

Article

Social Workers and Irregular Migrants in the Assistance Circuit: Making Sense of Paradoxical Inclusion

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Abstract

Despite restrictive policy frameworks, cities sometimes provide support to irregular migrants. Scholars have analysed these forms of inclusion, focusing on policies and tensions between inclusionary approaches by local or urban actors and exclusionary approaches by national or supranational authorities. This article seeks to shift the focus to the street level, examining how support is delivered, how it is experienced by different categories of irregular migrants, and how frontline social workers make sense of their work and foster “paradoxical inclusion.” To this end, the article first analyses the experiences of young North African irregular migrants in Geneva, Switzerland. Based on ethnographic research, we describe their everyday life in the “assistance circuit,” which forces them to follow a daily routine determined by the services offered at fixed times in different places. Over time, the young men develop a sense of entrapment and alienation, as well as escape strategies. Secondly, by examining the perspective of social workers, we show that the constraints associated with the assistance circuit reflect a social work paradigm that aims to keep people on the move, limit dependency and promote autonomy. This paradigm coexists with another, conflicting one, which can be described as palliative, but which also seems paradoxical to the irregular migrants who aspire to full participation in social and economic life. Overall, our study suggests an alternative interpretation of the limitations and paradoxes surrounding irregular migrants’ inclusion that complements policy-oriented approaches.

Keywords

Geneva; Harragas; inclusion; irregular migration; local level; social work; Switzerland

Issue

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1. Introduction

Despite restrictive policy frameworks, some cities provide support and services to irregular migrants. While irregular migration used to be equated with exclusion, researchers have increasingly paid attention to forms of inclusion, but also to their limits. Indeed, irregular migrants are often “included” as irregular migrants, which means that while they may have access to forms of assistance, they remain excluded from most wel-

fare rights and the formal labour market (De Genova, 2013). This “subordinate inclusion” (Chauvin & Garcés-Mascreñas, 2014, p. 423) results from a tension between the inclusionary approach of local actors (municipalities, civil society organisations), underpinned by economic, humanitarian or security motives (Spencer & Delvino, 2019), and exclusionary national and supranational policies on citizenship and migration, underpinned by economic, security or nativist logics (Jansen et al., 2015). Scholars have sought to explain this situation

by analysing the rationales of policymakers (Kaufmann et al., 2022; Spencer & Delvino, 2019), the advocacy role of NGOs and social movements (Lambert & Swerts, 2019), and the contradictions between human rights and citizenship regimes (Chimienti & Solomos, 2016). At the theoretical level, this literature contributes to debates around notions such as “urban citizenship” and the “right to the city” to make sense of the tension between local inclusion and national exclusion.

However, less attention has been paid to how this contradiction translates into the concrete structuring of support for irregular migrants. Describing *who* has access to *what* and *why* says little about *how* assistance is delivered, *how* it is experienced by different categories of migrants, and *how* frontline social workers make sense of their work and foster “paradoxical inclusion” at the street level. This article addresses these gaps by analysing, firstly, the experience of young North African irregular migrants—Harragas—in Geneva, Switzerland, and secondly, the perspective of social workers involved in the reception of these newcomers. This allows us to argue that the limits and paradoxes of irregular migrants’ inclusion cannot be fully explained by the contradictions between the inclusionary approach of local actors and exclusionary national and supranational policies.

We show that while the young men we met in the course of our ethnographic study had access to shelters and soup kitchens regardless of their status, this meant following a daily routine determined by the services offered at fixed times in different and dispersed locations. Over time, the young men develop a sense of entrapment and alienation, but also strategies to escape the assistance circuit. The constraints associated with the assistance circuit reflect the fragmentation and diversity of the actors involved. However, we argue that they also reveal a social work paradigm that aims to keep beneficiaries on the move, in order to ensure that they remain autonomous. This paradigm coexists with a competing one, which we call “palliative,” because it is more concerned with ensuring survival and preserving dignity. Both, however, involve a form of inclusion that may be characterised as paradoxical. Harragas aspire to more than survival, yet autonomy seems illusory. This is due largely to their lack of residence status. Nevertheless, we argue that there are many ways of living as an irregular migrant in Geneva. Compared to other categories of irregular migrants, Harragas are particularly burdened by their migration and face strong stigmatisation, which makes their prospects of integration and regularisation appear remote. Nevertheless, they have access to almost unconditional forms of support. This contradiction provides a strong case for examining the contours of inclusion “on the ground,” in so-called “low-threshold” reception facilities.

In the next section, we review the literature on how cities deal with irregular migrants and with Harragas, in particular. After describing how we approached our fieldwork and the data on which we base our analyses, we

will describe a typical day in the assistance circuit from the perspective of the young migrants we met. We then seek to understand why the provision of support is locationally dispersed and discontinuous over time, contrasting two perspectives on the role of social work with irregular migrants: one that “keeps them on the move” and another that “lets them rest.” In the conclusion, we question the extent to which our case represents a form of inclusion and argue for an approach that takes into account the specificities of different categories of irregular migrants and the practical aspects of resource and service provision.

