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Judgment and ambivalence in migration work: on the (dis)appearance of dilemmas in assisting voluntary return.

Abstract:

Street-level bureaucrats implementing nation states' migration policies increasingly find themselves in a structural tension between providing social assistance and regulating the flows of people entering and leaving the national territory. As a result, doing migration work involves a wide range of difficult, ambivalent situations. This article examines how and under which conditions these tensions translate into moral and political dilemmas in street-level bureaucrats' everyday work. In doing so, it draws upon original qualitative research with street-level bureaucrats working in the Belgian programme for Assisted Voluntary Return. The article concludes by proposing an approach centred around the notion of immunisation so as to understand the social context in which ambivalence and its contraries are produced.

Keywords: ambivalence; immunisation; judgment; migration work; street-level bureaucracy

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Introduction

"It's difficult to judge, isn't it?" the Immigration Officer asks while nervously scratching the back of her head. "I don't know what was best for those people: to return to their home country or to stay here without documents. But still, recently I heard from a policeman who returned to Kosovo, that he regretted so terribly that he did not do it earlier. 'All the time that I have lost! All those men that are way younger than me are now much further in their police careers, while I, I have to start again from nothing!'" We are sitting at the kitchen table in her house, between man-sized piles of dossiers, spread across a Senegalese table cloth. Perhaps I should have known better, but I had imagined it differently, meeting someone who nearly weekly commands police officers to arrest people, and have them deported afterwards. She does not resemble the heartless, unworldly bureaucrat no longer capable of imagining there to be actual, living people behind her dossiers (Herzfeld 1992), and she comes across even less as the conscience-ridden career hunter unable to think through the consequences of his or her own actions (Arendt 1976). And yet, the difficulty she experiences in judging her own work, is not a singular case, but indicative of a *structural* tension, between her sincere intention to do the best she can for the people she coaches, and her official task as an Immigration Officer: to make undesirable subjects leave the national territory – 'voluntarily if possible, forced if necessary', as her employer's slogan goes.

Doing migration work increasingly involves a wide range of difficult, ambivalent situations, as street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) are involved in ever more restrictive migration and integration policies. Faced with subjects having few rights and prospects of improving their livelihoods, they are expected to discipline immigrants or even to help the state regulate the access and exit of subjects to and from its territory. Although these tensions are widespread across the entire field of migration and integration work, they are perhaps particularly salient in the programmes for assisted voluntary return (AVR). In these increasingly popular programmes, undocumented immigrants or rejected asylum seekers are offered material and social support to return 'home' voluntarily. For most of the governments advocating these programmes, the main objective is inducing undocumented immigrants to leave the national territory in a way that is both more humane and cost-efficient than forced deportation. The implementation of these programmes, however, is usually outsourced to social or humanitarian agencies for whom AVR opens up the possibility of finding a sustainable solution for those with few prospects. Similarly, the Immigration Officers endowed with the task of deporting undocumented immigrants have recently become expected to prioritise *voluntary* return over the use of physical force. The SLBs putting these policies into practice, thus find themselves inscribed into two different, seemingly opposite imperatives: leading those who are denied legal access to the exit, whilst preoccupying themselves with their well-being, rather than with the trajectory they undertake.

One of the crucial questions arising from this set of issues then, is whether and how these opposing rationales manifest themselves in SLBs' everyday work? Do they emerge in the form of moral dilemmas? And if they do so, under which conditions are they experienced as such, and how are they interpreted and dealt with? I argue that the specific problematic of SLBs provides us with wider theoretical insights into how individual actors deal with differential loyalties (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) and the structural ambivalences that are produced when individuals are endorsing contradictory imperatives (Bauman 1991). More precisely, the article concludes by arguing that more attention needs to be given to how microsocial arrangements ceaselessly function to neutralise these dilemmas before they rise to the surface.

Doing Migration Work

At least to some extent, such ambivalences are structurally inherent to SLBs' position in between the micro- and macroscales in which social policies actually take place. According to Michael Lipsky (1980), SLBs are expected to implement policy goals and strategies that are ordered from the top downwards, which may conflict with approaches that would seem more appropriate from a micro-perspective. In migration work, this tension emerges most clearly in the confrontation between policies attempting to regulate integration and migration more strictly - e.g. by making social support conditional upon cultural assimilation or socio-economic success (Brubaker 2001; Schinkel 2010) – whereas serving the needs or the rights of the immigrant-client physically in front of them generally requires a more lenient or tolerant approach. This tension has resurfaced time and again in a number of ever more complex studies, ranging from UK asylum 'case workers' (James and Killick 2012) to US border officials (Heyman 2000) and Swedish Immigration Officers deciding upon regularisation applications (Eggebo 2012).

