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CAS SEE Spring/Summer fellowship 2022: Open Editorials

Frontiers and identity: new approaches for old problems

1. The theoretical-practical approach carried out by Franco Basaglia

The research carried out at CAS SEE of University of Rijeka is focused on two main topics, which are the problem of frontiers and the development of personal identity, and how they overlap with one another. Frontiers and borders raise the question of migrants, who are often forced to prolonged stay in free and neutral zones, surrounded by walls and guarded with cameras and other control devices, their identities being feared, forgotten and often rejected. There are numerous dissertations on this theme, but the starting point of my research is Franco Basaglia's analysis, whose theoretical-practical activity is a crucial evidence of this correlation. When Basaglia started his work at Gorica's asylum in 1961 he was faced with a dramatic situation, where pain, misery and repression seemed to be the only possibilities for human relationships, as the patients were just mere husks of men without any kind of will. The situation in Gorica's asylum was extremely delicate, because the city was situated in a focal point at the border with Slovenia, and was de facto a door to Balkans and, consequentially, to the communist block. When he examined the situation of patients, the first consideration was purely linguistic: the hospital's mental guests were not without needs and desires, nor did they lack the wits to express them, they simply did not know the language. Indeed at the time, two-thirds of patients were strangers and half of them didn't speak Italian; their life was a history of hate and violence, caused by the crimes that had inflamed the north-adriatic zone's frontiers during the Nineteen century. This border territory, in the heartland of Europe, showed him how the frontier's existence led to identity's negation and the construction of de facto lagers and he realized that hospital institutions could produce the same effect of ghettoization and denial of alterity out of fear for everything that is perceived as outside the norm. His theory project, although specifically envisioned for asylums, had the goal to be extended to other systems that could create walls and barriers between people and so it stands to reason to consider that his speculative proposal would encompass the actual institutional system of borders, where the negation of identity, be it cultural, political, religious or more, is common practice and is upheld by the very constructs that Basaglia tried to bring down with his philosophy of praxis, where the notion of "*incontro*", which means meeting or confrontation, could help eliminating the bias of incomprehensibility that surround the other, be it migrant or patient. The comparison with the other, who comes from beyond our frontiers, can happen with the aid of therapeutical practices adopted by Basaglia, who saw in the notion of incontro the elements necessary to reconnect to the social life an individual that has been negated by it. With the concept of *incontro*, Basaglia meant to bring together the essential terms of his anthropophenomenological approach that he developed based on the analysis of authors such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Karl Jaspers e Ludwig Binswanger. To quote Ernesto De Martino – whose link to Basaglia is also worthy of study, as some member of the Gorica team worked together with him in Apulia to analyze the tarantinism –, the views of those thinkers could help to grasp the crisis of existence that plagues the outcasted, whether they be psychologically ill or refugees. For Basaglia, it was only possible to conceive the presence of the patient through the incontro, which assumes the primal values of recognizing their existence and eliminating the stigma of incomprehensibility that surrounds them. Basaglia would delve deeper into his ideas in a paper of 1954 called *Su alcuni aspetti della moderna psicoterapia: analisi fenomenologica dell'incontro*, referring not only to Binswanger

and his anthropophenomenological analysis but also to the work of psychiatrist Eugène Minkowski, whose teachings, according to Basaglia, summarized the phenomenological tendencies of modern psychiatry. For the Italian psychiatrist, the incontro allows to study the true essence of a closed off individual who often needs stimulus (or provocatio) from the doctor in order to open up and not perceive the other as hostile. As Basaglia pointed out, the incontro implies an existential knowledge of the individual that can only happen through an anthropological and phenomenological investigation in order to create a relationship of unity between patient and doctor that precedes their singular identities. Proceeding with his analysis, Basaglia focused on the double values in the dynamics of the incontro: on one hand, it allows to empirically understand the modality by which one person interact with another, on the other it can help understand humanity as a whole. The primary means to achieve such a feat is the use of language, which assumes great importance. As the paper stated, it is imperative to get access to another world, another language that allows to recognize the peculiarity of the patients without ascribing them to the realm of incommunicability. The phenomenological analysis of the incontro and of the language are fundamental to explicate the Weltanschauung of a person and to add concreteness to the relationship that is built between doctor and patient which allows Basaglia to anchor his theoretical assumptions to a precise political praxis, compatible with the ordinary functions inside the clinic. In the eyes of the Italian psychiatrist, the study of language should not have the goal to find the perfect grammatical rule but instead to study the formal existence and to help create a common ground. This incontro is accomplished through a dialog of words, gestures, expressions and silences. The intimate relationship thus established brings to the blurring between subjective and objective, between “I” and “you”. According to Basaglia, through the incontro it is possible to replace the canonical dynamic doctor/patient with a relationship between two individuals that, by tacit agreement, work together to overcome the patient’s traumatic experience in order to open up to the world and to the society.