2. Harragas and the Differentiated Inclusion of Irregular Migrants

While irregular migrants are generally considered as being excluded, especially from the rights granted to citizens and regular migrants, scholars have highlighted forms of informal inclusion (Chauvin & Garcés-Mascreñas, 2014). Migration and urban sociologists have long studied the role of personal networks and “arrival neighbourhoods” in facilitating the settlement of newcomers and their access to parallel labour and housing markets (for a recent example see Gerten et al., 2022). While many irregular migrants are dependent on these informal forms of support, they are not always excluded from state protection. The development of human rights organisations and forms of urban citizenship has created tension between migration policies and human rights principles (Chimienti & Solomos, 2016).

A number of studies show that many Western European cities provide basic support to irregular migrants, even when the national authorities forbid it (Leerkes, 2016; Özdemir, 2022; Van der Leun & Bouter, 2015). Spencer and Delvino (2019, p. 39) show that “one part of the state, the local tier, is providing for a level of formal inclusion of irregular migrants, not merely the informal inclusion facilitated by sympathetic service providers.” These forms of support can result from “municipal activism,” as exemplified by the sanctuary city movement, in which cities oppose migration policies decided at the national level (Kaufmann et al., 2022). Without declaring itself a sanctuary city, Geneva has pushed for the regularisation of thousands of long-term irregular migrant workers. Other municipalities, such as Zurich, offer non-national identity documents for access to certain municipal services (Kaufmann & Strebel, 2021). These forms of inclusion are always based on eligibility criteria.

Other forms of provision are unconditional but involve forms of control. In the Netherlands, Leerkes (2016, p. 141) observed the “rise of relatively punitive arrangements ‘of last resort’ to control pauperism among certain categories of unauthorised migrants who commit minor crimes and/or are believed to frustrate their departure.” These measures consist of prison-like accommodation centres designed to keep

non-deportable irregular migrants off the streets and out of sight. The aim is to avoid both security and image problems while reducing the costs associated with their management. However, such infrastructure mainly concerns people whose asylum applications have been rejected and whose identities are therefore known to the authorities.

When irregular migrants remain anonymous, scholars suggest that they are assisted to the extent that they are deserving (Chauvin & Garcés-Mascreñas, 2014) or they keep a low profile. Immigration law is therefore selectively enforced, to the detriment of categories such as that of Harragas, who are at the bottom of the “hierarchy of deservingness” (Kyriakidou, 2021). Leerkes et al. (2012) showed that, in the Netherlands, North African irregular migrant men are up to eight times more likely to be arrested than irregular migrant women. They are also more likely to be discriminated against, more likely to be targeted by the police, and more likely to be involved in crime.

North African men involved in irregular migration call themselves Harragas. The word means “those who burn” in North African dialects. They burn borders, migration regulations, and sometimes their own documents. As M’charek (2020, p. 429) puts it, Harraga is “not so much about leaving one place for another, but rather about expanding living space. It is about making movement possible rather than staying stuck, buried alive in a dead end.” Young North African people have increasingly engaged in “Harraga” since the 1980s and the implementation of migration policies restricting movement from the African continent to Europe (Salzbrunn et al., 2015). Geneva is just one step on a long journey across Europe for young irregular migrants coming from North Africa. When they arrive in Switzerland, they are already drained by years of wandering and addiction to various substances. As a transportation interface at the centre of a cross-border conurbation, Geneva acts as a hub within their “circulatory territories” (Tarrius, 2015). This wealthy city also seems to be attractive because it allows vulnerable people to be housed and fed for free, irrespective of their residence status.

However, Harragas encounter considerable stigmatisation even among fellow North Africans. The local media have repeatedly reported on the role of “young North Africans” in petty crime. During the course of our research, press articles reported complaints from residents about fights and drug dealing involving young people from North Africa. In response, the Geneva police set up a special unit in the summer of 2020. In a recent study of Geneva, Clerc (2022) showed that not only are young male migrants seen by the authorities as less vulnerable than young women, but that young North African male migrants appear more like a threat. This echoes Hage’s (2017) argument that racialised Muslims are increasingly identified with the figure of the wolf. In the Western imagination, he writes, “the wolf is the ultimate representative of the threatening undomesti-

cated other of nature” (Hage, 2017, p. 38). Despite the processes of criminalisation to which Harragas are subjected, deportations to North African countries are infrequent. The Algerian authorities, for example, limit implementation of the readmission agreement signed with Switzerland in 2007. As a result, in 2021, 600 undocumented Algerians were waiting to be expelled from Switzerland (Kocher, 2021).

This transient population represents a challenge to the field of social work. Indeed, being illegalised, often without training or education, not speaking the local language, and facing strong stigma, this population is considered to have a “poor prospect” of integration (Bonjour & Duyvendak, 2018). In addition, or perhaps as a consequence, they often do not adopt attitudes that would make them appear as “deserving migrants” (Chauvin & Garcés-Mascreñas, 2014). In Geneva, however, they have access to a range of services that are provided almost unconditionally based on need. This contradiction provides a strategic case for examining the contours of inclusion, analysing not only the conditions of access to services but also how these services are delivered, received, and perceived by their beneficiaries and suppliers.

