

# Warehousing asylum seekers: The *logistification* of reception

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## Abstract

This article employs the analytical perspective of logistics to explore a key, yet quite overlooked, aspect of the functioning of the EU border regime: the reception and associated territorial distribution of newly arrived asylum seekers. Drawing on qualitative data collected at the height of the ‘refugee reception crisis’ in multiple contexts in Italy and Sweden, the article shows how reception is undergoing a process of ‘logistification’. In this process, organisational and logistical concerns prevail over the care for those who are assisted, and reception is turned into a logistical matter of moving and accommodating asylum seekers. Crucial to this process of ‘logistification’ is the warehousing of asylum seekers – an art of government that seeks to objectify asylum seekers through their depersonalisation, victimisation and (im)mobilisation. The article argues that the ‘logistification’ of reception not only has dehumanising effects on asylum seekers, but also exposes the attempt to make profit out their management and transfer. This creates the conditions for the development of a reception industry in which the very presence of asylum seekers is valorised for the profit of a whole range of actors who ensure the reproduction, transfer, knowledge and control of those hosted in reception facilities.

## Keywords

Migration, asylum, borders, logistics, warehousing, reception

In April 2020, amid the global Covid-19 crisis, 181 containers were dispatched to Greece from Austria in the framework of the cooperation between the two countries in the field of migration management (Ekathimerini, 2020). The containers were to be used to accommodate asylum seekers as a replacement of two camps that had to be quarantined after some guests were tested positive for Covid-19. Converted shipping containers were also the solution imposed on the inhabitants of the so-called ‘jungle’ in Calais, when French authorities

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decided to bulldoze the makeshift informal camp in January 2016 (BBC, 2016). Later in the same year, temporary housing modules obtained from containers, so-called ‘container villages’, were set up in Luxembourg to address the shortage of reception capacity (Luxembourg Times, 2016). Despite widespread criticism from human rights organisations, containers are still used to host asylum seekers in the Hungarian border points of Röszke and Tompa (ECRE, 2020: 99), as well as in the Italian hotspot centre in Taranto (Oxfam Italia et al., 2019).

These examples expose a disturbing connection between the container – the symbol of the ‘logistics revolution’ (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008) – and the accommodation of asylum seekers. While representing quite extreme cases, the examples above are paradigmatic of a more profound incursion of logistical concerns in the management of asylum seekers. This incursion not only manifests itself through the use of containers as accommodation facilities, but takes the shape of a broader process of ‘logistification’ that seems to increasingly inform reception policies and practices in the European Union (EU). Whereas this expression has been primarily used to identify transformations that are currently reshaping the EU border regime (Mezzadra, 2017, 2019), it is here employed to explore one specific aspect of such regime, namely, the reception of asylum seekers. By attending to the ‘logistification’ of reception, this article seeks to emphasise the growing centrality of a logistical rationality in the government of asylum seekers in the EU.

Although logistical concerns in the management of asylum seekers and refugees are not new (Marrus, 1985), the process of ‘logistification’ was accelerated by the ‘refugee reception crisis’ (Rea et al., 2019), when most EU countries found themselves unprepared to deal with a significant increase in the number of asylum seekers and resorted to temporary emergency facilities. This exposed the increasingly infrastructural character of reception systems in the EU context. Yet, the becoming logistical of reception is not a simple by-product of an exceptional situation and it should rather be considered as indicative of long-term trends in the EU border regime. The fact that containers are still used as reception facilities, although annual asylum applications in the EU are far less than those registered in 2015 and 2016,<sup>1</sup> is a proof of the necessary decoupling between ‘logistification’ and emergency. For this reason, the growing relevance of logistical concerns in the organisation of reception systems, as well as the mounting appeal of terms, metaphors, images and solutions from the world of logistics, deserve analytical attention.

Drawing on qualitative data collected at the height of ‘refugee reception crisis’ in Italy and Sweden, two countries that hosted a significant proportion of asylum seekers at that time<sup>2</sup> and thus represent privileged vantage points from which to observe EU-wide dynamics, this article explores forms and effects of the ‘logistification’ of reception. More specifically, it shows how the process of ‘logistification’ is well encapsulated in the gradual transformation of reception into a form of warehousing, through which the humanity of asylum seekers is moved into the background as they are increasingly treated and moved around as objects. In this process, organisational and logistical concerns prevail over the care for those who are assisted and reception becomes a matter of moving and accommodating newly arrived asylum seekers as quickly as possible. Such a ‘logistification’ of reception not only has dehumanising effects on asylum seekers, but also exposes the attempt to make profit out their management and transfer. This creates the conditions for the development of a reception industry in which the very presence of asylum seekers is valorised for the profit of a whole range of actors who ensure the reproduction, transfer, knowledge and control of those hosted in reception facilities.

The article draws on over 30 semi-structured interviews carried out between 2015 and 2016 with reception officers at *Migrationsverket* (Swedish Migration Agency), employees of

Italian reception facilities, activists and NGO workers in multiple contexts in Italy and Sweden. Interviews aimed to explore the logistical management of asylum seekers, with a view to understanding their trajectories from arrival to accommodation in reception centres across the two countries. This required a multi-sited fieldwork that took me from the docks in Sicily, where those crossing the Central Mediterranean disembark, to the frozen streets of Kiruna, in Lapland, passing through cities like Catania, Bologna, Milan, Malmö, Gothenburg and Stockholm. While disembarkation concerned Italy alone, both countries shared similar organisational challenges concerning the identification of available facilities, the distribution of asylum seekers and the organisation of transfers from transit centres to final reception facilities. These challenges were scrutinised with research participants, who were chosen because of their role and expertise in national reception systems, as well as their geographical positioning in such systems, with a view to mapping out the geography of reception in the two countries.