2. Across deserts, seas and hospitals: a look at migrations’s current state

A look at the actual global situation shows how the *stasis* of thousand people inside refugee camps throughout the world (be it in Greece, Turkey, Liban or elsewhere) has torn the identities of these stateless persons, stuck along the world’s frontiers. Nowadays, it is impossible not to notice how the problem of frontiers is one of the most pressing issue in our society and it involves different actors, both national and extra-national. The current social-economic crisis across the globe has destroyed the States’s frontiers, pushing an increasing number of people to abandon their hometowns in hope to find more acceptable and dignified life conditions elsewhere. The current economic system, essentially based on Neo-liberalism capitalism and a vicious globalization, has eroded with alarming speed the frontiers and has created a world virtually without barriers. However, this process did not involve an equal redistribution of richness, instead it has widened the differences between men encouraging all these migratory flows, further amplified and exacerbated by wars, persecutions and hunger. In a very short time, this crisis has sparked a copious movement of bodies particularly from Third World countries where the inhabitants, despite their poverty, were forced to pay lot of money to move towards the States that, in their opinion, could improve the quality of life and give them better chances. A poignant example is the massive migration towards Europe from Africa, as men, women and children venture daily in a dangerous trip across the deserts suffering degrading and inhuman conditions. It is hard to believe that these human masses could arrive unharmed in Libyan ports, as it is a fact that many of those who depart often die during the journey in African deserts. Moreover, if by chance they get to Libya – and aren’t arrested and detained in State’s prisons –, the luckiest survivors board on fragile inflatables across the tumultuous waters of the Mediterranean sea often with tragic outcomes –in the last eight years according to many Ong’s reports, twenty thousand bodies were swallowed up by the dark waters of the sea. Those who can reach Europe’s coast start a long ordeal into the facilities for welcoming immigrants and are treated with the stigma of

incomprehensible and relegated to the role of deadweight by the State in which they arrive. It is also significant to highlight how there is often prejudice applied to the migrant, born from a strong ideological heritage that impoverishes their existential peculiarity. This process regards various levels of western society and, despite the appearances, also affects the members of those social classes devoted to the protection of the humans. Allow me to report a very emblematic episode that I have witnessed long ago about a few months pregnant migrant from Sahara, who lamented severe bowel pain with chronic retching. She was taken to the hospital and the first medical report was neurotic crisis and recommended hospitalization in psychiatry's department, which was strongly supported by paramedical and nursing staff; linguistic mediators tried but could do nothing against the blind obstinacy of medical operators, and were forced to turn to doctors in private sector in order to reverse what, for all intents and purposes, would have been an unnecessary, and perhaps even scandalous, hospitalization. This anecdote is paradigmatic and allows to point out how certain migrant's physiological conditions are often misjudged and hurriedly categorized as mental illness or psychological distress, a much more convenient and inexpensive way than understanding their problems and needs. If the only answer made by institutions in front a serious health problem is the forced medicalization, its reduction to mere corporeity, this shows the serious social-ideological hypothecation on the migrant's shoulders. Consequentially, this leads to a serious identity's crisis, because the migrant is aware of the obviously unequal treatment to the point where he/she starts to question his/her own humanity. This situation shows how stateless people, after all the difficulties during the travel, have to deal with the prejudices present in the State they arrive in, where instead of being accepted and re-inserted into a different social fabric, they become the prime target of a new form of ghettoization that relegates them to the role of burden for the host society. The same reception arrangements, at least in Italy, don't point at progressive migrants' emancipation but rather are weighted down by cloudy form of social assistance that prevents them to cut out a minimal space of autonomy and self-determination. In the present situation, the frontiers aren't configured only as physical spaces in which to relegate certain human categories, but appear to constitute themselves as mental borders that make of migrants a sort of sub-human destined to all possible and imaginable atrocities. In addition to what has just been said, it should be brought to attention the function of refugee camps, that in the last years have increased in number around the world; these shadow zones become indeed autonomous microcosmos that perpetually enforce certain exclusion mechanisms and where new types of legislation and socialites are born. Segregated within these heavily guarded and fenced territories, the migrants are relegated in a new jurisdiction's typology and are subjected to the panoptic structure par excellence.

