

# THE SHOPPING CENTER OF ABNORMAL NORMALITY: ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE DISTRIBUTION TENT IN THE REFUGEE CAMP IN SLAVONSKI BROD<sup>1</sup>

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In a critical anthropological approach, a refugee camp is seen as a space of "humanitarian government" (Agier 2011), where it is primarily humanitarian organizations, social services and police that cooperate, whereas refugees are a "disquieting element" (Agamben 1998), non-subjects whose free will, freedom of movement, speech and expression of their personality is reduced to a minimum. As ethnographers and volunteers, we saw the transit camp in Slavonski Brod as an *assemblage* (Ramadan 2012) of space, time, practices and relationships that took place there, and whose dynamics was determined by legally unclear procedures of "triage" of refugees/migrants. The analysis focuses on the distribution tent which, despite being monitored, turned out to be the only place of "freedom" in the sense of conversational interaction and time and space management, both for refugees and volunteers. The predominant activity in the distribution tent was donating clothing and shoes to the refugees, which made us ethnologically rethink clothes as a cultural artefact and the non-verbal language which the refugees used to negotiate their identity and symbolically express their past, present and future. In addition to a description of abnormal normality of the distribution "bazaar" or "shopping center" as a globally recognizable *genius loci*, we also present autoethnographic reflections about the cultural, moral and emotional effects of unexpected meetings-events with the "ungraspable face of the other" (Lévinas 1991), which questions our existential and historical experience.

Keywords: fear of immigrants, humanitarian government, abnormal normality of the camp, the camp as an *assemblage*, anthropologist as a volunteer, semiosis of clothing

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## CAMP: GENERAL AND SPECIFIC, GLOBAL AND LOCAL

The aim of this paper is to analyze the dual experience of volunteering and ethnographic observation in the Winter Reception and Transit Camp in Slavonski Brod<sup>2</sup> in January and February 2016, and transform it into anthropological categories at the meeting point of refugee studies, autoethnography, anthropology of place and space and commodity. Although it may seem that autoethnographic reflection on multiplying positions of volunteers and their participatory and observatory perspectives would be most productive in this research situation (which is new to us, although not completely),<sup>3</sup> autoethnography will only be part of our scholarly interest. The paper focuses on several premises about the general and specific characteristics of the Slavonski Brod transit camp, more specifically its distribution tent, which we will try to illustrate and explain. Following in the footsteps of authors offering a critical anthropological reflection of the role of refugee camps in the political order, and of types of social, cultural and political life in them – such as Elizabeth Colson (2003), Michel Agier (2011), Adam Ramadan (2012), Simon Turner (2015) and others – we too will attempt to point at the specific characteristics of the Slavonski Brod camp, keeping in mind three regimes – the spatial, the temporal and the political.

The Slavonski Brod transit camp, like many other refugee camps, functioned as a distinct space of “humanitarian government” (Agier 2011), with main activities being carried out cooperatively between international and local humanitarian organizations, social services and the police, with logistical support of the army; whereas the refugees represented a “disquieting element” (Agamben 1998: 77), human beings whose free will, freedom of movement and speech and expression of their personality was reduced to a minimum. The particularity of this camp was the result of its function of “channeling”, “profiling”, transferring and “servicing” people on their way to their final destination, rather

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<sup>2</sup> For reasons of space and different official naming of the camp, we will use the term the Slavonski Brod camp or the refugee camp in Slavonski Brod. The camp was open on 3 November 2015, and was officially closed on 15 April 2016, several days after the last refugees were moved from it. As volunteers of the Centar za mirovne studije (Center for Peace Studies, CPS) and the Inicijativa Dobrodošli (“Welcome” Refugee Support Initiative), we stayed in the camp on three occasions: from 18 to 22 January, from 5 to 7 February and from 11 to 14 February 2016. Most of our volunteer work took place in the distribution tent and around it. Even when we were given police passes to do research in the camp, we decided to keep our volunteer passes and continue taking part in the distribution of clothing and footwear, because we considered a “purely” observation-research position among the people who needed our help then and there unethical. Still, although the organizations that we volunteered for considered volunteering to exclude independent, public, journalistic, research or similar activity, they were acquainted with our dual volunteer and research position from the very beginning.

