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**'Solidarity' and 'gender equality' as a
discourse of violence in Sweden:
Exclusion of refugees by the decent
citizen**

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‘Solidarity’ and ‘gender equality’ as a discourse of violence in Sweden: Exclusion of refugees by the decent citizen

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Abstract

In asylum policy regarding the civil war in Syria, Sweden’s ‘generous’ position vis-à-vis other European states has enabled the nation to regain its ‘moral superpower’ image of the 1970s, managing the population with a ‘governmentality of righteousness’. This paper looks at the repertoire of actions enabled by this governmentality, focusing on a refugee residence facility in a village in Southern Sweden. Drawing on ten months of fieldwork that involved about fifty interviews and four hours per day of participant observation, it looks at how volunteers and the wider village community individualized and reappropriated discourses of ‘decency’ and ‘gender equality’, paradoxically enabling practices of violence towards refugees who were considered ‘less’ gender equal and ‘less’ decent. The paper uses Foucault’s notion of the biopolitical to conceptualise violence and it differs from other publications within Refugee Studies discussing violence towards refugees, which focus primarily on physical harm. Instead, the notion of violence describes the more subtle methods through which human life is ranked and hierarchized, and how a refugee never enjoys a full social existence, no matter how caring and benevolent the prevailing regime.

Introduction

The Swedish national myth of ‘solidarity’ regarding refugee resettlement, as well as exceptionalism regarding gender equality and models of ‘good parenting’, ignores the way in which such an identity can enable biopolitical categorizations of the population at an anthropological level in day-to-day life. In terms of asylum policy regarding the ongoing civil war in Syria, Sweden’s ‘generous’ position vis-à-vis other European states has enabled the nation to regain its ‘moral superpower’ image of the 1970s. As the European Union (EU) member state receiving by far the most Syrian refugees¹ and the first European nation to offer automatic permanent residency and a right to family reunification to all Syrians arriving at the border, the Swedish population is managed by what I call a ‘governmentality of righteousness’; they are happy in the knowledge that they are most decent, most progressive and ‘ahead of the pack’ (Towns 2002: 163). Such a governmentality ensures, however, that open criticism to refugee policy goes against what it means to be a ‘good citizen’ and, aside from the far right, is thus confined to more hidden everyday practices and ‘sugar-coated’ exclusionary discourses; a ‘good taboo’ is firmly in place.

This paper looks at the repertoire of available actions of citizens enabled by this governmentality of righteousness by focusing on a refugee residence facility in Oreby,² a village in Southern Sweden in which around one hundred Syrians and twenty refugees of other nationalities are housed. It argues that the culture of righteousness engendered by the national myth of moral exceptionalism, though benevolent, created the conditions of possibility for a more open manifestation of biopolitical violence through the mechanism of a ‘moral panic’ (Cohen 1980) after the shooting of a Somali refugee by police in the north of the country. Though largely deemed in bad taste to speak openly of the Arab men as violent, lecherous or risky, this paper argues that the way in which volunteers, as well as the wider

1. According to Eurostat, Sweden received 34 per cent of all Syrian asylum seekers granted protection in the EU, followed by Germany, which received 25 per cent (European Commission 2014).

2. All names within this paper have been changed for reasons of confidentiality.

village community, individualized and reappropriated discourses of ‘decency’ and ‘gender equality’, paradoxically served to enable practices of violence towards those refugees who were considered ‘less’ gender equal and ‘less’ decent. This manifested itself in the hierarchical categorization of refugees, with the non-Arabs favoured most by these various actors for living their life the ‘proper, Swedish way’, and the further segregation and isolation of the Syrian women who were criticized for their modes of dress, modes of behaviour, and for failing to take care of their children properly. The paper goes on to examine how, although seemingly insignificant, these microscopic biopolitical practices adopted enough uniformity and homogeneity to serve as a base upon which to legitimately reconfigure obligations of ‘decency’ and to outwardly articulate the Syrian men as a threat to the well-being of the village.

Driven by an unease at the seeming contradiction between official policy towards refugees and asylum seekers in Sweden and the banal, day-to-day practices of exclusion at an anthropological level, I was determined to adopt an anthropological methodology in order to bring these everyday practices to the very forefront of my study. I thus spent around ten months, between February and December 2013, working as a volunteer and translator with a newly formed, ad hoc non-governmental organization working with newly arrived asylum seekers and refugees named ‘Friends of Syria’, whereby I conducted around fifty interviews of both volunteers and refugees, and undertook around four hours per day of participant observation.³ In conceiving of violence using Foucault’s notion of the biopolitical (c.f. Foucault 2004, 2010), this paper thus differs from other publications within Refugee Studies discussing violence towards refugees, which focus primarily on physical harm. Instead, the notion of violence describes the more subtle methods through which human life is ranked and hierarchized, and how a refugee never enjoys a full social existence, no matter how caring and benevolent the prevailing regime. By examining my fieldwork through the lens of ‘gender’, the paper demonstrates the way in which the concept was used by the villagers to legitimise some of these diffuse and indirect practices of violence towards the refugees .

The paper thus proceeds in four sections. It first examines the Swedish national myth of ‘moral exceptionalism’, investigating how notions of solidarity with the vulnerable became intertwined with notions of gender equality and exceptionalism regarding ‘good parenting’ to form a very specific and much cherished narrative of modernity and progress. The following section examines how this national myth and its reappropriations function as a particular type of governmentality, a code of conduct that nonetheless allows for a fair amount of ‘wiggle room’ in its manifestations at a day-to-day level. In turning to an anthropological approach, the third section examines how notions of righteousness prohibited any open criticism of the refugees amongst the Oreby dwellers, and confined opposition to a more hidden realm. In an attempt to address this veiled unease, I look at how a group of volunteers took it into their own hands to ‘empower the Syrian women’, resulting in biopolitical hierarchizations of the refugees. After reports of a violent incident involving a Somali refugee in the north of Sweden, the paper then goes on to discuss how notions of ‘decency’ were reconfigured and this hidden unease was able to be publicly articulated to the Syrians in the form of a warning. The paper concludes by examining the notions of ‘violence’ brought into being by the story of the refugees in Oreby, arguing that more overt, biopolitical forms of violence are underpinned by the more subtle, seemingly insignificant practices of a ‘caring’ biopolitics.