3. Methods and Data

For our research, we relied on an ethnographic study involving newcomers on the one hand and social workers on the other. This research is part of a larger investigation of the (in)hospitality of European cities towards precarious newcomers (Felder et al., 2020). “Precarious newcomers” refers to newly arrived migrants who are in a precarious situation either concerning their status (lacking regular residence status, having a temporary status, or being at risk of losing this status) or about their living conditions. We thus focused on people with various legal statuses and backgrounds yet having the common characteristic of being newcomers (this is not a clear-cut category, but we have prioritised people who have arrived within the last year) who do not have the resources to support themselves without some kind of assistance. We interviewed them a few weeks or months after their arrival in the cities of Geneva or Brussels. In doing so, we emphasise the importance of time. We suggest that not all migrants can be indiscriminately regarded as newcomers.

In this article, we focus on one particular group of newcomers and draw on fieldwork conducted in Geneva by Sahar Fneich with young irregular migrants from North Africa, between March and August 2020. On her first day of fieldwork, Sahar sat on a bench to observe a large and bustling public space in the city centre. A Moroccan man came up to her and asked if she was Moroccan. On another day, an Algerian man asked if he could sit next to her. Both helped her meet a group of young irregular migrants. In the following weeks, they would walk together, spend time by the lake, and eat

together. Then, Sahar started volunteering at a reception centre, helping to serve food and drinks. Being Lebanese, wearing a veil, speaking Arabic, and being herself a newcomer in Switzerland helped her to build trusting relationships. Her experience of getting access to this group tells us about their daily lives, their use of public spaces, and their desire to make contact with people—preferably of the opposite sex—who speak their language and share part of their culture. Despite these commonalities, Sahar speaks a different dialect, is highly educated, and comes from a middle-class background, while the participants were mostly lacking formal education and came from lower-class families. Moreover, she is Shia from a Sunni mother, while the participants were mostly Sunni. These differences generated a distance, but also a mutual curiosity, which allowed for more balanced exchanges, where the participants accepted to take part in our study while subjecting the interviewer to their own questions.

The fieldwork took place at a time when the Covid-19 pandemic was crippling much of the world. In Switzerland, people were asked to stay at home from mid-March to May, before restrictions were gradually relaxed. This period disrupted the provision of accommodation for people in vulnerable situations. Nevertheless, the daily life we describe based on interviews is more in line with the situation before the pandemic. We report in more detail on the impact of the pandemic on shelters and services in a previous article (Stavo-Debaugue et al., 2022). Sixteen semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated. The transcriptions were supplemented by informal conversations and field notes. The group studied consists of 19 men from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, without legal status, aged

between 20 and 32, who had arrived in Geneva between two years and two weeks earlier (see Table 1).

In Geneva, the places and services that young North African migrants encounter are not migrant-focused, but rather address people more broadly according to their needs. Contrary to the cases described in the literature, our research participants are not included as irregular migrants but approached as “precarious” or “vulnerable” people instead. The role of such social services in the daily lives, trajectories, and choices of migrants remains under-researched. In addition, the specific features of the form of inclusion offered by the so-called “low-threshold” reception centres still need to be analysed. In order to address these gaps, we carried out research in reception centres and interviewed social workers. Other interviews were carried out as part of the project, but we will limit ourselves here to those in which we talked with social workers about the services frequented by young North Africans (see Table 2). We use pseudonyms for both the newcomers and the social workers to protect their anonymity. We also avoid naming the institutions in which the social workers work, as this would allow them to be identified.

4. A Typical Day on the Assistance Circuit

After leaving the shelter, Ahmed usually starts his day at Le Bateau Genève (see Figure 1), where he has breakfast. This paddle-wheel boat serves as a reception facility in the morning. Every day, 150 to 200 breakfasts are served to people in precarious situations. Guests warm up, use the toilets, chat, and charge their phones. The doors open at half past seven. At half past nine, however, the last “passengers” are asked to leave. On the upper

Table 1. Interviews with newcomers.

No.	Alias	Age	Nationality	Arrived in Geneva × months ago
1	Adnan	26	Algerian	24
2	Ayman	24	Moroccan	24
3	Omar	28	Tunisian	3
4	Mohammed	29	Tunisian	3
5	Ismail	29	Moroccan	24
6	Kamal	26	Algerian	6
7	Farid	20	Moroccan	12
8	Youssef	26	Moroccan	9
9	Abd El Rahman	32	Algerian	20
10	Hassan	25	Algerian	3
11	Ahmed	29	Algerian	9
12	Hussein	24	Algerian	2
13	Fahed	28	Algerian	6
14	Abed El Aziz	22	Algerian	5
15	Wissam	20	Algerian	5
16	Jamal	27	Algerian	10
17	Ammar	26	Algerian	7
18	Yasser	20	Algerian	7
19	Wassim	28	Algerian	8

Table 2. Interviews with social workers.