<sup>3</sup> Both co-authors worked as researchers during the war in Croatia (1991–1995). Within the scope of war ethnography at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, both authors visited temporary shelters to talk to refugees and collect open-structured interviews about the war and their refugee experience, and in the period after the war both were involved in women’s nongovernmental organizations and in feminist activities aiming at (intercultural and inter-ethnic) understanding, acceptance, empowerment and integration of women victims of war (and domestic) violence. The result of this ethnography of the war and refugees were the following publications: Škrabalo and Trkulja (1992), Škokić (2000), Jambrešić (1995), Jambrešić Kirin and Povzanović (1996), Jambrešić Kirin (1999).

than caring for or housing them.<sup>4</sup> That is why the constant shifts from an empty to a full camp, anticipation of trains' arrival and seeing them leave, and the uncertain fate of those who were not allowed to continue their journey, created an experience of a fluctuating *assemblage* of space, time, relations and practices of diverse actors and institutions in the camp (Ramadan 2012: 70–72). Paradoxically, in the camp, it was the refugees who had a defined (although uncertain) goal of their journey and life plans, whereas the local workers in the camp were anxious about the precariousness of their job, and about the camp being moved or closed down. As we were told during a cigarette break by one of the women employed in public works, when “surplus workers” from the camp were made redundant, the management did not do it humanely or transparently, but would “dismiss people at random, according to their eye color”.<sup>5</sup>

The distribution tent was the central place of humanitarian distribution of clothes and footwear to refugees in the camp, where the impression of a *bazaar* creates an illusion of “abnormal normality” of the refugee everyday life. It has been selected for analysis because people in it would linger for longer periods of time and communicate more frequently, since they managed their time and space more freely, and because the humanitarian principle of satisfying one's most basic needs and the principle of distributive justice (the *per capita criterion*)<sup>6</sup> was replaced here with a practice of (limited) free choice.

Our interpretation is largely a consequence of a “thick description” of the experience of volunteering in the distribution tent and our mixed feelings about the speed of supplying people with what they need in between two trains, as well as the conflicting requirements of volunteering and critically reflecting on the practice in a wider sociopolitical context. This paper is based on an anthropological reading of the camp reality, which encompasses at

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<sup>4</sup> However, the volunteers of the Croatian Red Cross (CRC) and some twenty other humanitarian organizations, as well as the doctors in the camp, stressed their endeavors to make the camp a “warm place” of refugee reception, where they would be able to satisfy their own basic existential needs, but also feel the empathy and caring of those helping them. Some volunteers were able to achieve high-quality human contact, as seen from the fact that they kept in touch with the refugees over social networks as long as a year after giving them aid (as seen in the testimony of CRC volunteers in Olja Terzić's documentary *Strah od nepoznatog* [Fear of the unknown]).

<sup>5</sup> A newspaper article about the closure of the camp states that CRC volunteers and people working in public works were sad to see the last “bus with the needy” leave, as they were people to whom they grew close in the nearly 50 days that the camp was open, and given that the remuneration for working for the CRC or in public works, although small, was often “the only income in the family”. The author of the article stresses that the camp brought about the internationalization of the town and an improvement in its economic situation: “Companies and people from the Slavonski Brod area also worked in the construction of the Slavonski Brod transit center. The refugee crisis, as it seems now, was also an indirect way to help the stumbling economy of Slavonski Brod, because, given the overnight stays of numerous journal crews, restaurants had a higher turnover, and the shops sold more” (Radošević 2016).

<sup>6</sup> The idea of fair distribution, theoretically giving everyone equal opportunities of survival, regardless of the health status, age, gender and education of the refugees, is based on the *per capita* criterion of distribution of humanitarian aid. However, anthropologists caution that fairness is a subjective category, dependent on personal moral concepts and the power asymmetry between recipients and givers. As humanitarian aid is, in the long-term, always insufficient to satisfy the needs of the people who are not self-sufficient, the person deciding who deserves a meal, a medicine or shoes (the *gift*) has great power of decision which is “highly seductive and brings out the best or the worst in us” (Harrell-Bond as cited in Bonis 2016).