3. In terms of research ethics, my fieldwork complied with all requirements of the Ethical Approval Committee at King’s College, London. All participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the nature of my project. In addition, participants who are quoted or referred to were required to sign a consent form (translated into Swedish when required) permitting me to use this data. The consent form made clear that any names of participants would be anonymized and that withdrawal of their approval could be granted at any time.

Sweden as morally exceptional: The re-emergence of the national myth

At a time when refugees are not treated so well ... how nice to find people with such a heart! Sweden opens its borders, organizes language classes, gives economic assistance, and offers paths to join society. They do not have anyone in a concentration camp or other such terrifying places. That's an example we can present to the world; because in reality it is the only country that is doing that, and is not filled with misery. It is not thereby suffering. This is the message Sweden presents: Open your heart to your brother, your sister, who has nowhere to live, to work, to sleep peacefully. (Pope Francis, February 2014)⁴]/ext[

The everyday practices of stigmatization, exclusion and marginalization around the Syrian refugees in the village of Oreby, southern Sweden, need to be understood in the larger context of the Swedish national myth of 'moral exceptionalism'. This somewhat stereotypical Swedish narrative could be seen to be resurrected from the ashes in September 2013, when the Swedish government took the unilateral decision to grant all Syrians arriving at the border refugee status and permanent residency. As national myths go, the moral exemplar standard story is one that is much cherished. The move received cross-party support within Parliament – with the exception of the nationalist party, the Sweden Democrats, who occupy twenty seats – and was greeted largely positively in the mainstream press.⁵ Sweden's resettlement programme with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) saw Sweden resettle the second highest absolute number of refugees from camps within third countries, and placed absolutely no 'integration potential criteria' through which to filter seemingly 'undesirable' categories of refugee, which led to the country being held up as exemplar by both the UNHCR and the various NGOs and networks that work on resettlement (for an overview, see for example Perrin and McNamara 2013).

As was the case with Olof Palme's 'Moral Superpower' government during the Cold War, 'solidarity' can thus be seen to be Sweden's *raison d'état* once more. Certainly, Sweden's exceptional position within the EU has enabled the Swedish political elite to act as spokespersons for a more humane EU asylum policy, whereby it actively encourages the fifteen member states that currently have no resettlement agreement with the UNHCR to adopt one, and presses the remaining member states to take a larger quota.⁶

This 'morally exceptional' national myth extends way beyond ideas of 'openness' towards refugees, and is of course rather multifaceted, embracing more general ideas of 'modernity' and 'progressiveness' as a number of Swedish ethnologists and political scientists have discussed. This 'humanitarian reason' (Fassin 2012) or, in the Swedish case, extending so-called 'solidarity' inside to 'solidarity' outside, sees Sweden as having one of Europe's most generous developmental aid budgets, a historically 'moral' foreign policy in relation to its long-established non-aligned security doctrine and its traditional active stance

4. On meeting Carlos and Rodolfo Luna, two Argentinian brothers who were given refugee status in Sweden in the 1970s.

5. Main editorials in *Aftonbladet*, for example, called it a 'good decision' and stated that more needs to be done, especially at the European level, in order to accommodate more Syrian refugees (Lindberg 2013). *Dagens Nyheter's* editorial page on the day following the decision stressed the position of the UNHCR regarding the war in Syria, likening it to the genocide in Rwanda. The piece pointed out Sweden's generous attitude, quoting a study by the SOM (Society, Opinion, Media) institute at Gothenburg University which showed that 85 per cent of Swedes regarded war as an acceptable reason to be granted asylum in Sweden (Helmerson 2013).

6. In an interview for *Know Reset*, for example, the Swedish justice minister stated that '[o]ften, at the EU-level, Sweden stands out as the odd country proposing to improve asylum policy, to receive more refugees' (Perrin and McNamara 2013).

against foreign interventions (Nilsson 1991; Lawler 1997, 2007; Dahl 2006), as well as having some of the most advanced environmental policies (Lawler 2005).

One of the most important characteristics of this Swedish national myth is the notion of Sweden as the most ‘gender equal’ state. Indeed, it is now somewhat of a cliché to see Sweden feature at or near the top of various indices that rank gender equality.⁷ In her study of how ‘immigrant identity’ in Sweden is constructed vis-à-vis ‘gender equal’ Swedes, Ann Towns (2002) points out how it was not until the mid-1990s and its entry to the EU, however, that saw Sweden position itself at the forefront of this issue. The country was ranked as the most gender equal state in two indices that materialized in 1995, the Gender Related Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM).

Absorbed into this idea of gender equality are also notions of Sweden as an ideal place to be a parent; aside from the famed generous Swedish parental leave, images of the latte-sipping, metrosexual man about town with a pushchair in tow is a stereotype that is actively propagated by various ‘nation-branding’ platforms. A core element of Sweden’s ‘soft’ power in the international arena is thus centred around this gender equality in parenting. *Visit Sweden* (2014), an English language website promoting the country, for example, proudly states that ‘the modern Swedish man is a feminist’, citing the promotion of gender equality or *jämställdhet* from childhood onwards, to the extent that many kindergartens now use gender-neutral pronouns. Ideas of Swedish masculinity within this national myth are thus closely bound up with being ‘modern’ and ‘enlightened’.

