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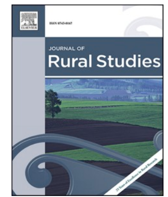

Lives in limbo: Migrant integration and rural governance in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Two long-term trends characterized the response to the influx of asylum seekers in rural Sweden in 2015. First, current integration policies with an increasing focus on the individual migrant, especially in relation to education, employment and housing, provided the framework for the response. Second, the shift of rural governance from state control to collaborative arrangements with nonstate actors, enabled the unprecedented involvement of civil society in the reception and integration of asylum-seekers in rural areas. The consequences of the confluence of these two approaches are most visible in rural areas. In this paper, we explore the new landscape of collaborative governance in relation to migrant reception and integration and ask: what kind of space for maneuver might be available for migrants in the context of collaborative governance of integration in rural Europe? We argue that the new context of rural governance in tandem with integration policies focusing on individual migrants/ families rather than also considering group and ethnic belongings can leave newcomers at the mercy of an informal and unknown institutional terrain of collaborative governance, one that can exacerbate their vulnerability and lead to a situation of "double isolation"- from co-ethnic networks as well as from local society.

The arrival of an unparalleled number of asylum seekers in Sweden in 2015, as in other parts of Europe, was a unique year for migration relations in Sweden. Civil-society played an invaluable role in complementing public authority efforts in the reception and integration of asylum-seekers. Their involvement was particularly evident in rural areas, already transitioning towards new forms of rural governance where the civil-society is regarded as an integral actor for 'development from below' (Arora-Jonsson 2017).

Many rural municipalities suffering from long-term demographic and economic decline as well as cutbacks in municipal budgets and public services, sought to benefit from the central government's financial help in the placement of asylum-seekers.[1] They were seen as contributing to a reversal in population decline, an increase in the number of pupils in schools threatened with closure and to a boost in local consumption, thereby generating further employment opportunities and revenue streams. Close relationships were built up in places and there was overwhelming response from the local municipality, civil-society and residents as they came out in support of asylum-seekers when central authorities wanted to move them from their municipalities.[2,3] At the same time, sparsely populated areas with few ethnic support networks to help navigate a complicated system of rural governance characterized by multiple state agencies as well as private and voluntary actors, limited language skills and an increasing right wing populist discourse against migrants, constituted a potentially hostile environment for newcomers.

Drawing on interviews in Östhammar municipality in east-central Sweden, we explore the complexities that can arise as the need for integration of asylum-seekers and immigrants guided by current integration policy meets a system of rural governance, meant to be carried out through a range of partnerships between the public, private and voluntary sectors (c.f. Copus et al., 2015). An analysis of the somewhat unusual circumstances of 2015, brings into relief the underlying contradictions of integration politics in rural areas in Europe as well as other parts of the global North. Partnership between civil-society organizations and state authorities in immigrant integration in rural areas, evident in our case are gaining traction across many countries. The

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[1] https://www.etc.se/ekonomi/flyktingarna-orsaken-till-god-ekonomi.

[2] https://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=98&artikel=6887526 https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/gavleborg/ortsbor-kampar-for-flyktingboendet.

[3] An indication are how rural newspapers reported differently from national dailies. Terms such as 'crisis,' security and economy recurred in the national/urban newspapers while local papers presented positive stories of everyday interactions between migrants and local inhabitants (presentation by U. Schmauch at Uppsala University, October 2017).

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current focus of integration policies on the individual immigrant and the blurred boundaries of new rural governance, where migrants are confronted with a range of actors responsible for their welfare, have created new implications for migrants' possibilities to make a home in rural destinations. Sweden offers insightful examples of some implications of this approach to integration.

We argue that despite the generous work of civil-society associations in the reception and integration of newcomers, the implications for many migrants were what we call a 'double isolation' – a distancing from ethnic support networks usually found in urban centers and from active decision-making on their lives as they waited in limbo - not knowing to whom to turn. This, we claim, was not merely a sign of the limitations of routines and resources for reception and integration in face of the sudden influx of newcomers. Rather, we posit that the explanations of this isolation lie, also in the structural contradictions that arise in the meeting of current integration policies with the rarefied, sparsely populated contexts of rural areas and everyday uncertainty of new rural governance. In addition, the limited definition of integration with its focus on newcomers rather than the larger communities contributes to the isolation of migrants and the community's ability to imagine new rural futures.

To analyze the space created by the current politics of integration and rural governance for migrants to establish themselves, we turn to the literature on integration politics in Sweden as well as to studies on rural governance and migrant integration. We describe the methods and material used by us for our analysis and this is followed by a discussion of the rural geography of integration policies through the case of Östhammar municipality. We go on to analyze civil-society - municipality relations in the reception and integration of asylum-seekers and what these might imply for the everyday lives of asylum-seekers in rural spaces. We conclude with reflections on the implications of integration policies and rural governance for immigrant welfare that has relevance not only in Sweden but for thinking on integration politics more broadly.

1. Integration politics and rural governance in Sweden

We analyze the integration of asylum seekers in rural areas at the intersection of two different bodies of work. The first builds on the literature on integration that follows the shifts in integration policies in Sweden from a prior notion of assimilation to a policy of integration that came to focus on the needs of the individual migrant instead of ethnic collectives. A parallel process was the shift in the geography of integration policies that extended the placement of asylum-seekers from the major cities to including smaller and rural municipalities. The second body of literature comes from studies of rural governance in Europe. We draw on these bodies of work to examine the role of the civil-society in migrant integration in the wider system of new rural governance increasingly being advocated by the E.U and national authorities and its implications for asylum-seekers in the wake of the recent wave of immigration to Europe.

1.1. Integration policies and multiculturalism in Sweden

Over the years Swedish immigration and integration policies have shifted from a focus on ethnic groups to the individual, in particular in relation to individual employment and to market and societal mechanisms to enable integration. Beginning in the 1970s, highly formalized, structured participation was arranged for immigrants in the polity through 'official ethnicities' and through clear top-down and centralized policies (Soysal, 1994). This had included support for different ethnic associations, for religious and other organizations, for culture and training in native languages and for non-Swedish newspapers and journals (Dalhström, 2004).