Access to research participants was obtained in multiple ways, depending on the case study and on the type of actors. In some cases, particularly – yet not only – in the Italian context, previous professional or research exchanges with members of institutions or NGOs facilitated access to their organisations or provided a helpful reference when contacting others. Similarly, a snowball sampling technique was used to recruit activists in both countries. Where prior networks were not available, like in the case of *Migrationsverket* for instance, I formally contacted the institution, which authorised my research and provided a list of possible available interviewees in my chosen cities. While this form of access inevitably presents risks, the most relevant being that interviewees are carefully selected by superiors to ensure that the official institutional narrative is promoted and potential criticisms minimised, data triangulation offered an important mitigation strategy. The involvement of different types of informants, including NGOs workers and notably activists, allowed the cross-checking of information and the resulting development of a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under analysis.

By focusing on the ‘logistification’ of reception in the EU, this article intends to make a double contribution to critical debates on migration management. First, while warehousing has been hitherto used as a merely descriptive tool in the field of asylum (Ehrkamp, 2016; Fekete, 2005; Guild, 2006), it is here conceptualised as an art of governing asylum seekers, whereby art of government is understood in the Foucauldian sense. Drawing on Foucault’s understanding of government as a set of techniques and forms of knowledge that aim to conduct behaviour by structuring one’s possible field of action (Foucault, 2002: 341), warehousing is presented as a complex assemblage of practices, devices, infrastructures, procedures and approaches that seek to govern asylum seekers through their depersonalisation, victimisation and (im)mobilisation. Through an emphasis on the practical and technical dimensions of power, this conceptualisation foregrounds the concrete and contested ways in which asylum seekers are governed in diverse contexts, regardless of the institutional and legal frameworks of reception. Taken as an art of government, warehousing does not merely concern exceptional situations, characterised by poor reception conditions, questionable reception practices or even violations of rights; it is instead integral to reception itself.

Second, the article contributes to a growing body of literature that has begun to address questions of mobility and border management through the angle of logistics. The originality of this contribution consists in the attempt to use a logistical approach to investigate the EU reception regime, as I define the specific aspect of the EU border regime that concerns the reception of asylum seekers. By doing so, the article draws attention to a further dimension of the intricate relation between capitalism and migration that is emphasised by studies exploring the ‘logistification’ of migration regimes. While these studies normally focus on

the ways through which a logistical rationality supports the exploitation of migrant labour, the emphasis on the ‘logistification’ of reception reveals how value can be extracted from newly arrived migrants regardless of their introduction in the labour market. In fact, as reception systems are transformed into logistical infrastructures through which asylum seekers are moved and put on hold, the very presence of asylum seekers becomes a source of profit for those involved in the management and control of reception facilities, in the transfers of asylum seekers and in the distribution of food and other basic commodities, such as clothes, bedding, toiletries and phone cards.

The article begins by situating the analysis within the debates on logistics and migration. Besides reviewing the literature on the logistical reorganisation of the EU border regime, the first section highlights the advantages that a logistical gaze can bring to the analysis of reception. The second section argues that the reception of asylum seekers in the EU increasingly resembles a form of warehousing, meaning a standardised and impersonal support that aims to the mere satisfaction of basic needs. Warehousing is conceptualised as an art of government, which is based on three key elements: depersonalisation, victimisation and (im)mobility. The third section explores the transformations affecting the reception of asylum seekers in the EU through the analytical lenses of logistics. By focusing on two key strengths of this analytical perspective, that is the double emphasis on infrastructures and on the correlation between migration and capitalism, the section empirically observes how reception systems are transformed into logistical infrastructures that generate profit by holding and moving asylum seekers. The conclusion briefly wraps up the argument of the article, while also calling attention to the practices of resistance that undermine the logistical dream of smooth and linear reception systems.

## The logistical reorganisation of the EU border regime

Logistics has become a central feature of contemporary global capitalism. Not a single aspect of our daily lives, in pretty much every corner of the globe, is free from the influence of global supply chains through which logistics has reshaped global space and time. Starting in the 1960s, the ‘logistics revolution’ (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008) has radically transformed the ways in which ‘corporations imagine, calculate, plan, and build spaces of production and of distribution’ (Cowen, 2014: 6). Crucial to this transformation has been a ‘shift from cost minimisation *after production* to value added *across circulatory systems*’ (Cowen, 2014: 24, italics in the original). Distribution, in other words, has been integrated into the process of business, thus becoming a profitable activity in itself. Initially developed as a ‘military art of moving soldiers and supplies to the front’ (Cowen, 2014: 24), logistics has turned into an ‘ubiquitous science of circulation’ (Cowen, 2014: 25), which has reorganised the global economy around the model of the supply chain.

Given this trajectory, it should be no surprise if logistics has spilled out from the field of business studies in which it mainly developed and has become a key issue in critical thought as well (Cowen, 2014; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Neilson, 2012; Tsing, 2009). Critical research on borders and migration has also placed heightened attention to logistics (Altenried et al., 2018; Bojadžijev and Mezzadra, 2018; Grappi, 2020; Mezzadra, 2016, 2017, 2019; Pollozek and Passoth, 2019; Tazzioli and Garelli, 2020). Scholars in this field have increasingly highlighted the central role played by logistical concerns and infrastructures in the practices of migration and in the attempts to govern them. Notably, Mezzadra (2017, 2019) introduced the notion of ‘logistification’ to describe the growing significance of logistics as a rationality that informs border management in the EU and manifests itself in

the attempts to reorganise mobility and its control through devices like hotspots, corridors, platforms and hubs (Mezzadra, 2017: 2).