No.	Alias	Place of work
1	Sarah	Shelter A
2	Ibrahim	Day centre B
3	David	Day centre C
4	Bernard	Shelter D
5	Lena	Day centre D
6	Selim	Social service (city of Geneva)
7	Anna	CSO volunteer, support for migrants
8	Erin	CSO volunteer, shelter E
9	Ali	Social workers, shelter E
10	Salomé	Social worker

deck, there is a restaurant that welcomes “ordinary” customers for lunch. If the weather is fine, Ahmed then spends some time in a park nearby or goes to the mosque (a 50-minute walk from Le Bateau). Sometimes he also finds a place to sit, and even free toilets and internet connection in shopping centres. These spaces, although privately owned, often offer all the qualities of a public space (at least in Europe, as suggested by Chiodelli & Moroni, 2015). Several interviewees explained that they like to blend in with customers, sometimes trying on clothes or perfumes.

He cannot stay long, however, because he cannot miss lunch at Le Caré, a day centre that serves free lunch Monday to Friday (another hour’s walk from the

mosque). The nearby Club Social Rive Gauche is an alternative, but one needs to pick up a ticket in the morning. They are distributed from 8 AM, on a first-come-first-served basis. In the afternoon, Ahmed either goes to Plainpalais, a public square where he meets acquaintances, or to a nearby university building where he can use the Internet connection and keep warm until the night shelter opens. The wait can be long: until 7 PM for the public underground shelters, 8 PM for the Salvation Army, and as late as 9 PM for the temporary shelters.

Walking from one place to another requires a degree of alertness. Our interviewees said that they choose routes where they are less likely to meet police officers. Ahmed is often tempted to take the bus to avoid the

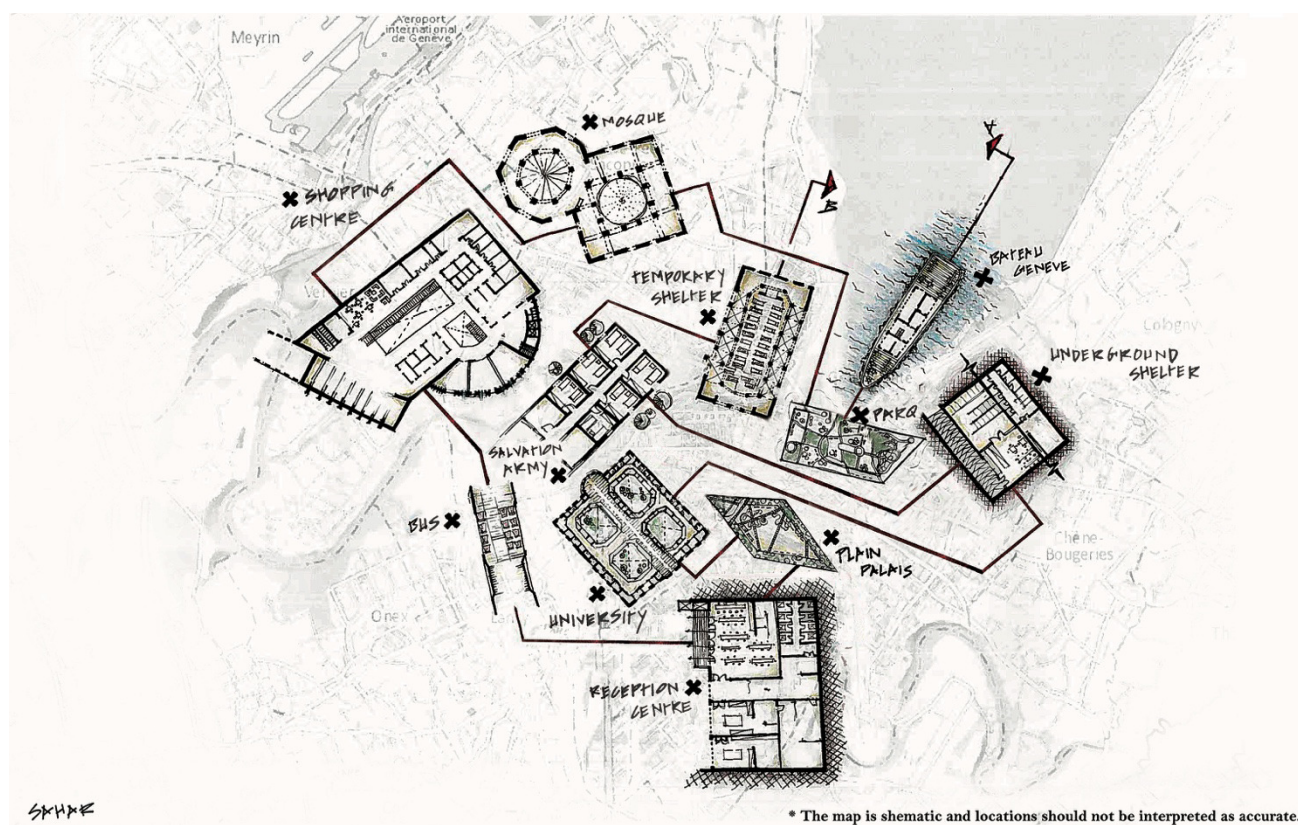


Figure 1. A typical day’s journey.

