, presenting Danish society as hospitable and humanitarian while at the same time making the material conditions of that accommodation as unaccommodating as possible, only meeting minimum requirements for safety and sanitation. This is done with the clear intention of keeping refugees away from Danish soil based on the logic that the 'accommodation' costs would be better spent helping refugees in neighbouring regions of the refugees' war-ridden home countries.

### **Concluding remarks – and an outlook to the current European refugee crisis**

Investigating Danish and Swedish policy narratives concerning refugee and migrant home-making sheds light on how "[a]ccommodation becomes articulated as both a hospitable and humanitarian provision to those 'in need' and a device for managing, monitoring and 'warehousing' (Fekete, 2005), those under review by domopolitics" (Darling, 2011, p. 267). Accordingly, we see how domopolitics is realised by means of 'housing' the refugee/migrant through regulated dispersal and controlled living spaces.

More specifically, light is shed on how having control over one's home becomes an exclusive privilege that can only be granted if the state considers it beneficial to the economy, which was the case in both Sweden and Denmark prior to 2015. However, post-2015 and in response to the 'last' European refugee crisis, refugees' right to choose and control their own accommodation seems to become a matter of state protection against 'too many' of 'non-Western descent' in the 'wrong places'.

In this way, our analysis points to a welcoming of refugees conditioned on numbers, descent, and a vision of the state home (receiving societies) as a pure space of entitled belonging for those with valuable content envied by others (Walters, 2004, p. 241) – in other words a form of exclusive humanism.

We see this exclusive form of humanism emerging most strikingly in the current Danish state's welcoming of Ukrainian refugees. Only a few weeks after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Danish parliament passed a special law that allows Danish authorities to diverge from the restrictive general Aliens and Integration Act.<sup>12</sup> This exceptional welcoming of Ukrainian refugees is clearly conditioned on their Western descent from neighbouring regions of Denmark. So, the administrative casework is encouraged and expedited to grant Ukrainian refugees as normal a life as possible, as soon as possible. This notion of normalcy includes a two-year residence permit and a contract with an accommodation operator providing Danish lessons, labour market integration, and housing. Unlike earlier dispersal and dilution policies, the establishment of so-called 'Ukrainian villages' is imagined as the gentlest way of accommodating their integration.

10 "Lov om ændring af udlændingeloven (Håndtering af flygtninge og migrantsituationen)". 2015.

11 "Sammen for fremtiden". Danish Government. 2015, p. 23.

12 "Lov om midlertidig opholdstilladelse til personer, der er fordrevet fra Ukraine". 2022.

Accordingly, the Danish special law for the reception of Ukrainian refugees seems to be in accordance with the recent EU directive on facilitating the subsistence of large numbers of Ukrainians fleeing the war. However, as this EU directive is based on the condition of the Ukrainian refugees' subsequent return, the Swedish government seems to have abandoned the tradition of granting refugees permanent residence. Consequently, the current Swedish state response to the accommodation of Ukrainian refugees rests on the idea that Sweden is not meant to be their home, but a temporary shelter. The dismantling of Swedish political identity as a "miraculous welfare machine" (Schall, 2016) should be accounted for in European and domestic contexts where security concerns on par with economic rationality and the rhetoric of sustainability play increasingly important roles in curtailing humanitarian policy regimes.

As such, this analysis echoes Brun and Fábos' finding that most national policies addressing refugees are rooted in the notion of "country of origin" and guided by imperatives of return and repatriation (2020, p. 165). This tends to translate into "encampment, minimum standards and 'don't die survival'" (2020, p. 166), restricting refugees' agency of home-making in the receiving countries.

### Time for a re-think?

Approaching home as a site of politics – radicalised by international flight in a world system of nation states – raises the question of the unequal distribution of the right and means to claim and/or attach a sense of security, familiarity, and control over a certain space. In this way, home can be used just as much for exclusion as for inclusion (Boccagni, 2017, p. 91).

Our analysis of recent Swedish and Danish policy-making shows that refugees' home-making is far from being a private matter in the liberal sense. Rather, refugees' home-making appears to be an object of state regulation, confinement, and dispersion.

However, reconstructing Swedish and Danish policy narratives of refugee reception provides the possibility to re-think how things could be done otherwise (Polletta et al., 2011).

Consequently, we encourage Nordic decision-makers and civil servants to take the opportunity to re-consider the kind of humanism deployed in refugee reception:

- Can we expect all refugees to be considered as belonging to the same kind of humanity, or do we allow differentiation on the grounds of numbers, descent, and a vision of the receiving society as a pure space of entitled belonging?
- Can we expect the provision of protection for refugees regardless of how – or even if – it benefits the receiving country, or is Nordic humanism inherently rooted in a utilitarian locus?
- Can we expect that the state will always be able to rely on the contributions of civil society, of ordinary citizens and their voluntary organisations, who were much praised for their initiatives of housing refugees and providing them with initial material support in both 2015 and 2022?
- Can we expect that the reception system of refugees in the Nordic countries will be reformed so that large numbers of refugees can be quickly and effectively accommodated while not jeopardising civil society's current humanitarian principles?

This analysis indicates that this might be the time to learn from the present local European refugee crisis and to re-write and subvert the management of the recent past global refugee crisis.

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