While most of these studies have explored how individuals *interpret and deal with* these dilemmas, however, this article seeks to examine *under which conditions such structural tensions manifest themselves as dilemmas in the first place*. To do so, I draw upon two bodies of work to provide specific focal points in analysing the qualitative data. First, over the last few decades, increasing attention has been given to the nature and extent of *emotional labour* required in SLBs' everyday work. Central to this body of work is the influential distinction drawn by Arlie Hochschild (1983) between 'surface' and 'deep acting'. In the former, actors engage in displaying emotions that are expected in a specific context (e.g. stewards are expected to continue smiling when faced with unfriendly customers), whereas in the latter, actors actually convince themselves to experience the emotion their job requires (e.g. stewards who feel like smiling even though customers are complaining). Translated to our concerns, this means that whether or not individuals experience dilemmas in their work, can be related to the extent to which they are *emotionally* convinced that what they are doing is right. Doing migration work, then, needs to feel right in order to prevent dilemmas from manifesting themselves (Graham 2002; Hall 2010). If they are only engaging in 'surface acting', SLBs may experience a higher degree of stress, which carries higher risks for their mental and physical health, as it requires them to display emotions that are not genuinely experienced (Ashforth & Humphrey 1993; Zapf & Holz 2006). Whilst deep acting may thus alienate individuals from their 'authentic' emotions (Hochschild 1983), it seems to protect them from the psychological distress caused by experiencing the effect of incompatible loyalties on their everyday work (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993).

Second, Hannah Arendt's (1976) attempts to come to terms with Adolphe Eichmann's (lack of) conscience has fed into a small body of work concentrating on individuals' ability to judge independently from the professional setting in which they find themselves. As the ultimate prototype of the unworldly bureaucrat, Eichmann represents an increasingly common inability to think for oneself, that is, independently from one's immediate social context. His figure has proven crucial in some ethnographic works on migration apparatuses, perhaps most importantly Gregory Feldman's (2013) essay on 'pivotal intellectuals'. These intellectuals are 'pivotal' in the sense that they hold crucial positions in migration policy institutions in which morally complex dilemmas are usually driven to the background. The crucial question then, is when and why a more universalist reflection on what is 'right' pierces through the bubbles of these intellectuals' everyday lives. In this sense, the specific focal point arising from this body of literature is individuals' ability to make singular judgments by drawing upon a more universal moral imperative that transcends the social context in which it is made (Fine 2007). Although emerging from different perspectives, each with their own complexities and nuances, this Arendtian focus on singular judgements can be linked to a broader literature on critical social work and pedagogy, in which individual professionals are encouraged to continuously assess their actions with respect to their wider consequences (Chambon et al 1999; Freire 2014; Rancière 1991).

On a more general historical-theoretical plane, this emphasis on singular judgments can be related to the ubiquity of ambivalence in individuals' life-worlds as a whole (Eggebo 2012). As Zygmunt Bauman argued in his *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991), for instance, ambivalence has turned into a defining trait of our age, as individuals increasingly find themselves inscribed into a wide range of potentially irreconcilable loyalties, requiring them to decide continuously upon the rationale to be obeyed in any particular situation. Similarly, Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) work on regimes of justification, examines how individuals decide which moral and practical criteria to use to evaluate the appropriateness of actors' actions and interpretations in situations that preclude a straightforward judgment. Although focusing more extensively on personal life-worlds, Anthony Giddens' (1991) work

on the social production of 'ontological security' through reflexive traditions, identities and lifestyles assumes a pertinent situation of fundamental contingency, requiring a great deal of 'work' before meaningful social action can actually take place. In this sense, the specific problematic of doing migration work may provide us with more general theoretical insights into how ambivalence and ontological securities are socially produced within particular contexts.

To analyse the mechanisms enabling or preventing the emergence of dilemmas, however, this article develops a particular notion of 'social spheres' throughout the empirical analysis. It will be argued that a range of microsocial arrangements of subjects and objects (cf. Boltanski & Thévenot 2006) serve to protect or 'immunise' individual professionals from experiencing conflicts between different social loyalties, cognitive rationales or moral imperatives. By drawing attention to the protective function these spheres fulfil, as I argue in the conclusion, we can learn more about the (dis)appearance of moral dilemmas in late modernity more generally. In the following pages, I will therefore first describe the methodology and data used in this article, before detailing how potential dilemmas are pre-empted in the case of SLBs working in the Belgian AVR programme.