least two registers (Ramadan 2012) – the external, macrostructural one, which is political and juridical, mediated by the media and social networks, and the internal, microstructural one where we, alongside other actors, facilitated the efficiency of the camp, measured by the number of trains which came and left, i.e. the number of men, women and children who passed through this transit station in the shortest time possible.<sup>7</sup> As the scope of information and insights about the external register increases and becomes more complex (cf. Hameršak and Pleše 2017), and as our own experience becomes more porous, partially recorded in our memory, and in part in our fieldnotes, photographs, mailboxes and other collected materials, the need for their anthropological examination grows. An analysis of surveillance and control, as well as of distancing from and labeling the other, which appears in both registers (Colson 2003: 1), is less challenging than a description of practices that, based on the need for mutual relationships and understanding, developed in direct contact with the other. We can only roughly describe these practices as processes of intercultural negotiation of needs, fears and expectations of people with limited agency. This is because our work has been inspired by the ethical and scholarly imperative to describe and explain our participation in a “humanitarian bazaar” which aspires to make the distribution tent into a place of supply, refreshment and meeting those “redundant people” (Bauman 2015)<sup>8</sup> who – more than food or clothes – need acceptance, human contact and recognition. We did not collect or interpret refugees’ narratives, not only because of the language barrier and working in shifts in the distribution tent, but because we realized that being faced with numerous testimonies of recent trauma would jeopardize the “humanitarian transfer” and destroy the spatio-temporal framework in which it took place.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to most refugee camps, some of which we are familiar with from the period of the 1990s war in Croatia, the adapted classification yard<sup>10</sup> in Slavonski Brod was a well-organized transit station for triage of the refugee “human contingent”; also signifying

<sup>7</sup> The data concerning the number of refugees and their characteristics vary, depending on the source. According to the data presented in Olja Terzić’s documentary *Strah od nepoznatog* [Fear of the Unknown], there were 175,008 men, 75,669 women and 96,475 children, out of which six children were born in the Slavonski Brod hospital.

<sup>8</sup> “Massive migration is by no means a novel phenomenon [...] – as our ‘modern way of life’ it includes the production of ‘redundant people’ (*locally* ‘inutile’ – excessive and unemployable – owing to economic progress, or *locally* intolerable – rejected in the effect of unrest, conflicts and strife caused by social/political transformations and subsequent power struggles)” (Bauman 2015). See also the argumentation about “dispensable and bare lives” Mignolo (2009).

<sup>9</sup> We can say that our volunteering relied on, on the one hand, the experiences of war ethnography from the 1990s, and on the other, on the activist counter-discourses which do not recognize the distinction between “legal” and “illegal migrants”, and their militarized and bureaucratized reception with controlled policies of “integration”, but promote a concept of *autonomy of migration*: “‘Autonomy of migration’ focuses on the migrating subjects and the projects in their life, constituted and articulated in their trans-border mobility and in the social fights during this mobility” (Marvakis 2012: 70).

<sup>10</sup> It is a historical sarcasm that an abandoned classification yard (Croatian: *ranžirni kolodvor*) (once intended to “make up trains and shunt them”) should in a postindustrial “humanitarian business” turn into a place of “classification” and “triaging” immigrants into those who are not entitled to continue their (train) journey as asylum and work permit seekers. The etymology of the Croatian expression *ranžiranje* ‘switching [in railway operation]’ comes from German and French *Rang* – 1. rank, class; 2. relative rank in a group; 3. position and status in a society; 4. position in a hierarchy. The expression triage comes from French

the last point of the transition of Slavonski Brod from an industrial into a post-industrial urban center. From a socialist industrial center with full employment, through the ravages of war and the (post)war base of KBR (Kellogg Brown & Root), an American outsourcing company for logistical support of NATO operations, Slavonski Brod has come to realize that someone else's misfortune is a (business) opportunity for transnational corporations and humanitarian agencies. In addition to Ireland as the "promised land" for new Slavonian migrants of both sexes, in their comments on social networks, unemployed young men on both sides of the Sava River recommend risky jobs (drivers, technicians, and the like) in war zones and NATO bases, as the quickest way to make money and economic empowerment. In our informal conversations with Slavonski Brod inhabitants, we could gather that some individuals feel particular empathy for war victims from the Middle East, recognizing their own war scars in them, as well as that many people consider the camp in their hometown a proof of passivity, hopelessness and lack of concern for the local population, forced to emigrate for economic reasons. This example is yet another proof that the process of humanitarian "exceptional inclusion" of refugees and migrants into the European social and economic system is achieved by temporarily including the "socially excluded", long-term unemployed people in public works and humanitarian projects that can be considered a part of the "humanitarian business" (cf. Weiss 2013).<sup>11</sup> In this way, the general precarity and uncertainty of the lives of those who serve the camp and those for whom the camp exists becomes the epitome of the neoliberal condition that some theoreticians consider a "decompression space" for the undesirable members of the society (Mezzadra as cited in Tsianos et al. 2009: 8), a space of "social dissolution" (Turner 2015: 139) and a place where new forms of "depoliticized life" are created, which, paradoxically, "also produces a hyper-politicized space where nothing is taken for granted and everything is contested" (ibid.).