A key instrument of this process of 'logistification' is certainly the 'hotspot approach' introduced by the European Commission in May 2015 to address the 'logistical challenge' (Papada et al., 2020: 1035) of registering all migrants arriving in Greece and Italy. The 'hotspot approach' has been described as 'a project of "logistical" reorganization of the European border and migration regime' (Altenried et al., 2018: 294), as well as a 'complex set of infrastructures, identification procedures, logistical nodes for managing migrants' landing and regaining control over migration movements' (Tazzioli and Garelli, 2020: 1018). Along similar lines, in their analysis of registration practices and the related data infrastructures at the Moria hotspot centre in Lesvos, Pollozek and Passoth define the hotspot as 'a logistical device which locates, sorts, and detains those who arrive at the hardened EU border' (2019: 2).

Despite the undeniable centrality of hotspots in the logistical reshaping of the EU border regime, it is important to keep in mind that logistical forms of migration management extend well beyond hotspots. The EU logistics of migration management is also incarnated in the forced corridors and channels that were established to regain control over migrants' autonomous mobility in the wake of the 2015 'long summer of migration' (Kasperek and Speer, 2015). This happened for instance in the Balkan route where an 'infrastructure of transit' (Kasperek, 2016: 6) was transformed into a corridor managed by the states along the route. In the corridor, 'migrants didn't travel the route anymore: they were hurriedly channelled along' (Kasperek, 2016: 6). The two relocation schemes introduced by the European Commission in September 2015 in order to transfer asylum seekers 'in clear need of protection' from Greece and Italy to other EU member states performed a similar function. They established '*channels of migration management*' (Tazzioli and Garelli, 2020: 1019, italics in the original), through which migrants could be distributed along controlled routes and thus prevented from deciding where to claim asylum.

Building on this growing 'logistification' of border management, some scholars have posited 'a logistical gaze on migration' (Mezzadra, 2016: 39), emphasising how this approach can open new research fields that are capable of grasping tensions and conflicts characterising contemporary processes of migration (Altenried et al., 2018: 295). This article takes up this call by placing a logistical gaze on a key, yet quite overlooked, aspect of the functioning of the EU border regime in recent years, that is the reception and associated territorial distribution of asylum seekers. The following sections show how reception, from disembarkation to the final accommodation centre, is increasingly a logistical matter of moving and warehousing asylum seekers. A logistical gaze is therefore particularly appropriate for grasping these transformations affecting reception measures in the EU. At the same time, testing this gaze in the field of reception provides an opportunity to refine this analytical approach by applying it on a new research subject.

The advantages of a logistical gaze on migration and, in turn, on the reception of asylum seekers are primarily two. The first is that it draws attention to the crucial relation between migration and the transformations of capitalism (Bojadžijev and Mezzadra, 2018: 110). A logistical gaze sheds light on the 'strict correlation between migration and the shifting configuration of relations between capital and labour' (Mezzadra, 2019: 46), while also acknowledging the role of migrants' practices in shaping such configuration. In this respect, a pathbreaking work has recently employed the lenses of logistics to investigate refugee 'integration' measures in Germany (Altenried et al., 2018). This study shows the emergence of a 'complex system and infrastructure of intermediation' that is centred on 'the "delivery" of labour power according to the presumed needs of the labour market' (Altenried et al.,

2018: 303). It is exactly the organisation of this encounter between capital and labour that is 'at stake in the logistical fantasies of contemporary regimes of migration management' (Bojadžijev and Mezzadra, 2018: 110).

The second advantage of a logistical gaze concerns the emphasis on the logistics and infrastructures of migration and migration management, which in turn puts into the foreground the increasing entanglement between humanitarian, military and economic concerns in the government of mobility (Mezzadra, 2019: 48). A key reference in this regard is the work by Xiang and Lindquist on migration infrastructures, a concept by which they refer to 'the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility' (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014: 124). The idea of migration infrastructure draws attention to the commercial, regulatory, technological, humanitarian and social infrastructures, including for instance recruitment intermediaries, state agencies, means of communication and transport, NGOs, international organisations and migrant networks, which create the actual conditions of possibility for migration (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014: 124). Other researchers explored specific aspects of migration infrastructures, such as 'urban arrival infrastructures' (Meeus et al., 2019: 3), data infrastructures for registration and monitoring (Pelizza, 2019; Pollozek and Passoth, 2019; Scheel et al., 2019), digital infrastructures of border control (Broeders, 2007; Broeders and Dijkstra, 2016). The emerging field of digital migration studies (Leurs and Smets, 2018), on the other hand, is placing an increasing attention on the digitalisation of migration mobility and the use of technologies like smartphones and social media to support it (Trimikliniotis et al., 2015; Ullrich, 2017).

The strengths of a logistical gaze on migration, which I have briefly described by drawing on different bodies of literature, can be successfully transferred to the study of reception measures. The focus on the relation between migration and capitalism, as well as on the infrastructural dimensions of movements and the attempts to control them, capture key features of the processes of 'logistification' of reception that are explored in this article. First, a logistical gaze on reception enables one to grasp processes of commercialisation of reception that are gradually transforming the management of asylum seekers into a profitable business for several actors. These include not only those who receive substantial amounts of public funding to run reception facilities, but all those related economic activities through which the reproduction, control, movement and knowledge of asylum seekers is ensured. A logistical gaze therefore offers a privileged vantage point from which to investigate the constitution of a reception industry as a peculiar and crucial dimension of that 'migration industry' which several authors have investigated (Andersson, 2014; Gammeltoft-Hansen and Nyberg Sørensen, 2012; Hernández-León, 2013).

