

# Symbolic despotism as hypocrisy, desire and violence: The Ironies of Humanitarianism in Spain's Asylum System<sup>1</sup>

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## Epigraph:

*There is not a living man who does not wish to play the despot when he is stiff: it seems to him his joy is less when others appear to have as much fun as he; by an impulse of pride, very natural at this juncture, he would like to be the only one in the world capable of experiencing what he feels: the idea of seeing another enjoy as he enjoys reduces him to a kind of equality with that other, which impairs the unspeakable charm despotism causes him to feel.*

— Marquis de Sade, Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, and Other Writings

In an era when humanitarian credentials often serve as a moral badge, the Spanish asylum system reveals a paradox: those tasked by providing care can become unwitting agents of subtler form of tyranny. Beneath the veneer of altruism, the front-line social workers everyday interactions with asylum seekers -often operating within overstretched bureaucracies- exemplify what we conceptualize as symbolic despotism, where the desire for control is entrenched in the rhetoric of virtue.

## The System Under Strain

Spain's asylum framework underwent a transformation starting in 2014. Triggered by the change in asylum law and unprecedented surge in applications mostly from Latin America, the system was forced to evolve rapidly. As temporary contracts and short-term responses were deployed, agencies like the Oficina de Asilo y Refugiado (OAR) were left with limited resources and a growing backlog of cases (Rué 2022). The results have been an overextended bureaucracy struggling to meet the needs of asylum seekers while inadvertently becoming an engine for exclusion.

A similar scenario developed in reception services. Since 1995, in response to periodic surges in asylum applications, the Spanish government has partnered with three third-sector organizations to help expand the asylum reception system. Originally a temporary solution, this partnership quickly evolved into a structural arrangement. By the mid-2010s, while public asylum reception centres were originally responsible for 50% of available slots, by 2019 they

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<sup>1</sup> This blog post is based on a book chapter written by Tunaboynu and Rué (forthcoming) titled *Despotismo simbólico como hipocresía, deseo y violencia: Caso de los trabajadores sociales en el programa de acogida del sistema de asilo en España: la naturaleza contradictoria del deseo de hacer el bien y el deseo de controlar* In *Deseos [re]negados*. Cartografiando relaciones, contradicciones y utopías, Edited by Olga Jubany, la Livia Motterle i la Marta Ausona. Edicions Bellaterra, Barcelona, Spain. Follow [Tunaboynu](#) and [Rué](#) for the updates on the book chapter.

housed only about 5% of the total number of asylum seekers. In effect, third-sector organizations came to be responsible for most of the reception capacity.

In an effort to manage this demand, Spain scrapped the long-term collaboration agreement in favour of a yearly public tender—a move that increased the number of organizations eligible to provide services. This approach was further modified in 2020 with the introduction of a mixed model in which both the public tender and the collaboration agreement coexist. These policy shifts meant emergency measures have become permanent features of the system. Within this set up, frontline workers are expected to balance empathy and care with administrative efficiency and political pressure. Ethnographic data<sup>2</sup> reveals that the demands of their work have created an environment where their reflections on the virtuous nature of their work are surpassed with moral superiority and racism embedded in the hierarchical power structures of the colonial past.

### **Humanitarianism or Symbolic Despotism?**

At the heart of the issue is a subtle yet pervasive power dynamic. The social workers' predicament is emblematic of a broader historical legacy. Their actions resonate with the deep-seated tradition: humanitarian intervention as a guise for exerting control. Echoing the colonial narrative of “civilizing missions” that once justified the subjugation of indigenous people (Todorov, 1987:45), modern bureaucratic processes continue to draw the line between the deserving and undeserving migrants (Masocha, 2015). The rhetoric of rescue and reception often mask practices steeped in racial, gendered and cultural bias. Such biases are not accidental; they trace their origins to the categorisations of a colonial past, wherein Spain significantly contributed to the formation and institutionalisation of racial hierarchies that reverberate in current bureaucratic practices and the public imaginary