Sweden is thus regarded as somewhat peculiar in that regard, in that its particular moral logic is distinct. For Swedish historians Bergrenn and Trägårdh (2009), Swedish gender equality has enabled the most authentic expression of ‘love’ within relationships. The conjunction of the ideals of independence with economic equality and social solidarity is seen to have been institutionalized by a ‘radical alliance’ between the Swedish state and the individual, which has served to balance the ‘deep existential desire’ for personal freedom and, simultaneously, social cohesion, liberating the individual from what they call unequal and patriarchal forms of community, such as the bonds to family, church and charities.⁸

The national myth as a governmentality of righteousness

What is important about the functioning of the Swedish national myth, its reappropriations, re-enactments and reproductions, and what is crucial with regard to the story of the Syrian refugees in the country is not the idea of ‘moralism’, but rather the notion of ‘exceptionality’. This extends from openness to refugees and migrants to, perhaps in a more banal and immediate manner, moral superiority regarding the advancement of gender equality and accompanying notions of a more enlightened masculinity. As a bastion of moral superiority, Sweden positions itself as most progressive and most modern. And indeed, this type of identification engenders a sense of pride. Being certain in one’s rightness, especially regarding the rightness of one’s group, or indeed one’s nation, is a comfortable and secure

7. Sweden is ranked in 4th place in the ‘Global Gender Gap’ (World Economic Forum 2013), ranked in 4th place in the ‘Gender Empowerment Measure’ (UNDP 2013) and has the 4th highest proportion of parliamentary seats being occupied by females, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU 2014).

8. These authors draw on a cartography produced by Inglehart and Welzel, based on cultural values from the World Values Survey, which positions Sweden as having the world’s most ‘secular-rational’ and most ‘self-expressive’ values (WVS 2014).

space. Everyday life, with all its uncertainties, is easier when you are secure in the knowledge that you are one of the ‘good guys’, or at least ‘better’ than the others.⁹

In talking about the life of the Swedish national myth, it is important to understand therefore that ‘myth’ in this context does not mean something false or fictional. Tilly (1994, 1999, 2002) was perhaps the most forceful proponent of the performative element of nationhood; what he saw enacted through the ‘standard story’, emphasizing the cultural homogeneity and cohesiveness of the nation. The importance of these performances for Tilly was their external audience: ‘disciplined, stereotyped public demonstrations of nationness’ were crucial for recognition and the granting of statehood (Tilly 1999: 179). In their ‘performance’, these national myths nonetheless take on a life of their own, enabling certain self-understandings of what it means to be a member of a particular nation. People gain an identification with certain stories as being ‘theirs’ and hence collude to some extent with the production of these fictions, even to the extent that they are recognized as a sort of background condition of everyday life (Calhoun 1997).

In its permeation throughout society, it is useful to follow the language of the late Foucault and think of this national myth and its reappropriations as functioning therefore as a particular type of ‘governmentality’, what I have labelled the ‘governmentality of righteousness’. This concept allows us to illuminate the art of control by complicating the question of state power, relating state governance to the subjugation and subjectification of individuals. In this respect, such an exercise of power in the form of government can be differentiated from simple coercion or domination. Nikolas Rose best articulated this distinction: ‘To dominate is to ignore or to attempt to crush the capacity for action of the dominated. But to govern is to recognize that capacity for action and to adjust oneself to it’ (Rose 1993: 4).

To think in these terms enables us to have a better understanding of how the type of power relations engendered within these ‘standard stories’ are in part salutary; certainly, the productive element of this banal, everyday myth-making sees the generation of self-governing, happy and contented subjects.¹⁰ Foucault labelled ‘biopolitical’ the type of power concerned with managing not only life, death, health and illness, but also everything to do with what we call ‘lifestyle’, including the social, cultural and environmental conditions under which we live (Dean, cited in Selby 2007: 333). To think in this way also enables us to envisage how notions of obedience, discipline, obligation and ‘taboo’ are also in play. To criticize the ‘morally exceptional’ narrative, with regards to both refugee policy and notions of gender equality, would be to criticize something that everybody has agreed to be unequivocally ‘good’; particular debates are therefore ‘off limits’, at least publicly and within polite company.

To talk of an ‘us’ and ‘them’ is a move away from ‘solidarity’; the ‘good Swedish citizen’ is one who sees no barriers to common humanity through either nationality or race, or gender. To be a good citizen is to be a good human. As a value, ‘solidarity’ can thus be articulated as

‘the humanitarian claim *par excellence* ... [the] imperative to act towards vulnerable others without the anticipation of reciprocation’ (Chouliaraki 2011: 364, emphasis in original). Solidarity is thus supposed to transcend the hierarchical power relations and

9. Indeed, there has been a great deal of scholarship that argues that, since the neoliberalization of the 1980s and moves towards a Europeanization of asylum policy, Sweden is no longer ‘exceptional’ in this regard (Pred 2000; Hansen 2009; Ålund and Schierup 2011). I argue, however, that the notion of ‘exceptionality’ is relational, and as long as Sweden is ‘the best’, even ‘the best of a bad bunch’, then the national myth is able to be reproduced.

10. Sweden is currently ranked in the top five of the United Nation’s ‘World Happiness Report’ (Helliwell, Layard and Sachs 2013).

moral economy of gift-giving so often talked about in Maussian-inspired studies of hospitality and humanitarianism, and inspires instead to ‘a vision of a technocratic Enlightenment Universalism ... [p]opulated by orderly, rational, cooperative, moral individuals. (Tomlinson, cited in Chouliaraki 2011: 368)

These ‘moral’ individuals, within the discourse of solidarity, are theoretically untroubled by notions of cultural particularity and are ideally able to transcend any cultural differences.

In our turn to the anthropological level, however, it is precisely this move to ‘culture’ that concerns us, specifically the wide array of practices that may be enabled by actors in this particular governmentality. The particular facets of the national myth and its reappropriations and reproductions allow for a certain amount of ‘wobble room’ amongst the ‘good citizen’. As just discussed, governmentality is not coercion or domination. Likewise, ‘culture’ is not something static and immutable. The plane of the quotidian in this respect is not one that is flat and level, but is one in which relations of power are constantly at play, in the form of one-upmanship, denial and saving face, and where social norms are continually negotiated. Within this plane therefore exists a repertoire of available actions for every actor (Somers 1994: 614), which includes modalities of circumvention to these social norms – practices that can simultaneously reinforce, utilize, but also evade these social norms in the most banal of ways. Indeed, governmentality can be seen to subsume such a wide array of scattered and contradictory narratives, the essence and shape of which cannot be defined prior to their enactment, as Michel de Certeau so eloquently asserts: ‘The occasion continues to trump definitions, because it cannot be isolated from a conjuncture or an operation’ (de Certeau 1990: 127).