Over time, the centralized approach was subjected to extensive criticism. Formal institutional structures of the corporatist civil-society in Sweden and their economic dependency on the state were found to disadvantage 'ethnic' associations and limit their authority (Odmalm, 2004). Migration policy came to be criticized for being instrumental in creating 'the other' with its focus on ethnic collectivities. In the 1990s, it was becoming clear that immigrants faced considerable discrimination, especially in the labor and housing market (SOU, 2005). Much of this critique came about in relation to the 'emergence of a strongly Europeanized field of policy on asylum and integration' (Scholten and Penninx, 2016: 95) that led to significant shifts in integration policies during the 1990s.

Although there is great ambiguity in the ways that the term integration is used by countries in Europe, 'integration' policies adopted by most countries including Sweden have been influenced by a wider understanding at the E.U. level. At the European level, integration especially after 2003 was conceived as a balance of rights and obligations targeting all dimensions of integration (including economic, social, and political rights; cultural and religious diversity; and citizenship and participation). In tandem with this, in 2010, the third multi-annual program or the so-called Stockholm Program, insisted once more that integration required 'not only efforts by national, regional and local authorities but also a greater commitment by the host community and immigrants' (EC, 2010 cited in Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx, 2016: 2). The implications of these agreements were that integration was not merely a one way process but entailed adaptation by both migrants and local populations (Phillips, 2010). In Sweden too, new integration policies marked a move from multiculturalism only for immigrants to a 'cultural pluralism' for everyone. The idea behind the new policy was to address the whole society and bring parity between immigrants and native populations in terms of social and economic rights, participation, duties and opportunities (Valenta and Bunar 2010).

Sweden had long been known for its generous migration policies in Europe. The extension of substantial citizenship, welfare and labor rights to migrants, not conditional on integration achievements such as language competency or assessment of country knowledge (dubbed the 'civic turn'[4] in most other parts of western Europe) and the promotion of equality for all groups and cultures, had led Sweden to be called the flagship of multiculturalism. However, critics argue that in practice, ensuring a multicultural democracy was left to the initiative of Sweden's institutions and to an enlightened technocracy, rather than a communicative public interchange, thus undermining multiculturalism in its very formulation (Ålund and Schierup, 1991:viii). Dahlström's (2004) examination of the rhetoric and practice of immigration policy confirms this image. He observes that while immigration policies changed significantly in the period between 1960s and 2000, in its practices, that is, in information efforts, language and culture programs, it continued much as before.

Dahlström attributes this continuity to a decoupling between changes on different institutional levels that responded to different questions – moral questions on the rhetorical level (in relation to the state policies for minority cultures) and questions of efficiency (in the programs already in place) on the practical level. Although evaluations criticized the programs for their lack of efficiency, the principles behind the programs were left unquestioned. He writes that the conclusions drawn by policy makers were therefore that they were doing the right thing, just not enough.

Fernández' (2019) thesis on Swedish citizenship echo these sentiments. According to him, Sweden's generous citizenship policy in relation to immigrants as well as its resistance to the 'civic turn' is a sign of its 'thin form of liberal citizenship.' In this view, Swedish multicultural citizenship, based on a fairly administrative, sterile and pragmatic conception of citizenship, is dissociated from conceptions of nationhood and societal membership. Coming to a similar conclusion in her comparative research of several countries, Simonsen (2017) argues that

[4] Where citizenship is conditional on the achievement of meeting certain requirements that would make them eligible for it as in other parts of Europe.

it is not necessarily citizenship policy but the attitudinal milieu of the host country that indicates belonging or integration. In other words, citizenship matters for feelings of belonging, but only when citizenship also matters for host nationals in their perceptions of who belongs.

This leads Fernández (2019) to propose that Swedish multiculturalism is of a special type. Contrary to multiculturalism in nations such as Canada or the U.K that acknowledge minority policies and cultural groups, Sweden has no constitutional and political tradition of making legal exemptions and concessions to communities who seek special treatment. The history of Swedish-Sami relations is a case in point. Immigrant integration and naturalization, much like social integration, are perceived as processes of emancipation and liberation through individual rather than group rights.

1.1.1. Integration for the individual

The implementation of multiculturalism policies on multiculturalism started with extensive introduction programs for individual asylum-seekers in 1991. Municipalities were responsible for granting an 'introduction allowance' to all those who chose to follow an *Individual Introduction Plan*, agreed to with the local authorities. Since the 1990s, introductory programs have continued and include language courses and employment related training such as internships for 2 years (Osanami Törngren, 2018). The decision on whether to take these programs is up to the individual migrant who is meant to exercise freedom of choice in whether or not to adopt the majority culture (Valenta and Bunar, 2010:468). The *Establishment Reform* of 2010 in Sweden concretized this approach. The reform emphasized individual obligations and duties on the part of asylum-seekers and aimed to provide more flexible, individualized and tailor-made services.

There have been two major critiques of such measures. First, integration programs meant to empower newcomers and explicitly guarantee the individual 'freedom of choice,' have been critiqued for disregarding structural barriers such as the lack of language that newcomers face in navigating the system (Fernandes, 2015). In practice, research (Saksela-Bergholm et al., 2019; Rauhut and Johansson, 2010; Rye and Slettebak, 2020) indicates that although the value of ethnic collectives as an asset varies across different groups, genders and the context, migrant groups tend towards co-ethnic community resources (often concentrated in metropolitan and urban areas), both for social and economic support and as an aid in political integration. Exceptions do exist. Torres et al. (2006) in the U.S. and Schech (2014) in Australia refer to the 'silent bargain,' whereby migrants trade better long-term opportunities in the metropolis for the relatively peaceful community relations of a small town. However, even in such cases, studies with chairmen of associations in rural Sweden such as the Somalian, Arab, Eritrean and Syrian, revealed that the presence of others from their ethnic communities had been one reason to move there and that the presence of co-ethnic groups had been invaluable for the newcomers in learning to maneuver in their new homes (Arora-Jonsson, 2017b).

Second, pointing to complications at the administrative level, political scientists (Lidén et al., 2015; Qvist, 2016) bring attention to how the policy of 'activation' of immigrants brought into being by the *Establishment Reform* of 2010 shifted administrative responsibility for immigrant reception and integration from the local municipalities to the centralized structure of the *Arbetsförmedling* or the *Public Employment Agency*. Their research indicates that the reform created a fragmented organizational structure that sits uncomfortably with the multilevel policy field of local authorities, county boards, municipalities and private interests, creating barriers for inter-agency co-operation.