Indeed, the discourse emerging from ethnographic fieldwork in Spain revealed that while frontline workers are keen to assert their role as compassionate state agents, their language is often filled with moral superiority and prejudice. In everyday interactions with asylum seekers, the desire to help is intermingled with desire to control – a dynamic reminiscent of ancient political despotism (Boesche 1978). Tacitus observed that power when exercised through bureaucratic mechanisms tend to corrupt best intentions. Modern day frontline workers may inadvertently adopt what we call a symbolic despotism. We argue that symbolic despotism results from contradictory dynamics between a desire for virtue and desire for power, encompassing hypocrisy derived from power to control over other's lives. The power they hold can corrupt, leading to a tyranny of desire. This lust for control, compounded by self-

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<sup>2</sup> The empirical data that inspired this article were collected by Alèxia Rué for her doctoral thesis at the Autonomous University of Barcelona between 2018 and 2020. The research involved participant observation in reception sites in the regions of Catalunya and Madrid and a total of 41 in-depth interviews with front-line social workers, lawyers and psychologists in third-sector organisations that in the different public asylum reception programmes in Spain. However, the theoretical and conceptual development of the article was carried out by the authors during their involvement in the research for the Horizon Europe project MORE: Motivations, Experiences, and Consequences of the Returns and Readmissions Policy. Revealing and Developing Effective Alternatives, funded by the European Union [Grant Agreement 101094107] and coordinated by Professor Olga Jubany from the University of Barcelona.

righteousness deepens the symbolic despotism in their present actions, that may have violent consequences, including deportation, for those who are subjected to such power.

The evolution of state power from the brutality of ancient empires as described by Tacitus to the bureaucratic violence of today is not merely a historical curiosity for us. It reflects a transformation in how power is legitimised, and how the subtler forms of the characteristics of ancient political despotism -hypocrisy, desire and violence- can still be observed in the everyday acts of contemporary state agents, where authority is masked by the façade of compassion. Yet, the mechanisms designed to protect vulnerable populations become instruments of exclusion, reinforcing a system that privileges formal legal status over human dignity.

### **The reality on the Ground: Impossible Decisions**

Frontline workers, whose training and motivations might have been driven by ideals of duty and care, are forced to operate in a regime that reward efficiency over empathy. With a growing number of people in need of asylum and persistent lack of resources, these workers are forced to make “impossible decisions” (Zacka, 2017) every day. The challenge is not only administrative but also moral. Workers like Eva, a psychologist whose early enthusiasm for humanitarian work was soon clouded with the pressures of screening between deserving refugees and undeserving migrants, now finds herself in having to make hierarchical assessments of need often based on racial, gendered and cultural biases:

“What should be done is... if you see a case that isn't one of international protection... that it isn't... there's no need... First, it takes a spot from someone who really needs it and who will have to wait longer to access it or might not access it at all. And then, I think... of course, after you go through the whole process, you do the work, you get everything ready, and then it's denied. Obviously, there are many ways to appeal, but you don't know if they will work. I think that the first step is screening. Also, because from a professional level, it's exhausting, there's an effort... and that effort...” (Eva, Woman, 20-30, 22/10/2018)

Their decisions masked in the language of administrative efficiency, reflect an underlying process of exclusion. Eva's admission that filtering out cases deemed non genuine is necessary to free up care resources highlights a disturbing trend. Her discourse shifts from the idealized vision of helping refugees to a more exclusionary attitude, where she emphasizes the need for screening to prevent those who "don't deserve it" from taking spots that could go to more "legitimate" cases. This contradiction between humanitarian and exclusionary discourse illustrates one of the common characteristics of despotism: hypocrisy. Here, this hypocrisy emerges in the gap between the frontline worker's discourse of altruism and humanitarianism, and the later admission of frustration and exclusionary attitudes toward certain asylum seekers.