Some of available actions, individualizations and reappropriations were, as I witnessed in my fieldwork, naturally often very successful in helping the Syrians to settle into their new lives and relieve some of their suffering. Within the space of eight months, over 120 refugees, most of them Syrian, had been resettled in the village. The type of decency engendered by this national myth ensured that conditions for the refugees were quite comfortable, going way beyond notions of a ‘bare life’ and generation of a narrow biopolitical subject, as advanced so regularly in ethnographies of refugee camps and the anthropology of hospitality and humanitarianism.¹¹ The huge bank of donations from the locals ensured that everybody had not only warm clothes for the winter, bicycles for the children to travel to and from school, and basic household utensils, but also provided each family with a television, toys, board games and books in both Swedish and English. In this way, the governmentality of righteousness could be seen to ‘function’ effectively.

However, as we have discussed, governmentality is also somewhat precarious. As Neumann (2002) points out, there is always the possibility in a governmentality framework that people will not act precisely according to the established norms and that these norms can be constantly reconfigured and renegotiated. In our case in Oreby, the tiny practices that went slightly against the grain of ‘solidarity’ nonetheless enabled all the volunteers to retain a righteous identity and a sense of moral superiority by their reinscription of notions of ‘gender equality’ and ‘good parenting’. Within the everyday terrain, a largely ‘hidden’ and unarticulated resistance to the resettlement of refugees in the village was also able to be voiced without fear of losing one’s reputation for ‘decency’.

As briefly alluded to, the anthropology of hospitality and humanitarianism, especially ethnographies of refugee ‘camps’, has gone a long way in conceptualizing how humanitarianism actually produces a hierarchical and unequal ordering of human lives. It has

11. I will go on to discuss this notion of ‘bare life’ with regards to the ethnographies of humanitarian practices later.

also shown how this is fundamentally intertwined with biopolitics and serves to produce a narrow ‘biopolitical subject’ (Pandolfi 2003) through various programmes, many of which are based on health or medical care (see for example Fassin 2005, 2010; Ticktin 2006; Redfield 2008; Feldman and Ticktin 2010). This rather restricted focus remains somewhat prisoner to an Arendtian and Agambenian notion of ‘bare life’ or ‘*homo sacer*’, and the violence of the biopolitical (Agamben 1998); by placing the refugee or migrant in a zone somewhere between merely biological and full social existence, it relegates to lesser importance the more ‘pastoral’ and compassionate functioning of such technologies of power. Many of these studies also fall short of examining the full social and political consequences of this hierarchization and what wider societal practices are enabled as a result of these moves. As argued by Rozakou (2012), besides investigating the functioning of biopolitical power on the ground, ethnographies would be better to focus more on the *cultural* conceptions with which biopolitical schemata are connected, and the manner in which such conceptions are altered under contemporary circumstances.

When we talk of culture in this sense, a focus on the repertoire of actions available to the ‘decent citizen’ under this governmentality framework avoids problems of reification or essentialization. Instead, we are able to bring to light exactly which practices are incorporated within this ‘wobble room’, and whether these practices can adopt any kind of uniformity. These kinds of practice need not be openly articulated or codified. Instead they point to more or less taken-for-granted actions that embody ‘how we have always done things around here’ (Neumann 2002: 237). The anthropologists James C. Scott and Michel de Certeau utilize the ancient Greek term ‘*mētis*’ to describe these types of practice; a way of behaving in the world that is learnt simply by local knowledge and cunning as opposed to hard and fast rules or principles (de Certeau 1988; Scott 1998; Neumann 2002).

Reflections from the field: The village of Oreby and the performance of decency

In its manifestations at the anthropological level, engaging with this ‘*mētis*’, these everyday practices, was enabled through my role as a volunteer with the Friends of Syria organization itself. After travelling to Sweden with the aim of engaging ethnographically with the day-to-day effects of the productive power brought into being by the labelling of a nation as ‘morally exceptional’ vis-à-vis migration, as well as looking at how this identity coexists with discourses of unease around the migrant, I began to follow the story in *Sydsvenska* newspaper of the generous donations and support given to one group of around seventy Syrian refugees who had just been placed by the Migration Board in a Skånska village of around sixteen hundred inhabitants. In an area of Sweden with a slightly higher than national-average income, a local municipality whose composition roughly reflected that of the national legislature, and with only two seats on the local council belonging to the far-right *Sverige Demokratarna* party, coupled with the glowing stories in the media of the kindness of this village, I felt it was an interesting site at which to engage with the day-to-day effects of this ‘progressive’ identity. Over the course of the ten months in which I carried out my fieldwork, the initial group of Syrian families were gradually joined by around fifty more Syrians, as well as around a dozen refugees or asylum seekers from other parts of the world – Georgia, Uganda, Eritrea – until around 130 new arrivals had been resettled there.

As opposed to an abstract notion of ‘solidarity’ based around the national myth, the particular dynamics between the villagers and the refugees at this site were extremely illustrative of all the taboos, obligations and negotiations of norms in play amongst those who are identified as, and identify themselves as, ‘good citizens’ in the context of refugees actually being resettled in their neighbourhood. The villagers of Oreby were informed about

the arrival of the refugees only three weeks before the first arrivals – but most had already read it in the local newspaper. The Migration Board, *Migrationsverket*, then promptly arranged a meeting in the local school to listen to locals' concerns; a follow-up meeting was promised for the spring, which in fact never materialized.