long walk. Like his peers, he has developed strategies to avoid the ticket inspectors. This requires constant vigilance. Ahmed has never been caught, but Mohammed (29, Tunisian), who arrived seven months earlier, told us about one such incident: “Just once on the bus, I was tired, I fell asleep and they found me.” While most people progressively disattend from the environment during their daily routine in order to concentrate on their activities, Harragas cannot let their guard down. Instead of a familiar backdrop, the city appears to irregular migrants as a collection of potentially dangerous elements that must be approached with caution (Felder, 2021, p. 188).

Inspired by Pichon’s work, we call the network of reception centres and services an “assistance circuit.” The notion of a circuit reflects the beneficiaries’ impression of going round in circles (Fneich et al., 2023). Pichon (Pichon, 1996, p. 168, authors’ translation) stresses that navigating this kind of circuit “requires a detailed knowledge of the network and its potential...of the quality of the services offered here or there, of the timetables, of the waiting times.” This knowledge is acquired first-hand, generally via disappointments and setbacks, but it is also passed on between newcomers with different levels of experience. An important function of the reception centers is to disseminate this type of information, formally through the social workers themselves or through posters and leaflets, but also informally between service users attending the same facility. This information needs to be constantly updated, as some reception centers are temporary and subject to uncertain funding or seasonal fluctuations in opening times. For example, city shelters are only open in winter, when sleeping rough can be deadly. The emergence of Covid has further disrupted this constantly evolving system (Stavo-Debaugue et al., 2022).

5. Alienation, Entrapment, and Escape From the Assistance Circuit

Irregular migrants’ experience of the assistance circuit evolves over time. At first, the possibility of being fed and housed for free seems to be a sign that Geneva is “a city of rights”—as Abd El Rahman (32, Algerian) recounted—a welcoming city sensitive to the plight of vulnerable people. Reception centres open their doors without question, offering temporary protection from the dangers of the outside world. At this point, the newcomers imagine that this is a temporary stage while they find a source of income. Over time, however, the experience of the assistance circuit leads to a sense of entrapment and alienation. This may seem paradoxical because, unlike other migrants who endure the prison-like conditions of refugee camps and deportation centres (de Coulon, 2019; Wyss, 2019), the people we met have a certain amount of freedom. Nevertheless, they share the impression of being “stuck in motion” and having little control over their daily actions. A combination of two factors may explain this paradox.

Firstly, following the assistance circuit is a form of routine work. The young migrants thus encounter conditions that Marx saw as alienating: They lose sight of the meaning of their actions and find themselves performing routines choreographed and ultimately determined by others. Secondly, unlike many workers who encounter such alienating conditions, the young men we met are never seen as workers or producers, only as recipients. The food and shelter they receive is not a reward for their efforts, it is a gift with no possibility of reciprocity, and very little possibility to choose. Their self-esteem suffers from being constantly forced to ask without having anything to give (Honneth, 1996), and forced to take without much possibility to refuse what is given. The relationship with food illustrates this form of alienation. Our interviewees often described the feeling of never being satiated by the free meals they were given. Youssef, a 26-year-old Moroccan who had arrived in Geneva nine months before we spoke, explained:

When you eat at the soup kitchen, the food follows you all day, you can’t think of anything else. You repeat the same thing every day, you eat, you drink and that’s it. All day long you just follow the food.

Some thought they could quickly find other forms of support, such as former migrants of the same origin. Mohammed met legal residents from North African countries at the mosque, but they did not show the solidarity he expected. This increased his feelings of alienation and exclusion and his desire to withdraw from an environment that humiliated him: “For them, as for the others, we will always be strangers; have you ever seen anyone help a stranger? I prefer to be a stranger among strangers like myself than to stay with them,” he explained. Ahmed argued that undocumented people are set apart from the North African community in Geneva. He reported how he was turned down when he asked for free food in Arabic-speaking restaurants. He finally decided to present himself as Palestinian: “If I had said I was Algerian, she would have called me a thief,” he told us. “Those who came before us have damaged our reputation,” added his friend Wassim. This feeling of being excluded even by fellow North Africans reinforces the feeling of entrapment and estrangement.

Young irregular migrants thus develop escape strategies. Youssef (26, Moroccan) and Ismail (29, Moroccan) explained how they had stopped eating at the soup kitchens for some time. Having saved some money, they have rediscovered the pleasure of eating by allowing themselves to choose what they put in their mouths: “When you eat something you bought with your money, you feel different, you are no longer hungry, you feel full, you forget about the food,” said Youssef.