Second, by focusing on infrastructures such as landing docks, hubs, transports, reception facilities and transit centres, a logistical gaze on reception emphasises the gradual transformation of reception systems into chains in which technical matters of moving and accommodating asylum seekers as quickly as possible acquire primary importance. While logistics enables the 'circulation of stuff' along supply chains (Cowen, 2014: 1), the 'logistification' of reception promotes the circulation of asylum seekers along reception chains. In a similar way to the Balkan corridor mentioned above (Kasperek, 2016), reception systems seek to channel asylum seekers along predetermined routes, preventing them from actively determining their own movement and selecting their destination. Just like labour migrants in the complex infrastructure of intermediation described by Xiang and Lindquist (2014: 131, italics in the original), asylum seekers '*are moved* by others' in the reception infrastructure. By emphasising the importance of the infrastructural dimension of reception systems, a logistical gaze sheds light on the processes through which asylum seekers are made passive

and moved around like objects. These processes denote the gradual slippage of reception into a form of warehousing, the features of which are discussed in the next section through the analysis of my empirical data from Italy and Sweden.

## **Warehousing as an art of governing refugees**

The US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (2004) dedicated the World Refugee Survey 2004 to the issue of warehousing to denounce the condition of refugees in humanitarian camps in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The editor of the survey, Merrill Smith, describes warehousing as:

The practice of keeping refugees in protracted situations of restricted mobility, enforced idleness, and dependency – their lives on indefinite hold – in violation of their basic rights under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. Egregious cases are characterised by indefinite physical confinement in camps. Encamped or not, refugees are warehoused when they are deprived of the freedom necessary to pursue normal lives. (US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, 2004: 38)

One year later, Fekete (2005) took the idea of warehousing to the European context in her critique of EU member states' efforts to step up deportations. Notably, she emphasised how objectification and dehumanisation underpin 'the idea that refugees can be "warehoused" [...] treated as commodities, they can be parcelled up, packaged and sent out of Europe' (Fekete, 2005: 67–68). Guild uses instead the term to specify the EU approach towards those entering the EU, as they need to be 'warehoused pending certification' (2006: 638) like goods in the internal market. As Guild puts it, 'in the internal market logic, asylum seekers should be certified on arrival like beans, or warehoused (like tins of beans) until this is administratively convenient' (2006: 636). More recently, Ehrkamp observes how refugees are warehoused not only in camps and detention centres, but also in cities as these increasingly become zones of exception where refugees are left on the margins (2016: 817). In her analysis, protracted uncertainty, waiting and the impossibility of fully enjoying rights are key features of refugees' experiences of warehousing.

While acknowledging the importance of these works in describing key dimensions of refugee experiences, this article intends to take a step forward by refining the idea of warehousing. This refinement seeks to propose warehousing as a conceptual tool that grasps some key aspects in the ways asylum seekers are governed in the EU and in other contexts. Far from representing a descriptive metaphor only, warehousing is thus presented as an art of government in the Foucauldian sense, whereby government is understood as an eminently technical and practical activity, whose main objective is the conduct of oneself and others (Foucault, 2009). In this perspective, warehousing denotes a manifold set of practices, procedures, infrastructures, guidelines, assumptions, technical and analytical instruments, contingency and preparedness plans, whose central underlying thread is the *attempt* to govern asylum seekers through their objectification. Before discussing the key features of warehousing as an art of government, it is nonetheless crucial to stress that it only represents an attempt – although significantly widespread and growing – to govern asylum seekers. As such, it should not be interpreted as the exclusive attempt nor as an always successful one. Quite the contrary, asylum seekers' unauthorised movements as well as their struggles constantly frustrate governmental attempts to warehouse them as I emphasise in the conclusion.

The attempt to objectify asylum seekers through their warehousing is premised upon three key elements: mechanisms of depersonalisation, mechanisms of victimisation and the imposition of (im)mobility. The first concerns a process of depersonalisation, through

which asylum seekers' subjectivities are obliterated and their specificity as individual human beings is moved into background. Such a curtailment of the self, which has been widely explored in the context of total institutions (Goffman, 1961), inscribes the warehousing of asylum seekers in a long tradition of confinement practices. Through warehousing, asylum seekers are targeted as an indistinct crowd, who can be assisted in a standardised way through the mere satisfaction of basic human needs. Far from that, 'migrants are not all the same; it's a very heterogeneous group' (Interview with an NGO worker, Sweden, January 2015), as a Swedish NGO worker explained:

We have people coming without knowing how to read and write, but then we have the sergeant from Teheran, we have the minister from Somalia [...] so, I mean, how to receive one or the other? [...] That's a big difference. Now we are receiving in Sweden a lot of people coming from Syria: doctors, dentists, nurses. And they are well educated, they are in the middle of the life, and they want to earn a lot of money so that they can take their families here and start a new life in a new place. They don't want to spend 3, 4, or 5 years, just waiting. But another thing is a very vulnerable 60 years old woman, who feels herself very, very old. She just wants to live in peace and just want to sit down. I mean, the way of receiving people each and everyone according to who they are, I think that is the big challenge. Because it's so easy to put everyone in classes learning Swedish, but this... to receive the 35 years old Syrian sergeant, the top intelligent, very smart guy, that is the challenge. (Interview with an NGO worker, Sweden, January 2015)

Many of the reception officers that I met were aware of these issues. Yet, implicitly or not, they justified depersonalisation by drawing attention to the challenges of supporting significant numbers of asylum seekers in an effective way, as if the attention to individual needs and features could not be maintained when the quantity of asylum seekers increases. Some *Migrationsverket's* reception officers found it impossible to attend to the demands and peculiarities of each asylum seeker, especially when the number of people under their responsibility was sizeable. For them, an organisation like *Migrationsverket* cannot work by being responsible for every asylum seeker and it is rather the latter who is required to adjust to the needs of the institution, not vice versa. Importantly, adjusting to the needs of the institution means accepting a standardised and impersonal support that is more concerned about the efficiency of the system than to the needs of its recipients. In other words, depersonalisation denotes a process through which reception is bureaucratised and standardised. As a result, asylum seekers and their dignity are moved to the background for the sake of efficiency.