Case and Method

Recent decades have seen the rise of programmes for 'Assisted Voluntary Return' (AVR), through which mainly undocumented immigrants and rejected asylum seekers are offered financial and social support to return 'home' of their own accord. In Europe, these programmes are usually implemented by (trans)national NGOs such as Caritas International, IOM or Refugee Action, whose expertise and international network is deemed to render voluntary return 'durable' for those making use of it (Koch 2014). Precisely how these external actors are involved in the AVR programme, however, depends on the specific country. In Belgium, where this case study was conducted, AVR is rooted in a corporatist-democratic decision-making structure, in which there is intense, continuous cooperation between Federal government agencies (Fedasil; the Immigration Office), international organisations (IOM; Caritas International), local civil society (Centres for General Well-Being) and municipal governments (Lietaert et al 2016). The Belgian AVR thereby works along the lines of what practitioners refer to as the 'German model': central government agencies rely heavily upon a wide network of local and national civil organisations. Due to the small scale of the Belgian programme, most employees working within this network know each other personally, and they regularly contact one another to discuss particular cases or queries.

As a result of this close cooperation, these actors' different roles are designed to complement one another. In this article I concentrate on the SLBs working for two types of actors. In a first section, I concentrate on SLBs working for social and humanitarian organisations active in the Belgian AVR programme. This includes Caritas International, IOM, Fedasil (the agency coordinating the AVR civil network on behalf of the government) and the local Centres for General Well-being. Their main priorities are to 'inform' asylum seekers as early and correctly as possible on the modalities of AVR, and to 'discuss' AVR with immigrants who honestly consider making use of the programme. A second section details the practices of the Federal Immigration Office (IO) and a number of local municipalities, whose main task consists of convincing undocumented immigrants to return voluntarily, before they are detained and physically forced to do so – they will be referred to as enacting the nation-state's sovereign's power.

To examine the (dis)appearance of dilemmas emerging from the confrontation between these sovereign and humanitarian rationales, this article draws primarily upon 24 semi-structured interviews conducted between March and October 2015, with a variety of professionals working within the Belgian AVR programme:

- 6 policy coordinators: all the coordinators currently working for the central organisations (2 IOM coordinators, 1 working for Fedasil, Caritas International and the two largest municipalities). Three out of six occasionally worked as street-level return coaches as well, or had done so for several years in the past;
- 4 staff trainers educating street-level assistants and return coaches (1 Caritas, 1 Fedasil, 2 independent civil organisations advocating immigrants' rights);
- 5 specialised street-level return coaches (2 Fedasil, 2 IOM, 1 Local Well-Being Centre);
- 4 generalist street-level assistants (1 Collective reception centre, 3 Local Well-being Centres);
- 5 Immigration Officers (2 in both a coordinating and street-level function, 3 in a purely street-level function)

After having analysed these organisations' policy documents, brochures and reports, I contacted their policy coordinators through personal contacts in Belgian civil society, which I had developed through earlier research. Subsequent respondents were recruited through the dense network of the AVR programme itself. My research project was introduced as an independent academic study examining practitioners' visions and practices of AVR, including the role they see for themselves (e.g. implementing tasks for the government, supporting returnees, coordinating the network, signalling problems), how they sought to fulfil these roles and which channels they relied upon for debating and discussing any particular obstacles they encountered. In the interviews I also explained that one of my primary interests was in the apparent contradiction between the social-humanitarian and sovereign rationale underlying the programme as a whole – a contradiction of which all respondents were well aware when asked about it.

In addition, these interviews were complemented by secondary observational data. Besides attending inter-organisational meetings, information sessions, staff training sessions and outreach activities to immigrant organisations (informing them on the modalities of the AVR programme), I attended over 20 'return conversations' between coaches and potential returnees, of which 8 took place in a local Well-

Being Centre (out of which 6 times an IOM coach was present), and 12 took place with a Fedasil office (out of which 8 times a Caritas coach was present). In the latter, potential returnees were asked in advance whether I could sit in as an independent academic interested primarily in the return coach's practices. Although I cannot vouch for this, practitioners claimed my presence made little if any difference to the course these conversations took.

In a first analytical step, I coded these interviews and field notes according to their references to a sovereign perspective (convincing immigrants to leave), a humanitarian perspective (serving immigrants' interests) and confrontations between the two. Additional codes were ascribed to indications of emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) and reflexive judgements transcending the particular social context in which they emerged (Feldman 2013). In a second step, these codes were then related to individuals' positions within organisations (e.g. street-level vs coordinating level) and to their organisation's position within the AVR programme (Lipsky 1980).