This type of escape also involves sacrifices (spending the night out and losing one’s place in the shelter) and risks (taking psychoactive drugs, for example). The young men’s occasional criminal behaviour (drug dealing, theft)

could be interpreted as a way of escaping from their dreary everyday lives and regaining agency. Finding a source of income through drug dealing or theft allows them to decide for once what to eat or what to wear. This also feeds their “project”: “In theory, everyone has a project,” explained Ibrahim, a social worker, “they all have a story to tell us about their plans. First of all, because you need it to move forward.” Marriage is a common project among our interviewees. Having a social life, especially at night, is therefore important. Ahmed told us about his experience of frequenting nightspots such as bars: “I don’t drink alcohol, but I go there to meet girls. I might meet a girl and we might get married. But if I meet a good girl, I will stay with her, not just for my papers.” However, the timetable of the shelters makes it difficult: “When everyone goes out and relaxes, I have to go home,” he regretted.

Regaining control and a sense of self does not necessarily mean leaving the circuit. For the North African migrants we met, it also meant creating niches of intimacy away from the public eye. They sought out urban spaces that they called their “secret place.” Fahed (28, Algerian) explains: “I chose my secret place, there is a shower, a toilet, everything is next door.” A “good” place is hidden but close to urban amenities. Our interviewees were always vague about these locations. Youssef told us about a “secret place” in the forest; Ismaïl finds them in empty houses. These places are used to spend time alone and “clear your head,” as Youssef told us. Through this, they reclaim some control over the rhythm of their lives and the timing of their public exposure.

6. Making Sense of the Fragmented Assistance Circuit

So far, based on migrants’ accounts, we have highlighted the constraints associated with the dispersal and restrictive schedules of reception centres and services, with fixed entry times and limited numbers of places. Making sense of these challenges will be the focus of the next few sections.

The fragmentation of services and reception centres is linked to the diversity of actors involved: associations, charities, religious bodies, and public institutions. Support for undocumented migrants is not planned as such. In low-threshold reception centres, irregular migrants blend in with a variety of vulnerable populations who also depend on assistance. The circuit of assistance is thus (re)constructed each day by the beneficiaries, who navigate through different locations and services. A number of institutions have created partnerships, but some actors prefer to remain independent. In addition to concerns about being monitored by an umbrella organisation (Schiller et al., 2023), Bernard—a senior social worker—raises questions of trust: “I am often a confidant for the people we shelter. What if they see me afterwards at [another reception centre] or elsewhere? We prefer to remain independent....We don’t want the information [about the users] to circulate

too much.” Other social workers value the range of options available:

People also come to complement what is offered elsewhere. And that’s really interesting....People will come to us for a reason, for reasons that are positive for them. Because they don’t have to come here. Nobody is ever obliged to come here. (David)

David’s comments echo those of Bernard: Working in organisational silos has the advantage of ensuring a degree of confidentiality. According to our interviewees, some beneficiaries take advantage of this lack of communication and coordination, allowing them, for example, to eat several meals in a row in different soup kitchens.

As for the spatial dispersion of services, that relates to the saturation of urban space. Organisations are forced to make use of what we call a “spatial reserve” (Felder & Pattaroni, 2023, p. 11), converting buildings earmarked for demolition into dormitories. It is difficult to imagine a place large enough, in the city centre, where all the services could be concentrated. Spatial dispersal is also an explicit strategy to avoid the spatial concentration of precarious populations, which would lead to concerns from local residents and the risk of stigmatisation. Lena, a social worker, joked about the fact that local politicians generally agree with the principle of sheltering the homeless, but think that the neighbouring municipality would be a better option. The locations that comprise the assistance circuit are discreet, or even camouflaged. The two shelters run by the city are located in underground nuclear bunkers. As their entrances are hidden—in an underground car park, for example—people are often not aware of their existence (Del Biaggio & Rey, 2017). Accordingly, social workers and activists sometimes struggle to convince people of the existence of homelessness and extreme poverty in the wealthy city of Geneva.

There are, however, more ideological underpinnings to this organisation of assistance. These are linked to different conceptions of social work. We will now focus on the social workers’ point of view and examine how they perceive the assistance circuit. Rather than focusing on the fault lines between social work professionals in Geneva, we will consider how two approaches that are revealed through the particular case of undocumented migrants coexist.

7. Keep Them on the Move...

Dispersion and fragmentation are sometimes seen as a way to prevent dependency. Bernard believes that “state intervention disempowers people. There is a dependency problem. There is no longer any way out.” More coordinated (state) intervention would, in his view, disempower the people being cared for. His discourse reflects the fear of the “welfare trap” that has grown since the 1970s. Throughout Europe, the standardised

interventions of the redistributive social state are leaving more room for individualised benefits (Breviglieri et al., 2003). The notion of contract replaces the notion of right, making the provision of welfare conditional. Beneficiaries are supposed to make a choice and commit themselves, choice and commitment being, in the spirit of the “liberal grammar,” two of the main capacities of an autonomous and responsible individual (Pattaroni, 2002).