In its focus on the mere satisfaction of basic needs, warehousing resembles what Hyndman and Giles describe as "'don't die" humanitarianism' (2011: 373). With this expression, they refer to forms of assistance that ensure physical survival, protecting the right to life while suspending the enjoyment of other fundamental rights. In this respect, it is important to highlight that warehousing does not designate exclusively a violation of rights, as in Smith's definition above. As an art of government, warehousing exceeds what Foucault defines as the 'juridico-discursive' dimension of power (1978: 82), meaning its repressive character and institutional incarnation. Far from representing a temporary exception to the norm of law, the warehousing of asylum seekers can and does take place even when rights are formally guaranteed.

In a strict relation with depersonalisation, a second feature of warehousing that deserves attention concerns the victimisation of asylum seekers upon which warehousing is based. Through the process of depersonalisation, 'refugees stop being specific persons and become pure victims in general' (Malkki, 1996: 378). This connection emerged quite clearly in the



interviews with reception officers. For instance, while emphasising the impossibility of being responsible for each asylum seeker in reception facilities, a reception officer justified depersonalisation by observing that: ‘we offer this opportunity, but it has to be under some special rules’ (Interview with a *Migrationsverket*’s reception officer, Sweden, January 2015). The reference to some rules to be followed is very controversial because it implies conditions to be respected for the enjoyment of what is instead a set of rights related to the condition of asylum seeker.

Besides that, making reception contingent upon specific conditions reveals that reception measures are basically imposed to asylum seekers, who are left with the possibility to take it or leave it. Such an imposition is premised upon the belief that refugees are victims who have lost everything and must therefore necessarily welcome and even be grateful for any help received. As already emphasised long ago by Harrell-Bond in relation to humanitarian camps in Africa, ‘refugees are expected to *appreciate* whatever is offered’ (1999: 145, italics in the original). They have to fulfil expectations about helplessness, gratitude, docility, to prove they are ‘real’, deserving refugees. From such a perspective, asylum seekers cannot certainly complain about poor reception conditions, or the isolation of their accommodation, as that would denote that they are not really in need. Consequently, from the perspective of authorities, reception in the form of warehousing is acceptable because it is better than nothing at the end of the day.

The third feature is another adjustment to the definition proposed by Smith in 2004 and it is meant to move beyond an overly static idea of warehousing, which is primarily framed in terms of immobility. The warehousing of asylum seekers does not take place only through their immobilisation and confinement in reception centres, camps, or hotspots, even if this is certainly a key dimension. Warehousing is rather based on ‘a complex combination of enforced stillness and enforced mobility of asylum seekers’ (Gill, 2009a), whose trajectories are subject to processes of acceleration and deceleration at once. I could see during fieldwork how this arbitrary combination of stillness and mobility begins from the very first moment of the arrival, at the docks, where asylum seekers were either left to wait or transferred to another facility depending on organisational issues. As explained by an NGO worker in Sicily: ‘It can happen that the guys [sic] stay at the dock for 48 hours or even more, while the means of transportation [...] and the places available in reception facilities are located’ (Interview with an NGO worker, Italy, October 2015). However, the opposite can also take place; in fact, in other disembarkations described by the same interviewee, ‘busses were already there, waiting for asylum seekers; hence, after the identification, they were immediately transferred’ (Interview with an NGO worker, Italy, October 2015).

The interplay between mobility and immobility continues in the next stages of asylum seekers’ experiences in the host country. At the time of fieldwork, both in Italy and Sweden, asylum seekers were moved through different types of centres before reaching the final accommodation. This reflects the widespread tendency to organise reception systems into phases, which is discussed in the next section. Transfers between centres and stop-overs interact in the management of asylum seekers, revealing what Darling defines a ‘politics of imposed (im)mobility’ (2011: 267). Transfers are not less important than practices of immobilisation, as they perform a form of control over asylum seekers’ mobility as well as maintaining them in a transitory condition (Gill, 2009b). Such a spatial politics is a core element of warehousing and it is accompanied by a corresponding temporal politics of waiting *and* acceleration, which informs asylum seekers’ experiences from the quay to the final reception centre. In this way, warehousing specifies a form of reception which governs asylum seekers through a combination of mobility and immobility as well as through the dispossession of their time.

An interesting parallel can be made here between the warehousing of asylum seekers and other forms of warehousing that are similarly based on the abovementioned spatial and temporal politics. For instance, carceral warehousing has drawn the attention of scholars who have explored the transformations affecting carceral spaces and highlighted the diffusion of the logic of confinement beyond prisons (Gill et al., 2018; Moran et al., 2018). As for asylum seekers, the dispossession of time and the combination of movement and immobility are key dimensions of the warehousing of other groups, such as the incarcerated. Yet, it is important to stress a key difference between warehousing as it plays out in the context of asylum reception and the way this concept is used in the debates on the carceral. In the latter, warehousing tends to denote a logic of pure confinement that increasingly informs contemporary prisons, as these seem to have relinquished their disciplinary task of shaping docile and productive bodies (Martin, 2013; Wacquant, 2010). In the case of reception, warehousing is not just the brute dispossession of asylum seekers' time. Rather, it maintains a productive, transformative dimension insofar as it serves the purposes of disciplining asylum seekers by instilling subjection through privation and precariousness.