In terms of performing the role of 'solidarity' with the refugees, however, the meeting in the school saw all notions of 'decency' abandoned, or at least put aside momentarily, in order to counter the imminent threat – in the eyes of the people of Oreby – of the reality of refugees being placed in their village. For this brief moment, it was more important for the villagers to prevent the refugees' resettlement at any cost, rather than maintain the appearance of being 'good citizens'. Resistance to the placement of the refugees was thus articulated along three main lines: that they would cause a fall in house prices; that the children in the village would be in danger from these 'damaged, war-torn' people; and lastly, that the young women and girls would be at increased risk of harassment and sexual advances from the Arab men. The most direct indication of this general unease came from a mother of three teenage daughters, who introduced her family to the *Migrationsverket* representative before stating that, thanks to them, she would no longer feel safe letting her three girls walk around on their own in the village at night. This assertion was met by an enthusiastic round of applause from everybody else at the meeting.

Disappointed at her fellow villagers' reaction to the news of the guests, Bodil, a volunteer with *Svenska Kyrkan*, the Swedish Church, organized a Facebook page and founded the small NGO, Friends of Syria, through which to collect donations of clothes, blankets and kitchen utensils for the refugees. The five women who made up the Friends of Syria were all locals, middle class, and in their forties or fifties. Despite the negative comments at the meeting, Bodil accumulated a huge amount of goods which she then took upon herself to distribute amongst the refugees. As a member of the village community, Bodil was not part of any wider humanitarian organization, and was only loosely affiliated with the church. As opposed to the usual working practices of NGO workers, it was Friends of Syria who initiated contact with the Syrian refugees by knocking on each of their doors a few hours after the officials from *Migrationsverket* had settled them into their new homes, introducing themselves as fellow villagers and neighbours, and volunteering themselves as the first point of contact should the new arrivals be in need of any assistance. A few months after the first refugees arrived, the Friends of Syria campaigned for a nearby house to be rented by *Migrationsverket* to be used as an 'activity centre' for the new arrivals, which became the scene of Swedish lessons, clothing donation and distribution, and general 'hanging out'.

Life in Oreby: A hidden transcript of unease

With the realization that the placement of the refugees in Oreby was something that they would be obliged to live with, rather than something that they were in discussions about, objections to the resettlement of the refugees were no longer voiced or articulated in formal settings, such as the various village events (which took place roughly once or twice a month), such as the Spring Festival or Children's Day. Instead, these fora became a terrain through which the villagers could perform the role of 'decency' to each other, demonstrating 'solidarity' by regaling stories of how terrible the war in Syria is and advertising how much they had personally donated to the new arrivals. The meeting at the school was thus the only occasion of such vocal resistance to the housing of the refugees in Oreby. Indeed, many of those people present at the meeting later denied being present or raising any objections, dismissing the resistance to the resettlement of the refugees as 'ignorant people', or 'people who were simply a bit scared of the unknown'. With the inability to influence

Migrationsverket's decision to place refugees in Oreby, power relations reverted to maintaining a certain ideal of respectability, and all the taboos and obligations enabled by the national myth were brought back into play.

Grumbles or complaints I overheard about the perceived deficiencies and flaws of the new arrivals, however, took to the more informal, 'safer' settings of the school gates, the pizzeria and the slimming club. The Arab men were conceived of in familiar orientalised terms, as hypermasculinized, lecherous and thus risky; it was only a matter of time before something terrible would happen in the village. Areas of the village in which the refugees congregated were deemed 'no go zones' of sorts, without ever needing to be openly articulated as such; it was simply the way things were. Swedish children and refugee children were 'of course' allowed to play together, but this transpired to be only within the supervised settings of the school (during school time) or the football club every Saturday. During training, Syrian parents congregated along a far end of the football field and Swedish parents separately along the length of the pitch. After the game, most of the local parents left immediately and ensured that their children were quickly shepherded away into cars.

Such a tacit, unspoken understanding between the residents of Oreby as to where the line of 'solidarity' was to be drawn and where it was permitted to falter enabled any outward confrontation to be kept to a minimum, even completely avoided, and for everybody involved to maintain their 'good citizen' reputation. James C. Scott, though talking about domination, talks about this type of shared understanding between members of a group in terms of a 'hidden transcript' – a sort of collective resistance that maintains the illusion of a placid surface, whilst slyly making use of fleeting, seized opportunities that push the limits of what is permitted (Scott 1990: 196). Though far from dominated, the taboos brought into being by obligations of 'decency' within this governmentality framework meant that any resistance against the refugees was pushed into a more 'hidden' realm, able to be voiced behind closed doors amongst the 'in' group and those who were certain to share these views, but unable to be articulated in polite company if one were to maintain a 'decent' image.

Notions of 'solidarity' and the performance of the 'good citizen' were nonetheless permitted to lapse or alter somewhat around the notion of gender equality and the 'children's well-being'. Although the familiar orientalised conception of the Arab man as somewhat dangerous was an accepted truth in the village – unspoken in 'polite company' after the initial meeting, but coming to form a sort of common sense, nobody would now expressly label the men as threatening or undesirable. Instead, open discourse was along the lines of how terrible the suffering of the refugees must have been, how it must be so traumatic to be forced to adapt to such a new culture, and how much help and support they would need. In terms of gender and parenting, however, a great deal more room for manoeuvre was available to still behave decently, from the acceptance of 'no-go' zones for the village children to the adoption of various 'female empowerment' strategies.

Gender (in)equality: Mending the deficient Syrians

As an intermediary between the village and the refugees, Bodil and the Friends of Syria were often the target of these grumbles and complaints, and thus took on the role of helping the Syrians to 'integrate' and 'enter society'. Any attempt to directly force the Syrian men to 'mend their ways', however, was deemed taboo. The Friends of Syria volunteers were aware that speaking about the Arab men as fanatical and potentially violent was in bad taste; although acceptable to be articulated behind closed doors, to speak this way publicly would be seen as particularly unsavoury, and something that was relegated in their imagination to the realm of the far right. Eva, for example, the volunteer in charge of running the weekly

Swedish classes, would often roll off the platitude that ‘sexism and racism are two sides of the same coin’. In this way the ‘public transcript’ of decency and complete solidarity was able to be upheld. Nonetheless, the Friends of Syria, in accommodating the unease of the wider community, took it upon themselves to ‘do something’ to help the new arrivals ‘adjust’ to Swedish life, particularly with regards to the notions of gender equality and the upbringing of children.