Given the morally sensitive nature of the topic, a last note is needed on my own position vis-à-vis these dilemmas. My interest in AVR was awoken by an unpublished historical analysis I conducted of European asylum and immigration policies' increasing tendency to externalise nation-states' sovereignty either spatially (e.g. resettlement, extra-territorial processing) or by involving civil and corporate actors (e.g. voluntary return and security). During this analysis I was struck by the fact that AVR was praised simultaneously as a tool for expelling immigrants (by policy makers) and as a humanitarian solution serving immigrants' interests (by quite well-reputed civil organisations). What began to fascinate me was how street-level practitioners – whom I wrongly expected to experience these oppositional rationales more intensely (Lipsky 1980) – dealt with the dilemmas which I assumed would emerge in their everyday work. How do professionals who consider themselves as helping immigrants, then, deal with the awareness that they are instrumentalised by governmental policies to implement and realise a restrictive immigration policy? Most of the available empirical evidence furthermore suggests that the benefits for returnees are ambiguous at best (Lietaert et al 2013) and simply absent at worst (Schuster & Majdi 2013; Van Houte et al 2014). What interested me first and foremost, however, was not so much to *expose* how these professionals were fooled by a governmental logic that disciplined their discourses and dispositions, but rather to *understand* why these individuals act and reason the way they do. Although radical scholars may legitimately read this article differently, my aim in this essay is limited to describe, rather than to denounce.

Humanitarian Professionals: Return as an Informed Choice

In one of the first interviews I conducted, an internal AVR staff trainer explained to me what he saw as the direst difficulties of return coaches' work:

It's always double you know, you have to continuously keep asking these questions to yourself, what is it that you are doing. On the one hand, that's providing assistance, care, sustainability, on the other hand it is migration management. We have to look for durable solutions. Our goal is to bring the goals of migration management into line with a number of goals of the concerned, his wish for durable solutions. And I think that we are now fully in an evolution where social assistants or coaches work from focusing on the concerned and his problems, that we are able to bring that in line with migration management. And I think that you can experience that very intensely in the first line (i.e. street-level-bureaucrats), that tension.

His account seemed to be strongly in line with what I expected by reading Lipsky's (1980) classic, namely that moral and emotional dilemmas manifest themselves more forcefully at the level of SLBs, due to the relative autonomy and discretion their position entails. When I talked to Fedasil's, IOM's and Caritas' return coaches or observed some of their conversations, however, these dilemmas seemed to be remarkably absent from their everyday concerns. Paradoxically, the confrontation between humanitarian and bio-political imperatives was experienced more intensely by desk-based bureaucrats coordinating AVR or training the street-level coaches, rather than by the SLBs themselves. In a typical excerpt from a 'return conversation' with a declined asylum seeker, a street-level return coach experienced few difficulties in delineating the boundaries of the professional help he could provide:

Returnee (R): 'the problem is that in Kosovo, we do not have anything.'

Coach (C): 'we cannot discuss anything else besides the programme, there are other people for that. I can only discuss things relating to my own work. The Immigration Office and the Commissariat-General [who decide upon asylum applications] decide those things, not us. And besides, it is not so easy to get reintegration support for Kosovars these days. Fedasil will have to decide that, not us.'

R: 'but 2700 euro support, is that possible?'

C: 2700 euro no, that does not exist. 2200 euro, that's the absolute maximum. But it's up to Fedasil to decide, not to us.'

R: 'But it is a problem for us to find an apartment in Kosovo'

C: 'I understand, but we cannot solve that.'

In a similar vein, I witnessed one of the information sessions, where the AVR programme was presented and discussed with a group of migrant-organisations. One of the main issues that kept resurfacing, was that the programme could offer very little in terms of solving immigrants' daily or structural problems. These organisations claimed, for instance, that return would be of little avail if there are few chances of ensuring one's livelihoods there, whether through finding jobs, ensuring education for their children, or even simply through guaranteeing physical security - even though the Belgian government decided that their country was safe enough to return to. As a result, these discussions became slightly monotonous, as migrant-organisations kept addressing the limitations of the programme, to which street-level return coaches would reply by delimit their expertise, their responsibilities and the resources available to them. In the words of one coach: "I completely understand you, but that problem is above our heads. We, as these organisations, cannot do anything about that. We can only help you with the support we can give if you do decide to return."