### The 'logistification' of reception

The warehousing of asylum seekers encapsulates the process of 'logistification' of reception, which is to say the growing importance of a rationality of logistics according to which reception systems are conceived as infrastructures through which asylum seekers are moved. As the director of an Italian accommodation centre pointed out, the reception infrastructure is like 'a machine based on movement' (Interview with the director of a reception centre, Italy, January 2016), through which asylum seekers are distributed from ports in the south of Italy to the rest of the country. Although the weight of immobility alongside movement should not be disregarded, this interviewee captured well the 'logistification' of reception, highlighting how reception is increasingly a mechanical matter – a *machine* that moves people around. In this process, the humanity of asylum seekers tends to get lost as they are treated like 'numbers that need to be sorted [...] therefore, knowing their name and surname is not necessary' (Interview with an activist, Italy, October 2015).

The logistical gaze proposed in the second section is particularly helpful in teasing out the main implications of the process of 'logistification'. Notably, this analytical gaze can be productively adopted in the study of the transformations affecting the reception of asylum seekers for two key reasons. First, from the perspective of logistics, reception appears as an integrated system that is conceived and organised as a chain, which partially resembles the supply chain at the core of the logistic process. In my Italian case study, asylum seekers enter the chain once they land on a Sicilian port, then they are moved all the way through the chain until the final reception centre. They may pass through one or two transit centres, which have interestingly been called with the English word 'hub' in the last few years, thus signalling a discursive shift that is symptomatic of the process of 'logistification' at stake. In this respect, the use of the expression *filiere dell'accoglienza* to describe the organisation of the reception system into phases and its multilevel governance is particularly striking, especially given its positive undertone (see De Gregorio, 2019; Rossi and Bruno, 2016). In fact, while *filiere dell'accoglienza* can be roughly translated as reception chain, the term *filiere* has an immediate logistical connotation as it literally means production chain.

Far from being a unique feature of the Italian management of reception, or more broadly a concern of those states that have to cope with arrivals by sea, a logistical approach to reception also emerges very explicitly in a study published in 2014 by the European Migration Network (EMN).<sup>3</sup> The study identifies the 'management of reception as a

chain' (EMN, 2014: 2) as a good practice that can improve the flexibility of reception systems and ensure 'a *balanced flow* of applicants through reception' (EMN, 2014: 5, my italics). From the perspective of 'chain management', the study continues:

[T]he *reception process* is treated as a continuum. (Member) States undertake measures at different stages of the process by limiting inflow, increasing capacity, making the asylum procedure more efficient, facilitating outflow, and/or operating an effective return or settlement policy. (EMN, 2014: 3, my italics)

In an alarming resemblance with the language of logistics, reception is presented as a *process* which is organised through stages, each one performing different functions while all integrated in the whole process.<sup>4</sup> According to EMN (2014: 3), this process should be improved by developing 'common indicators and standardised methods to measure and calculate capacity and pressure, to record in/outflow of applicants from reception facilities and to facilitate comparison of reception costs'. Therefore, calculation, coordination, information, as well as the transportation connecting the different stages of the process, acquire a central role in the reception of asylum seekers, which is in turn assessed in terms of preparedness, flexibility and efficiency (EMN, 2014: 3).

The logistical rationality has not merely modified the ways in which national reception systems are conceived, but it has also invested the overall management of asylum systems. Ground-breaking in this respect was the project *Kortare väntan* (Shorter Wait), which was introduced by Swedish authorities in 2009 to reduce the length of asylum procedures and cut public spending. Besides demonstrating a push towards the acceleration of asylum procedures that has been widely highlighted in the literature (Cwerner, 2004; Hambly and Gill, 2020; Tazzioli, 2018), *Kortare väntan* marks the introduction of the idea of 'lean management' in asylum systems, thus signalling the permeation of a logistical rationality into the everyday activities of case management.<sup>5</sup>

The 'lean model' is an organisational structure that is 'based on performance management, standardisation of processes and visual management with the aim of efficiency and streamlining of production processes in the name of the customer' (Thedvall, 2015: 45). First developed in the automotive industry as a management model focused on the creation of efficient flows in production processes (Womack et al., 1990), the 'lean model' has been subsequently introduced in the public sector. This expansion is part of a broader process of 'rationalisation' of management practices in public administrations (Thedvall, 2015), which reflects the appeal of entrepreneurial concerns and performance indicators following the diffusion of the 'new public management' paradigm in the Global North and beyond since the 1990s.<sup>6</sup>

In the Swedish asylum context, the introduction of 'lean management' involved the reorganisation of *Migrationsverket's* work into phases, each one featuring measurable objectives and distributed along well-defined time limits, thus facilitating evaluation and subsequent improvement. While 'lean production' transformed the assembly line into a 'flow where the car should go through and move between different stations as efficiently as possible' (Thedvall, 2015: 44), 'lean thinking' similarly introduces the metaphors of flows, chains and processes into the very management of a single asylum case. Each individual case is envisioned as a process that needs to flow as smoothly as possible through the different stages from the asylum application to the final decision and the consequent transfer of the applicant. The similarities with the idea of reception chain that is discussed above are evident and yet another example of the processes of 'logistification' and their dehumanising effects that are permeating this field.

The introduction of ‘lean management’ imposed a radically different work method on *Migrationsverket’s* officers, who stopped being responsible for individual cases, thus *persons*, and rather became members of a team, focusing on specific phases within the case flow. Clearly, the emphasis on quantitative and temporal efficiency has significant drawbacks in terms of quality of the services provided as it could be read between the lines of the answers of several *Migrationsverket’s* employees. Indeed, the pressure to meet the targets means that reception officers lack enough time to deal with particularly complex cases, which run the risk of disrupting the standard case flow as they need more time and attention than ordinary ones. The focus on the efficiency of the process clashes with the social and interpersonal dimension of reception officers’ work, which would also require them to assist and take care of asylum applicants. This was highlighted by one of my interviewees, who observed how they are expected to ‘work very fast’ and how this can affect the quality of the meetings with asylum seekers: ‘sometimes we have big families and you have to see also the children. If there is some problem in the family, you are very stressed because you have the next appointment soon. . . so it can be a problem’ (Interview with a *Migrationsverket’s* reception officer, Sweden, January 2015).