We argue that the individual focus has specific implications in relation to the geography of where these policies are enacted – whether in urban or smaller and rural settings. We go on to examine this ahead.

1.2. New rural governance and civil-society involvement in integration

Since the 1990s, the European Union has created a new context for rural governance. One result has been to shift rural policy and its implementation away from the direct control of state actors into partnerships with actors across (governance) levels and different policy areas and to the civil-society and private sector in a system of multilevel governance (Copus and Lima, 2015).

Sweden has been considered especially suited to such a form of rural governance due to its prolific civil-society (Nemes et al., 2015) grounded in popular movements from the 1920s. Especially since the 1980s civil-society activism has been vital in sustaining rural places subject to increasing depopulation, aging populations, with few employment opportunities and cutbacks in government services (Forsberg, 2001). The 'All of Sweden Shall Live' movement, as the voice of the rural grassroots gained strength in the 1990s as a result of networks and associations that worked to revive rural areas (Vail, 1996). Arora-Jonsson (2017a) cautions, however, that rural policies that built on this groundswell, increasingly expected and enabled the civil-society to take over service functions abandoned by public authorities through both national and E. U. project funding. In many cases this has led to confusion and uncertainty on part of both civil-society associations and local authorities as to the everyday practices of governance – of who is ultimately responsible and if municipal officials are in charge or merely facilitators of rural development initiatives.

She also argues that the expectation that the civil-society take over a role as service providers for the government has the potential of diluting their political 'voice' as they compete with each other for funds from the state, incongruously endangering the basis of rural policy that builds on an independent and active civil-society. In the U.S., Guo (2007) points to how reliance on government funding decreased the likelihood that non-profit organizations developed strong representative boards. Research in Greece has pointed to how a civil-society focus on service runs the risk of exonerating the state from its responsibilities and may contribute to redirecting attention away from systemic inequalities (Theodossopoulos, 2016). In a similar vein, Davies and Blanco (2017) write that as a result of the competition for access to funds, local charities in the U.K. avoid being openly critical of local authorities, and to present their role as service providers rather than as claims-making organizations.

Williams et al. (2016) bring attention to how this type of service provision can delegitimize broader criticisms on systemic injustices as it 'represents a privatization of political responsibility' and a depoliticization of the civil-society. Nousiainen and Pylkkänen (2013) call the blurring of civil-society and government boundaries as a neoliberal turn in European rural governance that programs the rural subject to take on collective responsibility.

While acknowledging this shift from 'voice to service' when examining state-civil-society relations at the macro level, Arora-Jonsson (2017a) also argues that shifting the gaze to the micro-politics on the ground can confound the thesis of depoliticization. Through ethnographic research, she brings attention to how groups that find themselves outside of decision-making positions in rural areas such as women or outside of civil-society associations such as migrant groups choose to organize themselves outside of these forums in informal groupings. These challenge accepted ways of organizing and have the potential of bringing a new politics to state-civil-society relations.

Likewise, Theodossopoulos (2016) and Monforte (2019) bring attention to how humanitarian work is politicized as volunteers mobilizing in times of austerity in Greece and the recession in the U.K. become critical of apolitical forms of engagement. They comment on the tendency for such engagement to increase social and political awareness and lead to social change beyond the traditional frame of compassion. Theodossopoulos (2016) observes how some volunteers thought of their service work in terms of solidarity rather than as succumbing to the current individualist spirit in society.

The official report commissioned by the Swedish government on the country's handling of the situation in 2015 (Riksrevisionen, 2017), points to tensions due to the differing political goals of the state and

civil-society associations. While praising collaboration between government bodies and the civil-society, the report raises the problem of the government's capacity to provide the right information and of civil-society actors' need to get the right information. As McAreavey (2012) emphasizes in relation to civil-society involvement in integration in Ireland, clear legal and organizational structures are indispensable in enabling civil-society action. In contrast, referring to the events of 2015, representatives of the Swedish Church spoke about being on a 'collision course' with public authorities. They expressed frustration that the authorities were unwilling to listen to critiques raised by them, arguing that the constant relocation of refugees across the country dictated by administrative expediency led to systematic mistakes and the mistreatment of asylum-seekers. In their view, the state's technocratic approach towards immigrants as 'clients' in need of help differed significantly from those of the volunteers who regarded them as friends in their everyday work with them (Larsson, 2020).

However, volunteer narratives are ambivalent. Civil-society work may engender political engagement and awareness but they can also contribute to dominant discourses by blaming the poor (Monforte 2019) or conceal the hierarchical and controlling inclusion of refugees in the social world of host populations, where volunteers can take on a position of virtue and 'moral exceptionalism' (Rozaku, 2012; McCluskey, 2019). Shortall and McAreavey (2017) point to how some civil-society organizations in order to promote their organizations can continue to construct a problem, such as 'women's marginalization' long after the problem has ceased to exist. In Sweden as in other parts of Europe (c.f. McAreavey and Argent, 2018), such contexts raise critical questions about the role of civil-society in supporting structures that may perpetuate precarity and inequalities.

1.2.1. Everyday relations of integration

Although there are exceptions (see McAreavey, 2012; Arora-Jonsson, 2017b; Woods, 2018), literature on civil-society engagement in migration and integration departs from the point of view of the volunteers involved in these relations rather than those at the receiving end. Writing on rural Sweden, Arora-Jonsson (2017b) notes that preconceptions about migrants are exacerbated, not only by the lack of interactions between local inhabitants and migrant groups, but also by their exclusion from discussions on integration, so that while it was not uncommon for researchers and experts from universities in the cities to be invited to meetings on migrant integration to the municipalities, migrants themselves were rarely invited. McAreavey (2017) writes that migrant identities can bestow particular status that represent an asset or an obstacle to integration. She shows how the creation of a migrant identity, such as 'lazy' or 'hard working' limits the structures and networks from which migrants may draw resources and in so doing curtails the possibilities for social change due to migration.

In Norway, Rye (2018) highlights nuanced experiences of migration that include social fragmentation, polarization and contestation whereby migrants feel that they are part of the economy but have not connected socially. Moore (2019) points to a similar phenomenon, arguing that while English village residents praised migrants as fitting in, the language of invisibility used by them point to their ambiguous relations and underlying inequalities. A study from rural Norway showed that importance of 'being seen' and of social esteem was an important factor for migrants in wanting to live in a place (Søholt et al., 2012). Research from the U.K has shown that migrants' longer-term residence in rural settings is contingent on understanding the material and emotional aspects of integration and that social security institutions and local authorities have a critical role in these processes (Flynn and Kay, 2017). de Lima (2016) observes that the prevalence of instrumental views of integration and a privileging of economic considerations has resulted in neglecting the ways in which the wellbeing of migrants is shaped.