## DISTRIBUTION OF THINGS, WORDS AND EMOTIONS

Rather than using the toolkit of refugee and security studies that appropriate and build on the Agambenian concept of the "state of exception" – the humanitarian exemption from the legal and political order – it seems to us to be more purposeful to return to Foucault's dichotomy of normal and abnormal in order to take stock of the microstructure of the Slavonski Brod camp. According to Foucault (1975), abnormal could be interpreted as a "departure" from a behavioral norm, with institutional practices of surveillance and

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*triage* – 1. screening of piece or grainy goods, 2. classification of patients according to type and emergency of medical assistance required.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas G. Weiss (2013) showed that "humanitarian business" is a constituent part of contemporary neoliberal economy, with around 37,000 international organizations. Contemporary political economy places the agencies and organizations that provide various types of assistance side by side with for-profit industry, including private military and security companies, as well as illegal arms and opiates market. Moreover, warring parties condition and charge access to victims of war in different way, so it seems that everything has a price – from access to moral authority and human life.

discipline being used to attempt to “restore to the state of order”. In this definition of the dichotomy, the refugees are those who “departed” from the norm and normality. They were “evacuated” from their own sociopolitical and cultural pre-life, and, based on procedures of hierarchized surveillance through camp architecture and police control in conjunction with humanitarian help, they were being “restored” to order, norm and normality. In the case of humanitarian government and monitoring of the Slavonski Brod refugee camp, the hierarchized surveillance was additionally laden with the suspension of international and national law (for instance the right of all refugees to asylum or the rights of unaccompanied minors), changes in administrative norms and *ad hoc* agreements between political subjects of the neighboring countries. The normal and abnormal of the camp everyday life changed under the not always clear and rational dictate of sovereign actors, based on volunteer practices that gradually formalized “informal” procedures or identified the degrading effect of “normalizing” humanitarian procedures, and because of continual expectation of the unexpected and of incidents.<sup>12</sup> The imagined normative order in the Slavonski Brod transit camp collapsed as soon as people entered it, as soon as it became a living space where existing informal practices would be tried out and new ones created, where new communicative situations would appear, where the knowledge acquired “along the way” would be enriched, and where new interpersonal relations in direct face-to-face contact would be established.<sup>13</sup> People who brought *disorder* into the camp, and especially those who managed to avoid the camp in their transit through Croatia, validated the statement that migration is an autonomous movement “that possesses knowledge, follows its own rules, and collectively organizes its own praxis” (Boutand as cited in Tsianos et al. 2009: 3); they confirmed how “normal they were in an abnormal situation”, and that abnormality and unexpectedness were becoming permanent characteristics of their refugee experience.

Our ethnographic study starts from debates about normality and abnormality, formal and informal procedures in the camp and develops through the reflection of our work as volunteers of the *Centar za mirovne studije* (Center for Peace Studies) and the *Inicijativa Dobrodošli* (“Welcome” Refugee Support Initiative). At the time of our research and volunteering in January and February 2016, the refugees did not stay in the transit camp for long, but walked along a circular route, which started with exiting one train and ended in entering another, going through three stations or points along the way: the registration tent, the distribution tent and the limited space where they could take packages of dry

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<sup>12</sup> Both the creators of the camp and the volunteers generally stated that it represents a positive exception, a humane and civilizational step forward, the only organized station on the uncertain Balkan route. However, the very moment that stories from Germany and Austria about the borders closing soon came, the Croatian government and its crisis unit changed their rhetoric, and rather than emphasizing humanity, they stressed the temporary nature of the camp: “This is not nor will it become a hotspot, it is just a temporary refuge” (Konjikušić and Dragojević 2015).

<sup>13</sup> According to Lévinas (1991), only this type of direct “proximity of the other” causes an ethical response and invokes the ethical principle of responsibility for the other, which is an attempt to overcome any violence, death and nothingness, and shows the value of the other.

food and water without stopping. The average time spent at the camp was four hours, and the trains no longer followed the “well-established rhythm” of four to five trains in a twenty-four hour period. During their unvarying circular route monitored by the police, disturbed only by visits to the doctor or to the nursing tents and family reunion tents, the distribution tent offered a spacious heated place where the refugees could move about more freely and linger. This was a place with seemingly less control and surveillance in relation to standing in lines enclosed by security fences, and with police interrogations. The main purpose of the distribution tent was to donate used or new clothing and footwear, blankets, hygienic packages for women, basic packages for small children and to serve hot tea. One corner of the tent had an enclosed space devoted to family reconnection, with printed photographs of missing or lost family members or friends, as well as a desk where one could seek asylum in Croatia, where we had never seen anyone sitting. Given that the distribution tent was a place that all registered travelers from the train had to pass through, it abounded in examples of direct face to face communication, and was an exceptional micro-location for the analysis of actors, practices and interactions in the camp.