One way to avoid more open or direct criticism of the perceived patriarchy or sexism of the Syrian refugees, which would risk being viewed as ‘indecent’, was to articulate disapproval as though it was not completely serious – simply a ‘joke’ or light-hearted teasing that could be easily laughed off. This type of interaction was especially prominent between the volunteers in their dealings with the older Syrian men and fathers who had been settled in the village. To every new family who arrived, for example, Bodil would proclaim to the father that ‘Sweden is the opposite of your culture; here, women are legally allowed to take four husbands but men are only allowed one wife’, before quickly adding that she was ‘just joking’. This type of teasing took on the form of anything from trying to shock the Syrian men into dramatically altering their perceived norms of how they expected their wives to dress – ‘Don’t be surprised come summertime when your wife will be in a bikini! You’re not in Aleppo now’ – to gently mocking the men for what the volunteers perceived to be a lack of domestic skills – ‘A Swedish woman would never let a man get away with that!’ This type of advice, though with serious intent behind it, was always given playfully, and as such was easily disowned in the (rare) case of it being challenged or of offence being taken by the Syrian men.

Within the same orientalist episteme, the Syrian women, viewed as more ‘passive’ and thus a somewhat ‘safer’ target, were seen as a more receptive group at whom to direct advice. In addition to the Swedish lessons and general drop-in sessions held in the activity centre, the volunteers also devoted every Tuesday to holding cooking classes, whereby two or three of them would show the new arrivals how to make simple Swedish recipes like cinnamon buns and pancakes. The rationality of organizing this event was precisely to attract the women, to facilitate an arena in which they could get to know the ‘real’ person in the absence of the perceived influence of the husband, and to create a separate form of ‘female solidarity’.

The first few cooking lessons were deemed very successful, attended by around twenty or so women, both Syrian and non-Arab. The volunteers spoke to the women in English, but took care to teach them simple, Swedish words as they went along. ‘They will never integrate or get a job if they can’t even say basic sentences’. Bodil, the chief volunteer, encouraged the women to leave their children at home during these classes, citing the need for the women to have some well-deserved time to themselves, but also promoting the ideal of a more gender-equal style of parenting: ‘Besides, now that you’re living in Sweden, it’s time that your husbands did some childcare for a change’.

After around five or six weeks, however, most of the Syrian women stopped attending the cooking classes, with only a family of two sisters and one of their husbands from Georgia, as well as three Ugandan women, making the weekly visit. This was a source of mild irritation to the Friends of Syria group who saw their time as wasted if the Syrian women would not even make the effort to get to know the Swedish culture and simply ‘locked themselves away’. In the absence of any Syrians, conversations at Tuesday’s cooking classes often centred on their perceived deficiencies; they were seen to be ‘stuck in their ways’ and weak willed, unable to ‘stand up to their husbands’ about the changes needed to integrate in Sweden.

These tiny annoyances at the Syrian women’s indifference towards their ‘empowerment’ strategies were accelerated in Wednesday’s Swedish classes, when numbers gradually began to dwindle so that only the family of three from Georgia were regular attendees. The

Georgian couple were now expecting their first baby, with the mother-to-be now three months pregnant. Wednesday's casual lessons at the drop-in centre thus became less structured teaching and more general discussions about life in the village, hopes for the future, and challenges being faced 'entering society' in Sweden. Gradually, these conversations again began to be framed in terms of the deficiencies of the Syrians, especially the Syrian women, and a general frustration at their perceived lack of integration. The Georgian woman would often tell us how she too was from a patriarchal culture where women were treated as second-class citizens, however she was willing to fight for her rights to education and equal treatment.

The terrain of the activity centre was thus one in which the 'good' refugee, willing to take on more gender-equal roles, gradually came to be differentiated from the 'bad' refugee, wishing to remain 'traditional' and 'patriarchal', and reluctant to enter Swedish society. The behaviour of the Georgian refugees came to be seen as a benchmark to which all the new arrivals should aspire. The Georgian man, for example, was constantly congratulated by the volunteers for his proactive approach towards parenthood and his involvement with Adriane's pre-natal classes.

Engagement with the Syrian refugees, both male and female, therefore only took place in the more informal 'drop-in sessions' that the volunteers had arranged twice weekly, whereby the new arrivals could stop by to discuss any issues they were having with accommodation, to search through donations and take any clothes they needed, or to come with letters from *Migrationsverket* or *Arbetsförmedlingen*, the Employment Agency, to be translated. The four volunteers thus utilized this opportunity to advise the women on what they should be doing to make 'entering society' easier, on subjects such as how to dress or how to control their children's behaviour. The perceived deficiencies of the Syrians' parenting was amplified during Ramadan when complaints about the refugee children being permitted to stay up late and 'run amok' came to a head, and the group received more and more complaints from fellow villagers.

By focusing on gender equality, albeit mostly aimed at the women, as well as 'good parenting', criticism of the Syrians' way of life, or their imagined way of life, was able to be articulated aloud, and within 'polite company' with an image of decency still kept intact. The national myth of moral exceptionalism and its permeation through society as a 'governmentality of righteousness' ensures that ideas of being a good parent and of 'gender equality' are firmly Swedish qualities, with 'everybody else', though sharing the same idea of 'decency', nonetheless failing to live up to this exemplar. As we have seen, however, this decency also legitimized tiny biopolitical practices of hierarchization and marginalization of the Syrians. An engineer and mother of two toddlers from Damascus complained of the volunteers 'shoving their ideas of gender equality down her throat', and her husband joked of it being a 'tyranny'. On the whole, however, most of the Syrians regarded the volunteers' work positively and gratefully; the Friends of Syria had been helping them to settle into life in Oreby and it was seen as only natural that they would have negative perceptions of Muslims from what they would have seen on the television and in Hollywood movies.