Notions of who really belongs is central for elites to maintain their positions. This can be in an example from Denmark, where Søholt et al. (2018) observed how local elites were receptive to immigrants for their economic contribution but at the same time made statements about the unsuitability of Muslims in the tourism industry as their appearance would disturb the (white) image of the place. They show how local elites beliefs in an unchanging rural is, kept in place, paradoxically, by the changes and local optimism that migration brings.

Conceptualizing such thinking as a 'misrecognition' of the rural, Arora-Jonsson (2017b) argues that dominant discourses on what constitutes rural culture, taken for granted boundaries on how to act and organize as well as the absence of immigrant voices in local discussions on development and integration activities, inadvertently embody racial undertones that can undermine well intentioned aspirations for integration. She shows how rural development projects in Sweden, in an effort to respond to E.U. policies that encourage rural areas to present themselves as unique to market themselves, instead of building on the multicultural present in their areas, invoked 'tradition' through a selective upper class, largely male, white history of a rural idyll.

As McAreavey (2012) notes, the politics of activation are much less likely to be successful than attempts to engage with minority groups within rural development initiatives where frames of reference take into account diverse cultural and social norms that more accurately reflect the new population composition in a particular area. In unusual examples from urban spaces in Europe, Mahieu and Van Caudenberg (2020) examine the forms of support that emerge when refugees and local young adults live together. They reflect on how this could complement or improve access to institutionalized, formal social support for young refugees. In England, Askins (2015) describes how a befriending scheme challenged asymmetric and simplistic notions of power-relations between local people and refugees, creating a new and different politics.

Drawing on this literature at the cross section of national policy-making on integration in Sweden as well as on rural governance and everyday integration, we go on to explore how the focus of integration policy on the individual and the organizational fragmentation of its administration is compounded by the uncertainties of new rural governance.

2. Methods and material

We carried out an exploratory study on 'integration' activities and migrant welfare with local authorities, civil-society actors and asylum-seekers in Östhammar municipality between December 2018 and March 2019. We interviewed 17 people: 6 local government officials (3 men and 3 women), 6 civil-society actors (3 men and 3 women), 4 of whom were members of two different church congregations. We conducted a group interview with 4 asylum-seekers (2 men in their 20s, both from Syria and a married couple in their 30s from Afghanistan). With the exception of one younger deacon, the officials/civil-society actors were approximately between 45 and 60 years old, while the asylum-seekers were considerably younger, between the ages of 20–40.

Interviews with local government officials included municipal officers (one a telephone interview in June 2020), the principal of the language school (SFI), 2 social workers at the municipality, one of whom worked with socially vulnerable families including migrant families and was the only non-white Swede, having migrated from Syria twenty years ago. The other social worker at the municipality managed various integration programs together with civil-society actors. The *Coordinator for Cultural Communication* at the municipality, also in charge of a network set up to address unrest between young immigrants and local youth in the town of Gimo, was contacted by telephone. Civil-society actors active in reception and integration of asylum-seekers were identified from the official municipality web-page[5] and they in turn referred us to others active in integration activities. The asylum-seekers were

[5] http://www.osthammar.se/sv/kommun-och-politik/integration/foreningar-samfund-aktiva-pa-integrationsomradet/besökt 2020-04-16.

asked if they would consent to be interviewed when they were visiting a civil-society association's facilities. All interviews were semi-structured and conducted in Swedish.

The themes explored with the officials and civil-society organizations centred on both their formal and informal responsibilities and activities in relation to asylum-seekers and the advantages and challenges of collaboration with other actors. The asylum-seekers were asked about their experiences of migration: their reception and early years in Sweden, their current home, whom they turned to for help and assistance and their experiences of 'integration' activities.

Previous research in rural areas in Sweden has pointed to the presence of 'ethnic' or cultural associations run by immigrant communities (Arora-Jonsson, 2017b). However, no ethnic associations were listed on the municipality web-page or mentioned during the interviews. When asked, the *Coordinator for Intercultural Communication* could not recall any such organization in their area. This was somewhat surprising given the number of migrants in Östhammar. All interviews were analyzed for themes that emerged from the interviews including those we identified from previous literature: the practical implications of civil-society-state relations in integration, uncertainties of new rural governance and everyday experiences of migration and integration. Despite the exploratory nature of the research and comparatively small sample, the interviews provided important insights on work with 'integration' and on migrant and community welfare in rural areas.

2.1. The rural geography of integration: the case of Östhammar municipality

A refugee dispersal policy, known as the 'Sweden-wide strategy' was first adopted in 1986/7 and asylum-seekers were sent to smaller and rural municipalities, largely to ease the burden on urban municipalities (Haberfeld et al., 2019). This step was reinforced by a governmental proposal in 1997/98 that sought to abolish social and ethnic segregation in big city regions and strive for equal standards for all by assigning newcomers to all parts of the country (Valenta and Bunar, 2010).

After 2015, the Swedish Migration Board assigned people in accordance with the Settlement Act Dispersal to municipalities that were obliged to take in asylum-seekers.[6] A certain number of asylum-seekers were allocated to each municipality, depending on housing availability and employment prospects. Osanami Törngren (2018) have pointed to the impossibility of government agencies being able to take care of the situation without the support of the civil-society. The *Swedish Church*, in particular played an active role (Ideström and Linde, 2019). The government allocated approximately 20 million euros to civil-society organizations to strengthen their support work for asylum-seekers and newly arrived refugees[7] to be administered by the County Administrative Boards. The two-year integration period for which the municipality was responsible, included health, material and social assistance.[8] Funds from the County board spurred municipalities, including in Östhammar, to engage in wider collaboration with civil-society actors, a trend already set in motion by new rural governance.