To understand why these dilemmas emerge at the level of policy-coordinators rather than street-level return coaches, it is crucial to examine the contextual arrangement in which their daily professional practices take place. Most importantly perhaps, return coaches only meet a particular type of subject: those that have either already decided for themselves that they want to re-migrate, or those who are sincerely considering re-migration through the programme as a viable, realistic possibility. In other words, they do not encounter the more difficult internal decision-making process of opening up the imaginary of returning 'home' as an actual option. The primary difficulties return coaches encounter are the practical-administrative obstacles involved in assessing whether or not subjects are eligible for

AVR support, and whether the basic conditions exist for a durable solution (e.g. can the potential returnee rely on a social network upon return; does (s)he have particular skills enabling him or her to find a specific job). These return coaches are rarely confronted with the forced nature of the activities carried out by other organisations, such as the Immigration Office or the police, which are designed to stimulate people to leave the national territory by making the threat of forced deportation more realistic. Put differently, these rather difficult, ambivalent processes usually remain out of sight and out of reach for return coaches, as people's primary decision-making process takes place elsewhere and if it does so, the element of force driving it has already evaporated into a more general perceptual background of constant fear and loss of prospects. In this sense, the subjects they encounter are not conceived of as deportable 'undocumented immigrants' or members of a community claiming legal-political citizenship, but rather as more or less rational actors who may make an informed decision to return by weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of such a move.

This *a priori definition of subjects* as 'potential returnees' is also embedded in the *temporal-spatial arrangement* of their work practices: Fedasil return coaches, for instance, have their own desks in separate offices, to which people are referred if they want to be informed more fully on the general modalities of the AVR programme. Their main task is thus to identify some of the factors enabling a more or less sustainable return, such as the existence of social ties or networks in the country of return, or by exploring whether the potential returnee can rely on particular skills and competences to improve his or her livelihood upon return. As such, their work is strongly driven by professional expertise. This humanitarian professionalism is developed even further among the return coaches working for IOM and Caritas. Their expertise is more specific both in terms of the AVR programme itself (e.g. the do's and don'ts in setting up a micro-business), and in terms of national context, with most of their staff specialising in a particular country or region. Their in-depth knowledge is also reflected in the temporal-spatial arrangements of their work. Whereas Fedasil's coaches spend most of their days in their own offices, IOM and Caritas' return coaches oftentimes find themselves on the road to a local social service, where they are invited to explain AVR in more detail in the case of a particular client. In other words, whereas Fedasil return coaches mostly encounter people who are genuinely considering AVR support, their IOM and Caritas colleagues usually meet those who have effectively decided to return. The only thing that remains to be done, is to make sure that their return becomes a success in terms of the sustainability it provides for the returnee.

What these arrangements of practices tell us, is that the disappearance of dilemmas at the level of SLBs, is at least partly due to their relocation to the scale of inter-organisational cooperation within the AVR programme. In other words, while these differing logics of migration management and humanitarian support manifest themselves at the level of inter-organisational coordination, the internal design of these organisations allows SLBs to act, think and experience their work within a sphere of their own, with its own values, means and subjectivation practices. Interpretations or subject definitions which appear as more bio-political (e.g. deportable 'undocumented immigrant') or legal-political (e.g. subjects claiming citizenship), are thereby systematically expelled to the external environment of the humanitarian-professional sphere in which they usually think, experience and act.

To sum up the argument so far, return coaches' inexperience of moral or emotional dilemmas can be understood as largely resulting from their relocation to the level of inter-organisational divergences. This translates itself more precisely into three assemblages or configurations creating the particular sphere in which return coaches work. First, they encounter only subjects who are at least already considering return as a viable option for the future. Second, the temporal-spatial arrangement in which they work consists of either offices where people can come for information of their own accord, or they are called in as specialists by local social services to inform clients in more detail on the modalities of AVR for their particular case. Third, these assemblages reflect an expertise-driven professionalism, which relies partly upon displaying 'detachment' rather than a more fully engaged empathic or moral concern (cf. Wharton 2009). For these specialised return coaches, in other words, their efforts to improve the lives of their clients lie less in engaging with their current distress and its (legal-political) causes, and more in perfecting their services by providing the best possible information and by dismantling some of the obstacles to a durable return.

While all of these coaches are well-aware of the involuntary nature of AVR on a more fundamental level, this awareness came more strongly to the fore for the few coaches who also worked in a particular type of camp, besides their open offices. Undocumented immigrants or rejected asylum seekers can request access to this camp if they have no place to stay, on the condition that they effectively engage in a series of conversations on AVR, both with Fedasil and Immigration Office staff.