Although the emphasis on quality is one of key principles of ‘lean thinking’, it is the quality of the process that matters as the following statement demonstrates:

My task is to organise the team, to see that we are effective, we are working with quality, we take decisions with quality. So, I look at these billboards with numbers and figures about the process; for example, the time of taking a specific decision. I check this and look at the process to see if we can be more effective. (Interview with a *Migrationsverket’s* team leader, Sweden, January 2015)

No space seems to be left for individuals in this perspective, whereby quality is a synonym of efficiency and it is measured in terms of the numbers of asylum decisions taken, the time needed for a decision and the solidity of these decisions against possible appeals. Quality is calculated from the perspective of the institution, its decision-making and management processes. It is *Migrationsverket’s* working routines that need to be lean. However, how these routines impact on asylum seekers is left out of the analysis, as if the diminution of processing times would automatically translate to applicants’ satisfaction and well-being.

The involvement of a leading global management consulting firm like McKinsey & Company (2014: 143–148) in the design and implementation of the project *Kortare väntan* is telling about the increasing centrality of organisational, efficiency and economic imperatives in the management of asylum processes. The growing interests of McKinsey & Company in this field are demonstrated by two reports published in 2016 by the research body and think tank of the company, the McKinsey Global Institute (2016a, 2016b). Both reports present migration as a ‘logistical challenge’ for destination countries, but one that has nonetheless significant potential for economic benefit. Most importantly, the ‘multilayered logistical challenges’ identified by McKinsey Global Institute (2016a: 31) not only relate to entry and registration procedures, but they also concern the ‘integration’ of newcomers and their ability to ‘reach their full productive potential’ (McKinsey Global Institute, 2016b: 77). Once again, this highlights the crucial entanglement between ‘logistication’ processes, migration management and economic interests.

Given the key interests at stake, it should be no surprise that the involvement of McKinsey & Company in the field of migration governance has silently increased since the experimentation of the project *Kortare väntan*. In late 2015, the company was appointed by *Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge* (BAMF), the German Federal Office for

Migration and Refugees, which needed to streamline asylum procedures to face a significant rise in asylum applications (Stanley-Becker, 2017). One year later, the European Commission's Structural Reform Support Service commissioned the company a study about the Greek asylum system, asking for recommendations to clear the sizeable backlog of cases (EASO, 2018: 12). The report, which has not been disclosed due to public security reasons (European Ombudsman, 2018), called for 'increased efficiency, speed and quality' in asylum procedures (EASO, 2018: 12), and delineated an operational plan whose implementation was then assigned to the European Asylum Support Office (EASO).

The growing attention placed by McKinsey & Company on migration and asylum management takes me to the second advantage of adopting a logistical gaze on the processes discussed so far. The company's emphasis on the opportunities offered by migration (McKinsey Global Institute, 2016a, 2016b) sheds light on the economic dimension of asylum management and reception, which the perspective of logistics is perfectly positioned to explore. Indeed, a logistical gaze draws attention to the creation of profits that takes place across reception *chains*, thus transforming reception systems into reception industries. Just as the logistical supply chain aims to extract value from the very circulation of objects which pass through it, so a similar mechanism can be identified at the heart of the reception chain. At every stage of the chain, several actors profit from the passage – *and stay* – of asylum seekers, especially when their management is outsourced to private profit-making companies. Just to make a few examples, these actors include those running reception facilities, those transporting asylum seekers, those supplying essential goods, those providing support services and those carrying out control activities. As logistics moves objects in pursuance of profits, a logistified reception similarly moves asylum seekers in order to capitalise on such movement. From the perspective of logistics, reception systems can thus be described as logistical systems that generate value by holding and moving asylum seekers.

However, two fundamental differences between the supply chain and the reception chain need to be underscored. The first one is that the reception chain produces profit not only through movement, but also – and especially – through immobility. The longer an asylum seeker stays in a reception centre, the longer this translates into funding, jobs, services and supplies, thus representing a source of income for those involved in these activities. The logistical management of reception turns asylum seekers into commodities that acquire value across space and time – the more they stay and are moved within the reception chain, the highest the profits for a range of different actors. In yet another eerie analogy with carceral spaces, a similar process has been described in relation to the rise of prison privatisation in the United States (Selman and Leighton, 2010), and the resulting transformations of prisoners into commodities generating 'per diem payments for their private keepers' (Hallett, 2002: 371). Hence, while studies exploring the 'logistification' of migration regimes have hitherto placed their emphasis on the centrality of the imperatives of just-in-time and to-the-point migration as mechanisms through which migrant labour is made profitable (Altenried et al., 2018: 304; Grappi, 2020: 19), a logistical approach to reception highlights another form of migrant exploitation. The 'logistification' of reception shows that asylum seekers are not only exploitable as labour power, but their mere presence and reproduction can bring significant benefits for some. They are profitable even when their labour power is not *delivered*.

The second difference is intimately connected to the previous one and concerns costs. Indeed, while the goal of supply chains is the maximisation of profits as well as cost reduction, the same does not apply for reception chains. Here, cost reduction does not always seem to be an imperative, as it was demonstrated by the huge costs of emergency reception measures both in Italy and Sweden in the heyday of the 'crisis' (Vianelli, 2017: 142). The

reason for this is to be found in the specific configuration of reception chains, in which public funding represents the main contribution to several activities within the chain even though many of them are outsourced to private companies, particularly when emergency reception measures are introduced. The combination of private and public in this domain leads to a situation in which higher costs for the whole reception chain (e.g. higher public investment for emergency reception measures) constitute higher profits for some of the actors of the chain (e.g. private contractors running emergency facilities). In this respect, the 'logistification' of reception is a clear illustration of private extraction of public resources.