Östhammar municipality with its capital town, also called Östhammar, is located on the eastern coast of Sweden in the County of Uppsala. It has a number of small towns, villages and islands in an archipelago. Some of the villages' and towns' proximity to Uppsala makes it possible for inhabitants to work in Uppsala city and live in the municipality but like other rural areas, the municipality shares challenges of employment and cutbacks in public services. According to *Statistics Sweden*, there were close to 1100 people with a foreign background in Östhammar municipality in 2010 and 2200 in 2019, out of which, 1500 were from non-Nordic countries. 9,6% of the population was born outside of Sweden or had both parents born outside Sweden.[9]

With the waning of agriculture and the metal industry that used to sustain the area, the municipality now brands itself as a tourist destination, due largely to the holiday homes located in the coastal areas and in the archipelago.[10] Between 2015 and 2019, the number of migrants that were placed in Östhammar by the central authorities ranged from 50 to 108 people[11] including lone children/minors without families. They were a heterogeneous group in relation to their country of origin, education, prior work experience, health and family situation.

The *Social Democrats* have been the largest political party in the municipality since 1973. The Center party, traditionally a farmer and rural party (though that profile has been changing) has been the second largest party in the region but was pushed to third place in the 2018 elections by the *Swedish Democrats*. The *Swedish Democrats* are a far-right party and their foremost agenda has been to restrict migration and put in place harsher criteria for Swedish citizenship. The support for the *Swedish Democrats* in Östhammar grew significantly between 2014 and 2018. In the 2018 municipality elections, they increased their votes by 5,2% taking it to 15% of the total and moved from holding 5 to 8 seats out of a total of 49 in the local assembly.[12] Interestingly, the *Left* and the conservative parties collaborated from 2014 to 2018 in order to the keep *Sweden Democrats* out of the local government. The increasing support for the SD is indicative however, of a hostile atmosphere in relation to migration.

Östhammar municipality has hosted several centers for the reception of asylum-seekers including temporary facilities for families and for unaccompanied minors. The municipality organizes the reception of refugees and provides them with housing and information on their next steps-such as needing to register themselves with the *Public Employment Agency*, schooling for the children, language courses and other such activities.

The Östhammar *Introduction Unit* for migrant reception and integration was formed in 2006 after a discussion of its function and aim in the Municipal Council. It was placed under the administration of the *Labor Market Unit* in the municipality structure rather than under the *Social Service Center* as the municipality wanted to separate 'integration' from the notion of it being a 'social problem' and of economic dependency. Echoing wider policy discourses, a municipal officer emphasized in an interview that they wanted a positive framing for integration where asylum-seekers were thinking about their own economic self-sufficiency.

In another interview, a municipal officer told us that almost all those placed in Östhammar since 2015 had a resident permit which meant that the municipality was responsible for arranging housing for them. Since 2010, the municipality, along with the *Public Employment Authority* has been responsible to see to that the newcomers are able to establish themselves in the labor market and able to support themselves economically. The officer also pointed out however that newcomers were not registered at the *Introduction Unit* and that the main responsibility lay with the *Public Employment Agency*. Newcomers were free to follow their instructions and get help from the *Introduction Unit*.

The officer complained that little consideration was taken in the placement of migrants in relation to the availability of housing or in

[6] https://www.regeringen.se/pressmeddelanden/2016/02/anvisningar-till-kommunerna-att-ta-emot-nyanlanda/.

[7] Prop. 2015/16:47 Extra ändringsbudget fö; r 2015 (Proposition on additional budget amendment for 2015).

[8] Municipalities receive single payment compensation per refugee and per year from the state, which are meant to cover costs for SFI, civic orientation, interpreters, and special introductory activities within schools and preschools.

[9] https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/statistik-efter-amne/befolkning/befolkningens-sammansattning/befolkningsstatistik/.

[10] https://webbutik.skl.se/sv/artiklar/kommungruppsindelning-2017.html.

[11] https://www.migrationsverket.se/Om-Migrationsverket/Statistik/Anvisning-till-kommuner-och-bosattning.html.

[12] https://www.val.se/valresultat/riksdag-landsting-och-kommun/2018/valresultat.html.

consideration of whether the asylum-seekers happened to have family or others from their community in other areas or what ethnicity they may have. This could mean that the municipality had to acquire more information as well as interpreters and the migrant could be very isolated during the time that it took. While this corresponds to the organizational fragmentation of integration policies (Liden et al., 2015; Qvist, 2016), we argue that this understanding of integration held by the officer, mainly in terms of economic self-sufficiency and employment, also contributed to moving responsibility to the *Public Employment Agency* and away from the municipality.

2.2. Civil-society-municipality relations in östhammar

Throughout the municipality, civil-society organizations were engaged in the wellbeing of migrants and worked in various ways towards making migrants and refugees feel welcome in Östhammar. Civil-society associations, meant to ease migrant integration into society, have been active in activities such as language cafés, in providing legal assistance, food nights and similar activities. Officials working with integration policy in the municipality emphasized the important role that civil-society organizations and churches[13] played in reception and integration efforts to assist migrants and asylum-seekers. They highlighted two projects in particular that they had organized together with civil-society actors, the *Språkvän*, or Language Friend and *Föreningsmatchning*, Matching with associations, both funded by the County Administrative Board.

The *Språkvän,* building on previous collaboration with the *Swedish Church*, was a collaborative project initiated in 2016. The idea was to connect migrants and native Swedish speakers with each other in order for them to meet and practice language skills. The project coordinator at the municipality related that she was pleased with the results as they had started out with a goal of ten matches but had been able to match over 35 pairs. The project organizers had set-up the matches but did not follow up or regulate them. They had heard that some constellations had broken up since some migrant families had moved to other locations. Another project, the *Föreningsmatchning* started in 2018. The idea was that the officer at the municipality met with newly arrived adults and children, and asked them if they were interested in joining an association that matched their interests - such as sports, music, crafts and so on. The official related that the original goal was to provide 20 matches but she estimated that the total number of matches had been over 40.

2.2.1. Meeting in collaborative networks

In early 2019, when the fieldwork was carried out, there were at least two networks for migrant integration in Östhammer municipality. One was a collaborative network in Gimo, a small town in the municipality. A story on the municipality website[14] describes how, with little to do during the evenings, youngsters, both migrant and local men from the villages, had been roaming the streets and getting into conflicts with each. The interactions between the two groups had not been violent but there was constant hostility and vandalism by both groups. The network, *Tryggt Gimo*, or Safe Gimo was started in 2016 by the municipality in collaboration with local government agencies, the police, civil-society associations and the church in order to come to terms with what they felt could become a major problem. One immediate solution was to re-open the *fritidsgård,* the youth center, that would give the youth a place to get together. The coordinator at the municipality explained that the situation improved significantly when the youth center opened again because it gave the youth a common place to socialize,

> " It isn't as if there is no conflict between young foreigners and locals but the new local youth center with organized activities for young people and a place to socialize gives them a chance to identify common interests and new relations emerges across cultural and ethnic boundaries."