We see that frontline workers internalize state narratives that blame asylum seekers for the system's shortcomings:

“For me, honestly, it's not the same when an African man comes alone because he chose to, and he invents a story... that he says he's seeking asylum because he had an argument with his father... than when a woman comes... it's harder to establish a connection, you see there's a case there, she always comes with different men... there are indicators, you know?” (Roger, Man, 40-50, 26/11/2018)

Roger's account also underscores this trend, using the language of deservingness loaded with racial and gendered assumptions as a tool of exclusion, making a moral judgement on who deserves asylum, a decision that holds biopower over someone's life trajectory. His reflections reveal how power over someone's asylum case—essentially determining their fate—can foster a sense of self-righteousness and how this authority can corrupt the frontline worker. In Sade's description of the despot in the epiphany, he becomes consumed by desire for power over someone else's body and life. Here, power is uncontested and absolute to the level that it can become intoxicating, shaping how the worker perceives their role and others' lives.

Another account by Lola, who is a seasoned social worker in the asylum reception system, explains how a mundane decision like going to another city for a friend's wedding led to the expulsion of the asylum seeker from the system. What is troubling is the discourse of the frontline worker, who justifies the expulsion without any reflection on what would happen to the person afterward or on her role in the process:

“Another expulsion we also had was of a single person, a guy... At first, everything was fine, he participated, his language level was quite high, and he wanted to enrol somewhere to improve it. He worked for a while, very well... until the moment came when he lost his job. He asked, "Look, I want to go to Madrid for two or three weeks... or just one week, because a friend of mine is getting married, and I want to help him. (...) We explained, "Look, you're using a resource. We understand, but you must be aware of your situation... you're occupying a place meant for people on the street, and you're not on the street. At this moment, you can't afford to leave the apartment for two weeks, leaving a room empty. Maybe later, but not right now." And he left without saying anything, without responding to WhatsApps, without answering calls... We filed a report with the city council, it was evaluated, and when he landed here, he was informed that we were proceeding with his expulsion for these reasons.” (Lola, woman, 30-40, 19/12/2018)

The frontline worker, whose job is to assist those in need, ultimately plays a violent role. This links to Ferguson's argument about despotism, where the fear of dissent -in this case from the migrant- results in a violent, authoritarian reaction (Keane 1988). This example reflects a despotic relationship, where the worker has total control over the migrant's judgment and their life decisions. The migrant is judged on how well they "perform" as a deserving refugee, while the worker exerts control over every aspect of their day-to-day life, from their movements to their associations. Failure to comply results in the ultimate act of violence—expulsion from the system, resulting in the political death of the migrant (Foucault, 2013).

Thus, in a system that is designed to provide safety and reception, acts of assistance become entangled with power over someone's life. When state sanctioned aid is administered in a context of colonial history, the act of helping can quickly turn into a subtle form of control. The frontline worker's role is thus ambivalent, caught between a desire to do good and desire to exert authority.

## Final Reflections

In reflecting on the Spanish asylum reception system, we found that behind the humanitarian narrative lies a complex reality of contradictions—one where the desire for control may lead to a new form of despotism. The case of Spain serves as a cautionary tale for the modern welfare state: as asylum reception systems are developed, it is crucial to remain vigilant of the power

dynamics and the seductive nature of authority within bureaucratic institutions. The lessons learned from this analysis may be confrontational. Yet, in a world where racial, gendered, and cultural biases are entangled with everyday practices, it is essential for frontline workers to recognise their positionality, prejudices, and the contradictions inherent in their work and humanitarian interventions in general. However, the issue is fundamentally structural. Frontline workers may become 'little despots' not because of personal failings, but because the system grants them the power and nudges them towards such behaviour. This aligns with contemporary readings (Kalir 2023) of Hannah Arendt's concept of the 'banality of evil' (2022 [1963]), where ordinary individuals can perpetrate harm within a bureaucratic system that normalises such actions. We argue that this can be the case even when those individuals oppose the principles of such harm as the desire to do good intertwines with bureaucratic power in a context of lack of resources. Only by acknowledging these systemic contradictions and hidden desires for power and control can the welfare state hope to provide a dignified system truly motivated by ensuring the fundamental rights of all, rather than serving as a façade to separate those deemed deserving from those considered undeserving and subject to control and management.

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