In the case of irregular migrants, this approach cannot be fully developed because, firstly, they already receive minimal and unconditional support; secondly, they are not treated individually; and, thirdly, employment is not an option (unless undeclared work is to be encouraged). The idea of keeping beneficiaries on the move can still lead to the persistence of uncomfortable conditions that would make them want to go elsewhere. Selim, a social worker, observed that with the 24-hour services for the homeless that were put in place during the Covid outbreak:

Some people were getting quite comfortable. They started to complain about the food....I’m not saying you shouldn’t complain about the food. But they were becoming more demanding. When we said that it was over and that the reception would be for the night only, some said that it was scandalous....For me it’s a slippery slope: it had become normal when it was supposed to be an exception.

We are not suggesting that the intention to create uncomfortable living conditions informs the daily work of social workers. Even if they are convinced that the beneficiaries—such as the young North African migrants we met—have no real prospect of integration and autonomy, their professional ethics seem to compel them to provide assistance to the best of their ability. Ali, who works in a shelter, insists that providing a bed and a meal is only a part of his job. He stresses the importance of the warmth of the relationship and the importance of smiling: “When you are homeless, you see how people look at you and it dehumanises you completely.” However, this desire to do one’s best sometimes seems contradictory, as Sarah explained:

My job is not to sell dreams, that would only feed their disappointment. Sometimes it’s better for them to know right away. [When they ask for help with their resume] it’s tricky. Sometimes I say “ok, I’ll read your resume, but from my experience, it’s going to be very difficult.” Especially for those who don’t speak French, sometimes they are motivated, they want to send their resume everywhere, but without French and without a permit, who is going to give them a job? But then I get blamed, they say, “you don’t have faith yourself, how are you going to help us?” But my job is to put them up for the night, that’s where it ends, unfortunately.

If constraints are not intended to discourage, they may be intended to avoid giving false hope. However, other hypotheses can also be considered. Gardella suggests that people are kept on the move as a way of ensuring a principle of justice. Creating a turnover would be a way of maintaining unconditionality: “In a situation of shortage, it is right to share the scarce good temporally, i.e., to “give everyone a chance” by rotating individuals” (Gardella, 2016, p. 249, authors’ translation). He also underlines the low legitimacy of assistance: “Whether for public or private actors, whether in recent times or at the end of the 19th century, offering the poorest people shelter for an indefinite period of time appears to have little legitimacy” (Gardella, 2016, p. 250, authors’ translation). While it is possible to find multiple justifications for this system, it is also contested, and its limitations are recognised even by those who see benefits.

8. ...Or Let Them Rest?

The idea of making beneficiaries of social services more active is also considered by some social workers to be an illusion. Sarah told us: “You have to be at the [soup kitchen] before nine o’clock to [get a ticket for] lunch, for example. During this time [of travel] they do nothing else, neither looking for work nor looking after themselves.” She also pointed out the health problems that hinder some people’s mobility and the fact that people with bad shoes walk all day with wet feet. In other words, this forced daily transit is not only tiring and discriminatory; it is also unproductive and does not seem to foster a liberal subject ready to choose, commit itself to a project of its own, and engage with and realise its own free will. Ahmed reflected on his job search and shared this view:

I am not stable enough to search for a job. If I want to shower and change, I can’t come back [to the shelter], that’s the problem. If you have an apartment, you can go home, take a shower, rest. I can’t do that, I have to wait until 7:45 PM to be allowed to go back to the shelter, and once I’m in there I can’t go out, that’s the difference, it’s a difference that can destroy a person’s whole life. Imagine being out all day under the sun and tired.

Providing stability is a goal in itself for some social workers who seek to develop less demanding forms of assistance. This is particularly important for people for whom shelters are accessible in theory but not in practice. David highlights the case of people with drug or alcohol dependency:

There are people who at some point, maybe in the middle of the night, need safety, either because they are in a consumption process or because they don’t fit the standards of emergency accommodation. So we need places where people can stay for a few minutes or a few hours, without having to

sleep....At the moment there are people who are alcoholics, for example, who can't stay in a shelter from 9 PM to 7 AM. Or they get wasted before they go into the shelter because they know they won't get out until the morning.

This idea fits into a social work paradigm that Soulet (2008) describes as “palliative.” It aims primarily at maintenance, whereas generative social work—with the idea of activation at its core—has a transformative aim. As Soulet (2008, p. 43, authors’ translation) puts it: “Palliative social work, based on a vocabulary of presence and making the here and now its universe (attention, listening, concern, care, awareness) makes reception a central part of its activity.” Observing the development of this approach, the author wonders, however, whether it means the end of a “teleological approach” and the departure from the idea that everyone can be fully “integrated.”

This idea of reception characterised by maximal accessibility is indeed questionable. What kind of hospitality can be expected when the place that receives is merely accessible? As Stavo-Debaugé (2018, p. 15) points out:

Hospitality is not always—or not only—about crossing a threshold, tearing down a wall, or opening a border. It is not only about removing physical or symbolic obstacles....Since it can require moments, procedures and mechanisms that involve closure, hospitality is difficult to describe based only on the concept of openness.