Another important network that spanned the entire municipality and gathered the largest number of people was the *Östhammars Integrationsnätverk* or Östhammars Integration Network. The network was initiated by the municipality in autumn 2015 when they received their first asylum-seekers, including several unaccompanied minors, mainly from Afghanistan and Syria.

It was clear that a great deal of the collaboration came about as a result of a widespread civil-society presence as well as the needs created by the situation, including the cutbacks at the municipal level over the years. Municipal officers as well as civil-society actors related that initially representatives from five civil-society associations and local churches participated in the meetings but that the network had grown steadily since then. In late 2018, it had over twenty-five organizations. These included several representatives from the *Swedish Church* and other church congregations, from sports clubs as well as associations such as one started specifically for the reception and integration of asylum seekers by an active civil-society member. No migrant organizations were involved. The network met about five or six times each year and the municipality provided basic information concerning reception and integration of refugees. Sometimes they invited speakers from the Migration Board or for example from a driving school who would explain how immigrants could go about taking a driving license.

The officials appeared to be pleased with the network as it gave them a forum to explain how they worked and followed the legal framework and their responsibilities. One said,

> "prior to the integration network there were often angry calls from various associations and concerned citizens about the maladministration of reception and integration efforts by the municipality. Now we are able to discuss these issues, showing the others, our point of view, and explain why we do things in a specific way. After the start of this network there has been much less conflict."

Although, association members spoke of it as a network controlled by the municipality, they acknowledged that the series of meetings had been productive and had created a better understanding about the roles, responsibilities and the legal framework that regulated local authorities. The Integration Network had created an arena for informal information-sharing where local authorities could brief civil-society actors on what might be needed such as information on migrant families or persons that would benefit from a visit from a local association.

2.3. Fragmented responsibilities: technocracy and humanitarianism

It appeared however that not all collaborative efforts were as congenial as described by the officials. Fragmentation of authority occurred not only at the national and regional level (e.g. Qvist et al., 2016) but reflected uncertainty at the local level as well (see Arora-Jonsson, 2017a). Interviews with civil-society actors suggested that they did not necessarily see themselves as collaborators and were critical of how the municipality sometimes interpreted their role. According to some, collaboration and forums in Östhammar had grown out of a discontent and critiques by civil-society associations on what they felt was the inhumane treatment of asylum-seekers by local authorities. In interviews, civil-society actors expressed frustration about having to provide immediate assistance instead of laying the ground for long-term integration as well as what they termed as the mistreatment of human beings. Two people pointed out that they had helped asylum-seekers with everyday challenges such as providing them with furniture, food, toys and clothes for children, that they felt should be the municipality's responsibility. A member of a local church stated,

[13] The Church of Sweden has the advantage of personnel and facilities across the entire country, in urban as well as rural areas and has been active in reception and integration activities.

[14] https://www.osthammar.se/sv/nyheter/2018/lugnare-kvallar-i-gimo-efter-gemensam-insats/.

> "the role of civil-society organizations is too important, we should be offering social events but at the moment we are performing key tasks of providing basic needs, material needs, and a lot of information regarding rules and regulations and conventions in the Swedish society …. Sure, the municipality is restrained by rules and budgets but they are not contributing to long-term integration. "

One civil-society actor, whose name was often mentioned in interviews with both local authorities and civil-society actors, was the person who had started an association specifically for migrant reception and integration in 2016. The organization was devoted to assisting migrants and asylum-seekers with material, social and economic support. In an interview, they recalled that the organization had probably helped around 70 migrants and their families with furniture, economic support and in getting internships. They found it odd that these duties fell outside the municipality's obligations and expressed deep concern at the lack of commitment from the local authorities,

> "They only apply, in the strictest sense, this minimal legal framework and they do it in a non-compassionate way. I mean, who in their right mind leaves a family with three kids in an empty apartment, 15 km to the closest grocery store, in the middle of the winter, and does not check in on them for over five days. If the concerned neighbors had not contacted me, I don't know what would have happened."

They felt that the municipality was far too strict in interpreting the legal framework and their responsibilities towards newly arrived refugees that stipulated that they provide them with housing. According to them, such a technocratic approach implied that when migrants arrived at the house, they could find it completely empty – with no beds or furniture or possibilities for cooking. The municipality believed that they had done their job, which was to provide them with housing.

This person was also part of the *Östhammar Integration Network* and saw their involvement there as a way to keep track of what was going on in the municipality and the current agenda of local authorities. According to them, there never had been any real deliberation or exchange in the network. The network functioned, in their view, basically as an informational channel for the local authorities. Some civil-society actors pointed out that meetings often had a fixed agenda and there was little time for open discussions and that some initial participants decided not to participate due to the rigid format and the controlled agenda. A person from a church, active in integration work and who had left the network remarked,

> "it was all talk and no action …. It is all just about talking; nobody does anything so it is just a waste of time … We do things our own way"

The church had been active in integration efforts such as in receiving asylum-seekers, arranging transport, providing food, in arranging language cafés and they saw themselves as continuing to do that, regardless of their relationship with the municipality.

On the other hand, an official complained about the limited resources and role that they had at the municipality,

> "I mean, 10 years ago we had a much more extensive role and could do so much more. Now we just provide housing, set up schools for children and adults, and daycare for the youngest children, and the adults. We only meet asylum-seekers if there is some sort of problem. Their main contact is with the *Arbetsförmedlingen*, and the service they provide is really limited here in the municipality."

There were thus diverging opinions on the role and nature of the *Östhammar Integration Network.* While some civil-society organizations gained a better understanding of the municipality's work and motivations, other were displeased with both the performance of the municipality and the network. The municipality too felt its limited by resources as well as its mandate. And yet, they as well as others still saw themselves as in charge.