For the return coaches working partly in these camps, people's 'fear' of being forcibly deported was more of a concrete reality they could actually encounter:

There is also really *fear* with people sometimes, like okay, sometimes I have people actually calling me saying yes I have an Order to Leave the Territory here, but ehm, well, I, I think that they will, I don't want to be locked up, can I immediately have an appointment with you?

This type of remark did not emerge in my talks with her colleagues working outside these camps, neither in their offices nor in (in)formal meetings or outreach activities. Instead, most return coaches' general mind-set was one of professional humanitarianism, concentrating on practical help, administrative information and how to improve people's actual return process. In other words, their perceptual experiences were fenced off more effectively from the spheres external to their humanitarianism. The example of the camp-coach quoted above is particularly telling as it demonstrates precisely what is necessary to make such a change in perspective more likely: a temporal-spatial setting of *everyday* encounters with potential returnees, whilst the *forcible* nature of the talks given by the Immigration Officers is more visible, as well as the *emotional* conditions of the subjects she encounters (by expressing distress, rather than a practical interest in the programme). What the configuration of these encounters does, is make sure that individual actors' judgments and emotional experiences are consonant with the overall logic of the humanitarian-professional sphere. This sphere thus functions as a recursive 'assemblage' between subject-definitions (my job is to make return as sustainable as possible, by providing factual information and social advice, to a potential returnee), spaces (a separate office available for potential returnees to go to of their own accord), and the substantial programme and vocabulary they offer (we can give you these types of material and social support). Combined together, these three assemblages ensure that emotional or moral conflicts are pre-emptively disarmed, as humanitarian professionals' experiences and dispositions are rendered consonant with the internal logic of the sphere that is created in their everyday working environment. The other side of the coin, however, is that this relocates the programme's inherent ambivalences to the policy coordinators and training staff overseeing how these spheres operate within a broader configuration. These desk-based bureaucrats face up to the external boundaries of the humanitarian spheres they help to create: through both explicit policy goals and responsibilities towards their superiors, they are confronted with the forcible function or effect of their humanitarian work. In the words of one humanitarian AVR policy coordinator: 'for us, it is continuously balancing on a thin line between voluntary and forced return, and between the vision of the State Secretary and that of our own.'

The Sovereign's Sphere: Return as a Given Reality

Besides these humanitarian professionals, however, AVR is also implemented by SLBs working for governmental agencies such as the Immigration Office and its subdivisions, and a number of local municipalities. These organisations also employ what they call 'return coaches', although their job is hardly comparable to that of their colleagues working for Fedasil, IOM or Caritas. The setting in which they encounter the subjects of their work revolves around convincing undocumented immigrants and rejected asylum seekers to return voluntarily, before driving up the degree of (physical) force in expelling them effectively from the national territory. When receiving an Order to Leave the Territory (OLT), for instance, immigrants are invited to visit the local Immigration Office where they are informed of the OLT, as well as the main modalities of the AVR programme. If they do not sign up for AVR, they can be legally 'imprisoned' within the house or apartment they are living in, which basically means that they can still go out whenever they want, but that they are due to be arrested from that point on, and that an Immigration Officer is entitled to enter the house at any time, to talk about, for instance, the possibility of AVR. Those who remain reluctant to do so without fleeing their homes, are subsequently arrested and prepared for physically forced deportation. Undocumented families with minor children, however, are moved instead to an 'open living unit' which is managed by the Immigration Office's 'return coaches', who provide them with daily practical assistance (e.g. arranging meetings with a doctor or the local school) whilst 'coaching' them by discussing the prospect of returning, whether voluntarily or not.

The tensions arising from this setting, then, could be expected to be more pronounced, because these coaches' main task is to *convince* subjects against their own will, rather than to guide or support them with practical information to make their own decisions. Their power position means that they are confronted with often devastated subjects who find little hope in the few possibilities lying ahead. In addition, the generalist (rather than specialist or expertise-driven) nature of their work leads them to engage on a broader basis with their subjects, that is, through daily meetings where they deal with a range of practical concerns, rather than merely engaging with specific questions on the AVR programme. Unsurprisingly, most Immigration Officers noted that their job was often 'difficult', largely due to the emotional distress they witnessed:

Yes it's not easy you know because those, those families I do them all myself, and those families I usually do 5 a day, those conversations are really intense those conversations, because obviously a lot of despair and emotion is involved. Most people receive that letter and they think oh yes! I will be invited 'with respect to my residence situation in Belgium', so they think ah! They enter with a lot of hope and they ask, but look, it's not looking so good people, can't we discuss return? And then you see those people really collapse, all hope gone, and a lot of tears and emotions are involved so for me that's often, by the, by the end of the day I am, wrung out, emotionally. (Immigration Officer 1, henceforth IO 1)