In the case of these young irregular migrants, the legal context may simply not allow for hospitality. More pointedly, by the time these young adults arrive, migration policies have already taken their toll, and survival and dignity are the only goals that social work can aim for. As Sarah told us, marriage or departure sometimes seem to be the only possible outcomes. To her, if there is a “happy” end (she acknowledges the situations of violence and dependence that marriages sometimes lead to), it will not come from social work, although that will have helped to keep them afloat.

However, the fate of the young Harragas in Geneva should not be seen only as a consequence of their lack of residence status, a situation they share with many other foreigners. In 2017, the canton of Geneva launched a regularisation programme: 3,000 people received a residence permit after proving that they had lived in Geneva for 10 years (or five years for families with children), were employed, financially independent, spoke French, and had no criminal record. There are therefore many ways of being an irregular migrant in Geneva, but the chances of avoiding an alienating everyday life on the assistance circuit seem partly determined before arrival. Harragas arrive already exhausted, sometimes ill or addicted to drugs and alcohol, and the stigma they face keeps them

away from the forms of support that others receive. The young North Africans discussed in this article are far from being a homogeneous group, but they share circumstances that make them captive of an assistance circuit whose only realistic outcome seems to be departure for another destination.

9. Conclusion

Having described the daily life of irregular North African migrants in Geneva and the ways in which they are received, the notion of inclusion must be questioned. First of all, it should be noted that providing access to resources for survival is a very limited form of inclusion, far from the idea of full participation in social, economic, cultural, and civic life (Printz, 2017). As scholars have pointed out, what limits this inclusion is first and foremost the migration policy that makes these people illegal and confines them to inclusion through exclusion (De Genova, 2013). However, our case study shows that the limitations and paradoxes of this type of inclusion cannot be fully explained by the opposition between the inclusionary approach of local actors and exclusionary national and supranational policies on citizenship and migration.

First, our study of a specific category of irregular migrants shows that differentiated inclusion is linked not only to residence status but also to other characteristics that, in the context studied, distinguish young North African men from other categories of undocumented migrants. Some migrants, despite their undocumented status, manage to avoid or escape the assistance circuit and, after a few years, are able to prove their merits and benefit from exceptional regularisation (Consoli et al., 2022). The migrants discussed in this article seem to be excluded from the outset from such a path, in particular because of the stigmatisation they face, the lack of support they receive from settled compatriots, and the criminal behaviour of some. Discussions regarding inclusion and irregular migrants should therefore pay more attention to the heterogeneity of this category.

Second, inclusion is limited not only by restrictive national and supranational migration policies but also by practical and symbolic aspects of the organisation of assistance. The first paradox of inclusion lies in the contradiction between the principle of unconditional access to resources and services and the practical demands placed on beneficiaries. The reception centres examined in this article can be considered low-threshold in the sense that, theoretically, they are accessible without prior conditions. However, in addition to the courage required to walk through the door and ask for a free meal, following the assistance circuit involves the ability to move, adhere to schedules, and maintain the pace over time. These practical and temporal aspects deserve more attention in the inclusion debate. Initially, the migrants we met found the assistance offered in Geneva to be generous compared to what they had experienced

elsewhere. Sometimes it took a few weeks for them to realise how tiring their daily routine was and how they felt like they were going round in circles.

Another paradox lies in the fact that aid, while theoretically unconditional, is never guaranteed. Irregular migrants benefit from weak coordination between actors, which allows them to receive assistance without becoming a “case” for which a “file” is compiled. An integrated reception centre—like the accommodation centres for asylum seekers—has some aspects of a total institution (Acocella & Turchi, 2020). Irregular migrants are not dependent on the decision of a single authority, as is the case with asylum seekers. However, this reliance on multiple, uncoordinated actors creates uncertainty. First, most places close at certain times of the day, week, or year. Then, when resources (including time and space) are limited, they are distributed on a first-come-first-served basis. This does not mean that the concept of merit is never relevant. Depending on their individual characteristics and the way they present themselves, people may have access to more substantial forms of support, for example from volunteers.

While such limitations have been linked to the authorities’ desire to turn “migrants’ endurance into exhaustion” (Wyss, 2022, p. 26), we have shown that this situation also reflects a social work paradigm that aims to keep people on the move, limit their dependency and promote their autonomy. In the case of young undocumented migrants from North Africa, autonomisation seems illusory. Assistance thus also has a “palliative” dimension, which contradicts the teleological approach of social work and the idea that everyone can be fully “included.” However, this approach to assistance as maintenance rather than transformation is experienced as no less paradoxical, as suggested by a “passenger” who expressed his feelings as he left *Le Bateau* after breakfast:

You say you are helping us, but it won’t change anything. You say: “Did you like the breakfast?” But I don’t come here to eat....You made us pancakes. It’s cool, but we don’t give a shit about pancakes, what are pancakes when you don’t have a job, and nothing to do, because you don’t have documents?

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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