The narratives above reveal that in several instances, the welfare of asylum-seekers ended up falling between chairs as it was never really the responsibility of any one actor. Apart from the drawback of language and lack of social networks, the individual migrant was thus likely to confront a maze of authorities, organizations and actors. The *Intercultural Communicator* at Östhammar municipality admitted that the local governance system, including reception and integration, could, at times be very difficult to understand and navigate for outsiders. All the actors involved in the process worked from their own points of departure and core tasks could get mired in prolonged waiting periods for individual asylum-seekers. This was compounded by the fact that asylum-seekers were moved from one location to another, often several times during the first years.

The asylum-seekers confirmed this in interviews. They were moved between geographical areas and across administrative levels and could be interviewed several times during these moves, bringing with it a sense of frustration and confusion about what was actually expected from the individual asylum-seeker.

3. Everyday relations of 'integration' in rural spaces: navigating an obscure terrain

Although civil-society efforts were greatly appreciated, conversations with asylum-seekers also revealed experiences of not knowing where or to whom to turn to in navigating the system and of being outside of the life of the places despite having lived there for some years.

In the focus group with four asylum seekers, a man from Syria related that when he came to Östhammar with his family in 2017, they had been assigned an apartment in the small town of Hargshamn, far from grocery stores and the reception office in Gimo. The lack of public transport between Hargshamn and Gimo contributed to the family's isolation. The apartment they were placed in was empty and they had lived, more or less on the floor, for over a month before civil-society volunteers helped them get furniture. For him, a major source of tension was the lack of information on what he should be doing or how his family could be helped. Eventually, all the basic information and assistance had come from various civil-society actors who had involved themselves in their case. He had not been able to find a job during his first one and half year in Östhammar but was now helping to renovate the *Homestead Association*'s facilities as part of an internship for which the *Public Employment Agency* paid him a salary as initial support for entry into the labor market.

Lack of contact with decision-makers was a source of anxiety for others as well. A young couple from Afghanistan in the focus group recounted that they had come to Sweden in 2016 and had stayed in an asylum center in Timrå, in northern Sweden, for three years. During that time, they had not been able to study as they did not have a residence permit. They were allowed to work but employers are unwilling to hire people without Swedish language skills. The three years at the asylum-center where they were isolated with other asylum-seekers were stressful as they did not know if they could stay and had nothing to do during the period. The woman, a former English teacher in Afghanistan said in an interview that they "felt very bad and sick" (she pointed to her head implying psychological health problems).[15] Eventually, they were given a temporary permit for 13 months and moved to Östhammar municipality. However, they had had little communication with the municipality in the resettlement and the little contact they had with the local community was limited to civil-society volunteers.

Others spoke of their isolation due to their inability to reach out to people living in the area. A 28 year old man who gave the impression of being outgoing and gregarious related that he had come from Syria in 2014 and had been in Sweden for five years. He had been through

[15] The focus group was conducted in Swedish.

language and civic orientation courses on Swedish culture and traditions but had been unable to find work and had had a difficult time making friends. The association started for reception and integration that had its office at the *Homestead Association* center had arranged an internship for him. His temporary permit was however up for renewal in a few months. He had been eager to sign up for the language friend program but that did not work out as he was paired with a retired man and they had little in common and did not have much to talk about,

> "It was a bit awkward … but I do understand that it is a problem to get young or even middle aged Swedes to sign up for this project. Mainly retired people come for the matches"

He regretted that since he was assigned to Östhammar municipality a year and a half ago, he had not met anyone his own age despite regular attendance at various language cafés, making him feel isolated and detached from society and the village where he lived. The organizers confirmed that such mis-matches came about due to the fact that mostly older and retired people volunteered to be language friends at the language cafés. In part, this was also a reflection of smaller and rural places that in general had an older population. In such places, the migrants often brought down the average age (c.f. Arora-Jonsson, 2017b). In some measure, the incident also indicates the limits of humanitarian efforts and asymmetrical relations in wanting to teach and do good (c.f. McCluskey, 2019) *versus* migrant hopes of being able to find a foothold in society through a friend.

3.1. Belonging and hostility

While the travails of making a new life amidst uncertainty about how the society functioned and of making friends were tangible, there were also incidents of outright hostility towards migrants. For instance, the association housed in the *Homestead Association*'s facilities attracted negative attention for its engagement with migrants. Some local inhabitants refused to visit the community center since it hosted and allowed migrants to carry out internships at the facility. The buildings were vandalized and racist comments appeared on the association's Facebook page so that they had to close down the page to the general public. The number of members in the *Homestead Association* fell as individuals exited the association due the presence and engagement of one of the members who chaired the association set up for integration. The chairperson noted that now very few local Swedes came to the organized activities.

An example of harassment of immigrants was related by one of the deacons at a church in one village. According to them there were few refugees and asylum seekers that actually chose to live in their village, partly because there are very few rental apartments. One couple from Ethiopia, active in the Church, decided to buy a house there once they received their permanent residence in Sweden. Yet, within a year of buying the house, they decided to sell it and move to Uppsala. The reason was that they had been harassed, subjected to racist abuse and their property vandalized since the first day they moved in, until they could not stand it anymore. She said,

> "it truly broke my heart, I am so angry when I think of their story."

In a conversation overheard at a café by one of the authors in January 2019, a number of elderly men discussed openly how they believed that migrants were more prone to cheating and lying to get benefits from the state while Swedes barely got livable pensions.

These incidents and stories, taken together, depict a potentially hostile environment towards migrants and refugees. According to two people at the church as well as an official at the municipality, there was a division among the inhabitants between those who voted for the *Swedish Democrats* and held anti-immigrant or even racist attitudes and others who voluntarily engaged in the wellbeing of migrants.

A municipal official acknowledged that there were instances of open racism and xenophobia in the area but they were also anxious to get rid of what they believed were false ideas about Östhammar as racist, an opinion that they felt other Swedes seem to have about them,

> "there is just a history of bad experiences, and we are not all racists. I get really upset by the image that Gimo is a racist-dump. This image was created by bad news coverage back then but it is an image that just won't go away".

These statements refer to past incidents in Östhammar. In 2012, angry inhabitants had arrived at the house in which unaccompanied minors lived, in a rage over stones being thrown at cars, although it was not certain that the youngsters living at the center had been involved. The manager of the housing facility was quoted in a news article as saying that this was the culmination of verbal threats that had been going on for months. That same year, the center for unaccompanied minors was attacked with Molotov cocktails and according to newspaper reports, there were several incidents of physical assault directed at the migrants.