Indignation and panic: The voicing of the hidden transcript

Thus far we have examined the multiplicity of ways in which the 'morally exceptional' national myth was reappropriated at an anthropological level by people who saw themselves as 'decent' citizens, claiming to be proud of their country's humanitarian record and stance towards refugees. By never openly criticizing or voicing objection to the resettlement of the refugees, the volunteers and residents of the village reinforced but also utilized the national

myth to retain a sense of their own moral superiority. In this respect, a ‘public transcript’ was firmly in place, giving the appearance of a tranquil, placid surface in which everybody accepts the prevailing norms. Although there was a marked unease in the village over the resettlement of the refugees, any resistance to their resettlement, aside from the initial meeting, was forced into a more hidden realm in order to maintain a decent image. The only realm in which it became acceptable to let this public transcript ‘lapse’ somewhat was around concerns about the perceived gender inequality and parenting practices of the new arrivals, whereby the ‘good citizen’ image was still able to be maintained. Any allusion to the Arab men as violent or fanatical, though allowed to be voiced in the initial meeting, was no longer acceptable in public and would now immediately render the speaker a ‘dreg’ (Gullestad 1992), or at best, un-Swedish. As long as the refugees played by all the rules of being a ‘worthy guest’ (Rozakou 2012), and accepted the advice of the volunteers on how to be more gender equal and on how to raise their children, then this ‘public transcript’ of complete acceptance was maintained, and talk of violent, lustful or risky men was kept somewhat hidden.

And indeed, to place oneself in a position of critique regarding Swedish policy and everyday practice towards refugees and asylum seekers is to stand on somewhat shaky ground. To be sure, I am not trying to diminish either the significance of Sweden’s role in accepting such a relatively high number of refugees, or the kindness of the Friends of Syria in providing the refugees with not merely a ‘bare life’ but indeed a ‘decent life’. It is important, however, to be able to understand the political as opposed to the ethical implications of such a form of governmentality and to open a space for critique, even in these ‘best case’ examples: the limits of the functioning of this type of governmentality; the manner in which solidarity is reappropriated as generosity; and the very fragile relationship between a seeming acceptance of the refugees and the complete disbanding of social relations.

To see the tiny, almost insignificant micro-biopolitical practices of exclusion and hierarchization around ‘gender equality’ and ‘good parenting’ as the ‘whole story’ and as having only minimal implications or a limited reach would be an extreme error. Indeed, as analysts of social action, we are interested in how these tiny biopolitical practices go on to inform a more far-reaching phenomenon, ‘adding up’ to a type of social change (Neumann 2002). The unease that was markedly present within the village regarding the issue of the refugees did not disappear because of the projects of the Friends of Syria or because it was not acceptable to be voiced in open after the initial meeting.

Indeed, one could conceptualize this ‘hidden transcript’ of unease within the village and the micro-biopolitical practices of hierarchization, marginalization and stigmatization of the Syrian refugees by the volunteers as the ‘concealed base of the iceberg’ (Veyne 1997: 154), which, through the mechanism of a ‘moral panic’ (Cohen 1980), enabled the more ‘public’ articulation of the Syrian men as a threat, and the controversy over the perception of Arab hypermasculinity and their tendency towards violence to be openly voiced, as we will discuss below. In articulating the shared unease of the Arab men as dangerous, we also see how moves towards an ‘us and them’ become more acceptable within the public domain.

The shooting of the man in Jämtland

Whilst driving to Oreby on the morning of 13 November 2013, I heard on the news about a young Somali man who had been shot dead by police the previous night in a small village further north, in the county of Jämtland. The news reported that the man had been brandishing a knife and waving it around the small block of apartments where a few refugee families were housed. The report was very brief, with the newsreader stating only that the

man was said to have been drinking alcohol and running towards the police when he was shot.

When I arrived at the activity centre, it was much busier than usual, with around thirty people milling around in the lounge and kitchen. All four members of the Friends of Syria were present, with Bodil explaining that she had called a meeting to discuss what had happened the previous night and what implications this may have. The atmosphere was a little tense and Bodil seemed tired, a little irritated and short tempered.

She explained to the Syrians that, throughout the course of the morning, ‘dozens’ of people had phoned her or approached her at the school gate to talk about the incident up in Jämtland. People were worried that something similar could happen in Oreby, reasoning that damaged people, straight out of a war zone, were capable of anything. Despite refugees having lived in Oreby for around eight or nine months by this point, with no ‘incidents’, the actions of one refugee hundreds of miles north had legitimized, for the first time since the school meeting, speaking openly of the Arab men as potentially very dangerous, with some sort of ‘action’ needing to be taken to ensure that Oreby would remain free from this sort of trouble. This was the first time that Bodil had conveyed this general unease to the refugees themselves, positioning herself as one of the villagers, instead of taking the usual role as an intermediary: ‘I just want to tell you men that you have to behave yourselves. This is what happens in Sweden if you don’t behave yourself. It is a good country but if you come here, you have to respect our rules’. Bodil’s speech to the thirty or so people who had gathered was short and to the point, directed at every Syrian man there.

The protests of an articulate, twenty-two-year-old male medical student from Aleppo that this man was ‘Somali’ and thus, in his reasoning, was completely uncivilized and backward, as opposed to Syrians who were cultured and peaceful people, was quickly dismissed by Bodil. True, he may be from another country, but he was also a ‘guest’ in Sweden, who the good people of Jämtland had been so kind as to protect. When the meeting was finished and most people had left, only Ahmed and the young Georgian couple remained, along with Bodil and myself, and talk around the kitchen table once again reverted back to the police shooting. Ahmed was astounded at the shoot-to-kill policy of the Swedish police, stating plainly to Bodil that the exact details around this incident were unclear, and admonishing her for being so quick to tell everybody to ‘behave’ themselves, when in actual fact it could be the Swedish police that needed to ‘behave’.