## Conclusion

This article has contributed to recent debates on the logistical reorganisation of the EU border regime by describing a process of 'logistification' through which the reception of asylum seekers is transformed into a logistical issue of moving around, distributing and accommodating people. This process is particularly visible when operational concerns prevail over the care of asylum seekers, who are therefore treated in standardised and impersonal ways, regardless of individual needs and specificities. Reception thus becomes a form of warehousing based on the depersonalisation and victimisation of asylum seekers, as well as on the imposition of (im)mobility.

The 'logistification' of reception constitutes an innovative path of research that can be fruitfully developed in several ways. Not only the permeation of a logistical rationality in the management of asylum seekers can be explored in other geographical contexts beyond Italy and Sweden, but the extent of 'logistification' can be examined at the micro-level of the everyday running of reception facilities. Furthermore, the conversation with scholarship on carcerality, which has only been sketched out in this article, can be deepened with a view to understanding if and to what extent reception systems share features of carceral spaces and produce carceral effects on asylum seekers. Following another line of investigation, the 'logistification' of reception can be situated in a broader historical perspective and analysed through a genealogical approach focusing on past practices of governing displaced populations and on the conditions that have made the current warehousing of asylum seekers possible.

The logistical gaze on reception put forward by this article has proved particularly fertile because it has offered a privileged vantage point on the infrastructural and economic dimensions of the management of asylum seekers. Attending to these dimensions has two crucial implications in analytical and political terms. First, by capturing the tendency to conceive reception systems as chains through which asylum seekers are moved and put on hold, the perspective of logistics highlights the processes of objectification underpinning reception practices. Second, a logistical gaze draws attention not only to the ways in which asylum seekers are moved and warehoused like objects, but also turned into commodities that can constitute a source of profits for several actors who are directly or indirectly involved in reception systems. The objectification and the commodification of asylum seekers are therefore two major risks at stake in the becoming logistical of reception. Importantly, the perspective of logistics enables one to detect these risks in the ordinary functioning of reception systems, without explaining them through the discourse of emergency as exceptional and temporary flaws.

Before concluding, it is fundamental to emphasise the contested character of these processes of objectification and commodification, which should be interpreted as attempts. Although a key effect of the logistical imaginary and the governing mechanisms it brings about is to create the conditions for an increased control over asylum seekers, the

'logistification' of reception is anything but a smooth and frictionless endeavour. Like the supply chain (Chua et al., 2018), the reception chain is traversed by struggles of both asylum seekers and workers of the chain. The former constantly subvert the linear progression of the chain through their unauthorised movements (Fontanari, 2016; Picozza, 2017); while the latter, particularly in Italy, have started self-organised movements in which the claim of better reception conditions has been connected to the claim of better working conditions.

When these two struggles meet, the outcome is amazing and the 'logistification' of reception can be reversed. This happened in Bologna in the summer 2019, when the residents and the workers of a well-known reception facility came together to fight against the sudden closure of that facility. While the reception centre had long been criticised for its living conditions and its closure was therefore welcomed by the demonstrators, the next steps envisaged by authorities involved the forced relocation of the inhabitants to other parts of Italy and the redundancy of many social workers. The collective struggle of the inhabitants and the workers was thus eminently logistical as it focused on blocking the forced transfers while also getting rid of a reception facility that was a clear example of warehousing. In these logistical terms, the struggle was indeed a success. Not only were the negative impacts of the closure reduced in terms of loss of jobs and the closure of the facility confirmed, although only temporarily, but most asylum seekers obtained to be transferred to other facilities in the same area, thus interrupting the logistics of the reception chain.

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### **Notes**

1. In 2020, 417,380 first time asylum applications were registered in the EU, while the annual number exceeded a million applications at the peak of the "refugee reception crisis" according to Eurostat data (1,256,580 applications in 2015 and 1,206,055 in 2016).
2. In 2014, the asylum applications registered in Italy and Sweden accounted for a quarter of all applications in the EU (respectively, 63,655 and 74,980 applications out of an EU total of 562,680). One year later, the same two countries received 19% of all EU asylum applications (82,790 applications in Italy and 156,115 applications in Sweden out of 1,256,580 applications in the EU).

3. The EMN is a research network coordinated by the European Commission and formed by National Contact Points in each member state (except Denmark) plus Norway.
4. This is evident in some of the countries I focused on in the last few years. For example, at the outset of the crisis in July 2014, Italian authorities published a strategic plan that called for the reorganisation of the national reception system into three phases (first aid and identification centres, regional hubs/transit centres, and final reception facilities). Similarly, in Luxembourg, the reception system is organised into three phases consisting of the registration phase, a second phase in which healthcare needs are assessed while asylum seekers wait to be allocated to a reception facility somewhere in the country, and finally third phase facilities in which asylum seekers stay until the end of the procedure (Vianelli et al., 2019).
5. The Swedish project inspired the Finnish Immigration Service, which similarly tested the “lean model” to speed up asylum procedures in 2012 (see: [https://migri.fi/en/article/-/asset\\_publisher/turvapaikkahakemusjonot-lyhenevat-lean-filosofian-avulla](https://migri.fi/en/article/-/asset_publisher/turvapaikkahakemusjonot-lyhenevat-lean-filosofian-avulla)).
6. For a comparison between the “new public management” and the application of the “lean model” to public services, see Hallström and Thedvall (2015).

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