An officer for migrant reception and integration at the municipality remarked during an interview that people would call the municipality and wish to know why person x (an asylum-seeker) had received this or that benefit,

> "… they simply do not understand that I can't reveal such personal information or justify decisions taken about people … but I do understand that Swedes are frustrated by the situation. They have been living and working here there whole life and feel abandoned by the state and authorities and then newly arrived migrants receive apartments or get to see the dentist. These things really rankle with people."

It is clear from this the underlying issue of unequal geographies is central to integration in rural areas. The narratives ranged from identifying the asylum-seekers as victims or a threat (see McAreavey, 2017). The rhetoric of a 'system breakdown' in Sweden, as echoed in the men's conversation at the café, can be seen as a sign of 'a discourse prompted by long-term austerity politics rather than the coming of refugees' (Scarpa and Schierup, 2018) and that is especially tangible in rural areas. In Östhammar, as in other places (e.g. Arora-Jonsson, 2017b; Søholt et al., 2018), it was compounded by few spaces of interaction between immigrants and newcomers. While it is true that municipal officers cannot reveal information about support to individual asylum-seekers, as de Lima (2016) writes, more attention to engaging with the local community is clearly important. While, the work is far from over, the concerted initiative from the community in setting up the youth center provided a ray of hope for how spaces for a multicultural future might be forged.

4. Conclusion

The rural geography of integration policies has received less attention in debates about integration. In this paper, we explore the implications of integration politics in a rural municipality in relation to shifts in integration policy over the years and how it coincides with new forms of rural governance that expects active participation from civil-society as well as newcomners. Our analysis points to three main conclusions.

First, the policy shift from a focus on the participation of 'ethnic groups' in the polity (Soysal, 1994) to much needed attention to the rights and benefits of the individual migrant has over the years resulted in a technocratic approach that pays short shrift to questions of ethnicity and difference, and in particular to 'structural barriers faced by immigrants' (Fernandes, 2015) that go beyond the economic. As we show, this is particularly so in sparsely populated rural areas with few immigrant communities. We argue that this obliviousness to ethniciy increases migrants' isolation by disregarding the important role played by groups from their country of origin in their integration as shown by

previous research (c.f. Arora-Jonsson, 2017b; Saksela-Bergholm et al., 2019).

Second, our interviews reaveal that the organizational fragmentation of the multilevel policy administration pointed out by scholars on integration policy (Qvist, 2016; Lidén et al., 2015) is exacerbated in rural areas where the thrust towards the involvement of actors including the civil-society has brought about uncertainties about responsibility and accountability in the governance of integration, a characteristic of new rural governance more broadly (Arora-Jonsson, 2017a). For rural communities threatened by economic and population decline in Sweden and in Europe more widely, the active participation of civil-society organizations is seen as crucial to ensure 'development from below.' However, as the case of Östhammar confirms, boundaries around who is meant to do what and involved to what extent are far from clear.

The technocratic approach to integration criticized by scholars at the national level (c.f. Ålund and Schierup, 1991, Dahlström, 2004) permeated everyday relations of integration. Civil-society actors were critical of local authorities for using a technocratic approach to dictate the agenda in their collaborative network, and as in other rural municipalities (c.f. Arora-Jonsson, 2017a), the organizational fragmentation from the national level made itself felt in local contexts by the municipality's ambiguous relationship *vis à vis* the civil-society.

Examining the shifts in integration policy and rural governance in conjunction with the stories from Östhammar, we argue that asylum-seekers in Sweden who have been assigned to rural areas thus run the risk of experiencing a 'double isolation' as they wait in limbo and uncertainty. The isolation of migrants from local communities emerged strongly in narratives of both those involved with integration activities as well as that of asylum-seekers. Social interactions and relations were scarce beyond formal meetings arranged by civil-society associations. While this might not be uncommon for newcomers to an area, we argue that this isolation is exacerbated in rural areas where they are isolated from the local community as well as co-ethnic communities and diaspora that could be useful in socializing them and helping them navigate a new system. At the same time, individual responsibility for their own activation is made complicated by the blurred boundaries between various actors responsible for their welfare. Asylum-seekers were expected to be active in dealing with the Swedish bureaucracy, yet it was difficult for them to know how they could take care of themselves or where there might be possible spaces for them to take initiatives.

Third and last, we argue that this uncertainty in governance can come in the way of working towards a collective future for the whole rural community. Rural inhabitants in many parts of the country have welcomed migrants to their areas with the hope of reinvigorating rural areas. It has been suggested that the lack of anonymity in a small community, the shared use of spaces, and a sense of collective interest in sustaining the community could militate against segregation and polarization *vis a vis* migrants (Woods, 2018). This would suggest an approach with much more discussion about the future with both local inhabitants, migrants and authorities. While several in Östhammar attributed racist attitudes to a segment of society, that is, those who voted for the *Sweden Democrats*, xenophobic instances also highlight the lack of interactions between the larger community and the immigrants. To our mind, this lack calls for the importance of the whole community approach in questions of integration (c.f. de Lima, 2016) where the civil-society is an important actor. It calls for the involvement of the larger community in integration practices and of migrants in rural development.

As was clear in Östhammar, civil-society actors felt torn between the immediate service they felt bound to provide due to what they felt was municipal incompetence and out of 'feelings of compassion' (c.f. Theodossopoulos, 2016; Monforte, 2019) and what they felt was their actual work of long-term social integration that would benefit both newcomers and the community. Research points to how integration work by the civil-society can build on ideas of 'moral exceptionalism' and charity for the 'other' (McCluskey, 2019; Monforte 2019; Rozaku, 2012) and that formal multicultural citizenship in Sweden tends to be dissociated from conceptions of nationhood and societal belonging (Fernández, 2019). However, research also shows that practice on the ground and rural civil-society initiatives for rural development are often borne of wanting to nurture the place and build on bonds of history, friendship and a sense of belonging to place (Arora-Jonsson, 2017a). Thus, as migration to precarious rural areas becomes more prevalent, not only do local inhabitants need to be part of the conversation on integration but migrants too need to be part of a conversation on belonging to place and its development because the context has already changed. Although difficult, it is also clear from examples elsewhere (Askins, 2015; Mahieu and Cauldenberg, 2020) that a new politics, beyond the asymmetrical relations of care is possible.

Author statement

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