How then, do these return coaches prevent the emotionally intense effects of their job from feeding into morally ambivalent experiences? On a very practical level, these return coaches relied upon a number of conversation techniques to neutralise these dilemmas. First, some of them claimed to cease the conversation with their subjects if the latter refused to talk about voluntary return. Immigrants' continuous efforts to switch the topic to the injustice of the decisions made as to their legal status, for instance – decisions made by other divisions within either the Immigration Office or the Commissariat-General – were generally dismissed as irrelevant to the conversation in that particular time and place (e.g. the open living units where they were now being guided to return). In response to these complaints, the SLBs thus shifted these decisions on their legal status from a politically contingent to a *given, external* reality, thereby simultaneously ossifying the subjectivities produced by these legal-political structures. As these simple facts of life could not be changed, the here and now of their encounter needed to be configured towards a different reality, that of (voluntary) return. By stepping through the door of the open house unit, subjects had thus entered a sphere where voluntary return and kind conversations took centre stage over the struggle for legal residence.

In this sense, the underlying episteme seemed to be that state sovereignty is a reality, which needs to be defended both from potential returnees' opinions and from 'unrealistic' social assistants and civil movements criticising the state's persecution of undocumented immigrants:

But there's also social assistants who are more *realistic* in that, and who also say look, we have the option of voluntary return, but if you say no I do not want to return, yes, well then be aware that forced return is going to happen.' (IO 3, original emphasis)

The message we give here at the Immigration Office, is that return is going to happen in any case, and the way it is going to take place, and it may sound, perhaps, unsympathetic but that's how it is, the way in which it happens is up to you, either voluntarily, or forced. But there will be return. (IO 2)

Within this reality, furthermore, return coaches regularly maintained that the subjects in front of them *should have* taken different decisions. In one paradoxical move, the latter are thus re-inscribed with a form of agency, pushing them into a condition in which they no longer have any choice but to return:

There is always that frustration when you talk to people. Yesterday I spoke to 5 families saying well, what are you going to do? Keep burying your head in the sand? And continue applying for humanitarian regularisation, while knowing better? For the twentieth time? Or are you going to take fate into your own hands and say, I need to rebuild it some way or another? (IO 1)

Second, Immigration Officers also shared a genuine belief that participating in the AVR programme is most often to the *benefit* of all those involved, including the returnees themselves:

(...) with voluntary return, *the fear*, of returning, is huge. But many of them would *actually want* to do it, deep in their heart, you know. (IO 1)

Even in the conversations with IOM, if you see *how far* those support programmes actually go, and how often we react, well, how is it possible that a family does not use that support? (IO 3)

Remarkably enough, instead of merely relying upon an official policy discourse, these judgments regularly seemed to be grounded in coaches' private lives and experiences. In this sense, all of the Immigration Officers I talked to relied upon a moral-emotional consideration of children's well-being, which seems to betray a form of 'deep acting' (Hochschild 1983) that brings their emotional experiences into line with the visibly devastating consequences of their professional actions:

I also try to put myself in their place, saying okay, I understand that, I'm also a mother of two children. Ehm, because they always say the children the children but, you don't always do your children a favour by staying here in illegality for so long, because eventually you will end up ah no, my children are entirely uprooted. Yes, but you had your first Order (to leave the territory) eight years ago, your first decision, whose fault is it then that those children are uprooted now? (IO 1)

(...) so they leave us with the idea of no, we are not going back (...) so then we say you can refuse and then you will just come back to us. But, the next time you will be repatriated with an escort (i.e. physically forced), and then I also say, that's not good for the children something like that, because then there will be police officers next to mummy and daddy, so we try to make it clear that an escort is not the ideal solution, so that they'd better do it (return) the first time. (IO 4)

Third, several coaches disbelieved subjects' narratives and the moral claims they made. They did this by relying on two mechanisms for identifying 'evidence'. First, coaches often took decisions made by governmental institutions as more objective assessments of reality than subjects' accounts (e.g. whether a country is 'safe' to return or not). Such evidencing was often rooted in coaches' previous experiences within the Immigration Office – an experience the following SLB shares with many of her colleagues:

Those 9 years working within the Immigration Office's X division have really taught me a lot, I keep repeating that, they gave me a lot of basics for my work today. I remember hearing stories of which you think at first oh! How terrible. And then you would hear, from the Commissariat that all of that is actually not true so you know. I don't take these things home, I used to do that sometimes, but I draw a line there (...) I am not going to let myself, how bad it is, but after a while, then it begins to intrude into your life, so I manage to draw my line pretty well there. (IO 4)