This was the first time that there was a firmly demarcated line between the people of Oreby and the refugees. The incident legitimized, in the eyes of the Oreby dwellers, the move away from ‘solidarity’ – even the thin veneer of solidarity that was being performed thus far – to an open articulation of an ‘us and them’. Cohen (1980) famously articulates such an event as a ‘moral panic’, recognizing the way in which a person, or group of people, can emerge and come to be framed by the media as a threat to societal values and interests through exaggerated and somewhat distorted reporting. The resulting frenzy thus engenders a largely disproportionate response to the perceived ‘deviancy’. Crucial to the success of a moral panic, however, is its capacity to tap into somewhat pre-existing societal orientations, perhaps not previously publicly voiced, but which become more crystallized and organized as the result of the panic, and hence more legitimate (Cohen 1980: 47).

Indeed, this vignette of the police shooting and the subsequent reaction in Oreby is extremely telling. The Somali man in Jämtland had most spectacularly broken the rules of being a ‘worthy guest’ (Rozakou 2012) by wielding a knife. The media articulation of the refugee as threatening and dangerous thus altered the power dynamics in Oreby and rendered sayable what had been taboo only a day previously. The repertoire of available actions for the ‘decent’ citizen became far more wide ranging. Although the episode did not take place in Oreby, or indeed anywhere near it, a subsequent moral panic ensued allowing Bodil to

publicly voice what people had been saying more or less privately in phone calls and in conversations at the school gate.

Concluding thoughts: Conceptualizing the everyday practices of violence in Oreby

In telling the story of the resettlement of refugees in a small Swedish village we have brought to light some of the number of ways in which the national myth of solidarity, of moral exceptionalism, and gender equality can enable and create the possibility for practices of violence. But how can we conceptualize violence in such an instance? As we have discussed, the standard of living of the refugees in Sweden was high; the villagers were generally all kind and well-meaning people (at least within polite company). ‘Solidarity’ as a national myth enabled an outwardly tranquil, cordial relation between the villagers and the new arrivals, at least for most of the time.

The ‘moral panic’ created by the media report of the shooting of the man in Jämtland, however, created the conditions for a seemingly ‘exceptional’ moment. Here, the Syrian men were told, in no uncertain terms, that they were deemed deviant, risky and abnormal, and would have to ‘behave’ if they did not want to be shot dead by the police. This notion of violence as explicit and crude mirrors a wide array of governmentality- and biopolitics-inspired scholarship which illuminates the fundamental interweaving of humanitarian practices and biopolitical hierarchization of human life into that which is desirable and that which is undesirable (most notably Fassin 2005; Agier 2008, 2011). Drawing on Agamben’s (1998) reinscription of biopolitical governance as producing ‘bare life’, the refugee in these instances is one who does not enjoy the benefits of inclusion in the political realm, residing instead in a ‘zone of indistinction’ (Ojakangas 2005). For Agamben, the *homo sacer* of the camp is defined therefore, as with the panic around the perceived passionate, angry, unhinged Somali man in Jämtland, only by his capacity to be killed. Through this very spectacular framing, it is possible to see the ‘governmentality of righteousness’ working like any other racist discourse, creating the conditions of possibility to control, correct and ultimately exterminate ‘the other’ (Foucault and Ewald 2003).

This conceptualization, however, would be a hugely reductionist reading of the biopolitical practices at play in Oreby, the more pastoral functions of such a type of power and their own particular relation to violence. By turning our attention to *mētis* – to culture as a dynamic interplay between discourse and practice and the wide repertoire of available actions of the ‘good citizen’ as an actor within this governmentality of righteousness – the complexities of this relationship are brought to light. Indeed, the national myth and its reappropriations produced certain taboos whereby any criticism of the refugees was deemed in bad taste – not completely unsayable, but only able to be articulated behind closed doors. The villagers of Oreby had a shared understanding of what it was to be ‘decent’ in polite company. In the same vein, ‘correction’ took the more gentle form of ‘female empowerment’ talks at cooking classes and Swedish classes, giving advice about what to wear to make ‘entering society’ easier, and on how to prevent children from ‘running amok’ – advice that was only deemed offensive by one or two people, but was generally laughed off or even appreciated for the good intentions behind it.

The moral panic around the shooting of the man in Jämtland could therefore be seen as only the ‘tip of the iceberg’ of wider, more subtle practices of hierarchization and categorization, as well as the public voicing of the general, more hidden unease that had been present in the village since the school meeting. Indeed, we have seen how it was within the realm of ‘gender equality’ and ‘good parenting’ that taboos regarding solidarity and decency could be seen to be redrawn. As ‘morally exceptional’ in these regards, one could retain an

image of decency whilst acting slightly against the grain of complete ‘solidarity’ and unity. It was within this domain that some requirements of reciprocity and rules of hospitality were brought into being. As Sweden has been labelled morally exceptional vis-à-vis gender equality in addition to, or perhaps even prior to, showing ‘solidarity’ towards refugees, there was some compulsion for the refugees to ‘mend their ways’ in this regard.

Far from a biopolitics of ‘bare life’, we must also therefore examine how this ‘benevolent’ biopolitics (Vrasti 2014: 74) enables more subtle and invisibilized conditions for violence. The national myth of ‘moral exceptionalism’, by its very definition, thus enables a move away from solidarity to one of humanitarianism, complete with notions of generosity, gift giving and hierarchization. The labelling of Sweden as ‘best’ regarding gender equality and parenting enables an asymmetric power relation between those who have been labelled ‘exceptional’ and those who have just arrived and are obliged to ‘mend their ways’ to meet this ‘morally exceptional’ standard. To speak of the refugees as ‘deficient’ in these regards is commonsensical, benign and indeed objective.

It is within the Swedish national myth and the governmentality of righteousness that we can see the relation between subtle, invisibilized biopolitical practices and more overt, seemingly spectacular public violence. Though somewhat benign, caring and commonsensical, these practices can instead be seen to form the base of an iceberg of exclusion, stigmatization and marginalization, in which it takes only a story in the media to legitimize, in the eyes of the Oreby dwellers, the open articulation of the Syrian men as a threat; coercion as crude and explicit. The Syrians moved quickly from being objects of care and assistance, to being undesirable and able to be ‘sacrificed in the name of protection’ (Balzacq et al. 2010: 10). What is interesting, however, is that all this can occur with notions of ‘decency’ and even ‘solidarity’ remaining firmly intact.

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