3. New strategies for inclusion

If we keep in mind these elements, the main question to ask is how it is possible to counteract and invalidate these ideological legacies that prompts us to negation of migrant's identity and alterity. As previously mentioned, the globalization has imposed a redefinition of geographical maps, thus making frontiers and borders of modern nation-State almost ethereal; however, despite this processes of homologation and leveling, it is necessary to reaffirm frontiers and borders's importance that are secular artifacts elaborated by men in order to delimitate their territory and also, and maybe more importantly, to defend their existence against the threat of hostility. The contemporary movements pushing in favor of frontiers suppression reveal an inherent immaturity, as they aim to avoid the problem instead of facing it directly, and while it is not feasible to find definitive and ready made solutions, maybe it is possible to list some necessary measures that may allow us to mitigate some of those negative effects we have described. Firstly, the illegal migration that nowadays is one of the most urgent problems and the cause of numerous deaths, especially in the journey through the African deserts and the Mediterranean sea, should be monitored and reduced. This measure is to safeguard the life of many that are endangered not only by the natural perils of the journey but also by the

stratified criminal organizations, possibly covered by some State authorities, that act mostly unpunished in their human traffics. This observation brings out the necessity of bilateral agreements between different governments in order to help not only regulating the migratory fluxes – at the current state, impossible to wholly control –, but also to stop thousands and thousands of people to try their luck across the sea in inflatables and improper boats. Plus, it is necessary to deeply rethink welcoming strategies with the goal to eliminate those forms of sick social assistances that often make the migrants a weight for the society. To pursue this goal, it is fundamental to encourage integration's process through some preliminary steps that allow them to master the language and have the possibility to choose a work with regular contract and retribution; too often, especially in Italy, there have been cases of irregular migrants used in agricultural work, without protection and adequate insurance cover or any of those rights that should be reserved for any worker. One of the main challenges related to migrants inclusion consist indeed to understand how best preparing them for a new country, making sure that the human capital they bring from their countries become integrant and productive part of the communities hosting them. To achieve this objective is a desirable result not only for the migrants wellness, but also for the economies and societies in which they live, that could benefit from all the different skills with which migrants can contribute to socio-economic development and the potential to mitigate the impact of aging and population decline. According to some sector studies, the migrants inclusion can be obstructed by specific key elements: lack of linguistic abilities, of education or working experience in destination country, but also the non-recognition of job qualification acquired in their home country. In order to nullify these elements, the job market should be more open towards the migrants, encouraging measures in favor of citizens of Third-world countries, ethnic minorities, asylum claimants and refugees, with the purpose of promoting social inclusion and full participation in the community's life. A great part of public opinion should understand that the migrants arrival in depopulated and economically marginalized territories has often represented a occasion of true rebirth, not only in economic terms – for example through the revitalization of abandoned activities like craftsmanship, considered unprofitable – but also demographic, which is a very delicate theme that polarize the political discourse when debating the rights to citizenship for immigrants and their children. But why some communities reject the migrants, viewing them as another cost to shoulder, while others want to grasp the opportunities of a younger population and are eager to integrate them? What factors can promote the start of those virtuous processes of migrants integration and local economic development that seems to be so important for the state organizations? The answers to these question could help in facing the continuous challenges that the process of immigration poses to western countries, increasingly focused on positions of closure. Beyond the pessimistic or enthusiastic positions that emerge from the analysis of individual experience, it is in fact necessary to identify possible integration's scenarios starting from elements that, at local level, can indicate not only socio-economic inclusion trajectories of migrants, but also social interaction with the population and life's overall quality. Plus, in my opinion, a further problem is the prejudice promoted by media establishments and some political parties that, indifferent to the daily difficulties of these human groups, promote certain stereotypes that see in the “nigga” a career criminal, a serial rapist and, in short, a human being doomed to illegality. This narration foster the distrust with which we observes the other, those who comes outside of our frontiers, always seen as constant threat in western society. It is almost superfluous to note that the way we see the other, the migrant that invades our borders, is weighted by a strong social heritage that is rooted in a sense of superiority, sometimes unconscious, that is always common to the wealthy parts of the globe. For undoing all this, it is necessary to start from the technicians of medical knowledge and the workers inside the public health structures, those who first come in contact with migrants and should be more receptive towards their needs, helping in their integration's law process with host societies, in order to see a resource and opportunity in immigration and an important growth medium and improvement for society, now poisoned by diffidence, in a identity different from ours.