Second, they evidenced their scepticism by means of sudden shifts in subjects' behaviour and discourses. In one case, a return coach told me of a forced deportation she had witnessed. At first, the young mother who was being deported behaved hysterically both during the arrest in an open housing unit and during her boarding onto the plane. To prevent her from hurting the police officers sitting next to her or sabotaging the flight, a straitjacket was put on her during the flight. To the coach's surprise, however, the woman's mood changed completely as she descended from the airplane a few hours later:

What struck me there, is something that had been said to me repeatedly, but you have to see it for yourself. These people arrive there, and they smile, olé olé! It won't be like that in all cases but, but that family, return was for us no option, it was from the very beginning no option. They were screaming, dramatizing, before they got on to the plane, and the children began shouting and fighting, they had to carry her onto the plane. And then they arrive and then, olé olé olé!' (IO 4)

The lesson she drew from these experiences, was that one should not immerse oneself too deeply in subjects' emotional, dramatic stories – a lesson she had been taught in theory first, and in practice later. Immersing oneself in a subject's story would entail creating a micro-sphere around the subject, in which all the relevant elements – from the actors involved to the open house in which they find themselves, and the documents they base their judgments on – would acquire a different meaning, leading up to a whole series of actions and reflections that were now deemed simply irrelevant. By maintaining such a distance, whether it is done through disbelief, disinformation or endorsing the reality of state sovereignty, return coaches retain their ability to immunise themselves from any external threat piercing through the bubble of voluntary return.

5. Conclusion: on the (dis-)appearance of ambivalence

In recent years ever more migration workers have implemented policies with which they do not necessarily agree, either on professional (e.g. being trained as a social worker) or on personal grounds (e.g. as a parent wanting the best for one's children). In this article, I explored the conditions under which these structural tensions manifest themselves in the experiences of SLBs, by drawing on the particular case of migration workers assisting immigrants to return voluntarily. The preceding analyses suggest that ambivalences are pre-empted by the particular configurations of a wide range of elements within specific spheres. These configurations include the *definition of a situation* (e.g. a 'return conversation' in which the modalities of AVR are discussed) and of *the subjects and the objects involved* (e.g. 'return coaches', 'undocumented immigrants' and their 'papers') (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). Besides prescribing particular types of actions or perspectives, these definitions lead actors to rely on *specific knowledges and skills* (e.g. convincing subjects to return, or relying on knowledge of the country of return), *emotional labour* and *personal criteria* to judge the justness of their actions.

In the case of humanitarian professionals, their specific type of expertise was detached from the legal-political structures producing these subjects. This was realised through three mechanisms: a) the '*rationalisation*' of the subjects they encountered, who were considered as informed individuals having weighed up the advantages and disadvantages of voluntary return; b) particular types of *expertise*, ranging from identifying factors enabling durable return to presenting country-specific information; and c) the *temporal-spatial insulation* of return coaches' offices from returnees' daily lives, as well as the latter's encounters with the government agencies convincing them to return. In the case of professionals enacting the sovereign sphere, furthermore, ambivalences were neutralised by a) subscribing to the *reality* and *inevitability* of sovereign power and, paradoxically, relocating agency to potential returnees; b) relying on *personal criteria of justice*, rooted in a concern for children's well-being; and c) reverting to an informed scepticism that built on *previous professional experiences* of deceit and institutional truth-making.

What these two spheres have in common, then, is the 'immunising' function they exert for SLBs, protecting the latter from the ambivalences that may emerge through the presence of elements that are external to the sphere in which they operate – whether these elements consist of defining situations, subjects or objects in a particular way, or of prescribing relevant knowledges, emotional labour or moral criteria. In other words, by organising these elements into recurring spheres, these 'pivotal intellectuals' (Feldman 2013) and 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky 1980) are thus prevented from individually experiencing these dilemmas. From a more general sociological perspective, examining in close detail how these spheres work opens up a path of inquiries into how individuals create a particular type of 'ontological security' from within a position where a myriad of seemingly contradictory evaluation criteria, feeling rules and knowledges are instantly available. In this sense, exploring how migration workers are pre-emptively protected from contingency, may actually provide us with broader insights into how individual actors deal with the ubiquity of contingency in globalised life-worlds. To dismantle the threat of ambivalence and ambiguity, in other words, actors are engaged in ceaseless efforts to immunise themselves from external rationales, precisely by re-arranging discrete social situations into social spheres, in which their actions, reflections and experiences continue to make sense.

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Biography

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