Given De Certeau's (1984) claim that *place* is a current order where rather fixed elements and positions coexist, and *space* is “composed of intersections of mobile elements” where mobile bodies intersect in constantly new relationships, the distribution tent can be theorized as a “space [that] is a practiced place” (1984: 117). Although it was planned as a place where refugees would be given donations through a fence and would go through quickly, it became a place of various multidirectional communications, narratives and emotions, and of serious human drama. Every single day, starting anew during every shift, cooperation between volunteers from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the Croatian Red Cross (CRC) would be established here, including negotiations and consultations as to which clothing items were lacking, who was allowed to visit whose part of the tent and give out whose donation, as to the (lack of) compliance with the rules agreed upon in the morning briefings between the coordinators and leaders of NGOs and the CRC, as to how amicable and helpful one should be towards the refugees. We recorded some of our experiences and reflections in our fieldnotes, which we use in the text as an autoethnographic contribution to the practice of thick description.

The camp is excellently organized, although my first impression is of a concentration camp. The distribution tent, where clothes and other supplies are distributed, is where most of the NGOs are stationed. The tent has a very unpleasant smell of moisture and musty clothing,<sup>14</sup> but you get used to it quickly. The space is cold, although it is heated

<sup>14</sup> In her study of humanitarian aid as “an aspect of global moral and political order that affected local sociocultural orders”, and determined the identity, attitudes and values of the recipients in the long-term, Maja Povržanović Frykman (2016) cites a statement of a Sarajevo resident about the feeling of nausea caused by the odor of donated clothes from a Red Cross warehouse: “I still have memories of stinking clothes at the Red Cross... Well, that part, of the clothes that were arriving – with the best intention of those people who were giving away second-hand clothes – for me, that smell, I still seem to have it in my nose [she laughs tensely]. The mountains of clothes that I rummaged through in order to find something suitable for my children [...]. it was very humiliating” (2016: 91). On the other hand, individuals who grew up

with warm air, but I got warm from working very quickly. Still, I felt that my hands were constantly freezing. [...] The CRC, by arrangement with the other NGOs, has 12 people distributing clothes in a single shift, but there were situations when there were more of us, which unnerved the people from the CRC. They considered the tent to be primarily theirs, and thought that we were “pushing them out”. They were angry that we were giving too much attention to the refugees, satisfying their wishes as to the type, design and number of clothing items. There is considerable tension between the German organization IHA which is running the NGO warehouse, and the CRC. It is odd that no one at the CRC is doing any selection of clothing being shipped to the tent, and we get packed boxes that contain Bermuda shorts, windbreakers and other inappropriate clothing. Over the last two days there have been fewer volunteers handing out clothes, and it is really easier to work like this and pass through the narrow passage, and the volunteers are actually cooperating excellently, and helping each other. NGO volunteers are generally younger, whereas there are people of different ages at the CRC. There is a gender diversity, with only slightly more women. Part of the volunteers visit with the refugees in the tent or in front of it, talk to them, help them, etc. Impressive because of their enthusiasm and communication skills were an Iranian man, Puja, who graduated from college and then worked in a bank in Dubai and is now, after he quit his job, traveling and volunteering, as well as Alice, a Canadian woman following the refugee route and volunteering from camp to camp. Both are independent volunteers, and were registered in Slavonski Brod as HSUST. Other volunteers include UNHCR, Rode, Adventists, Samaritans, IHA, CMS, Care, Caritas, Slavonski Brod Volunteer Center, doctors from Slovakian Magna, Save the Children... (Fieldnotes, 18–22 January 2016, Tea)

The space at the entry and exit from the distribution tent was frequently the only place where communication between volunteers and the police was possible, where volunteers could get various pieces of information about the movement of the refugees, about the time of arrival of the next train, about the number of children who were registered that day, etc. These were spontaneous conversations over a cigarette, where episodes from private lives would be exchanged, and where people would make joint assessments as to “how long this will last” and “who these people are”. In our conversations with the other volunteers and the police, we frequently witnessed informal but culturally significant ethnical triage from below, where the refugees were assessed according to the subjectively defined notions of urbanity and civilizedness, knowledge of English, civility, gratitude, etc. These first-hand impressions and judgments would frequently be repeated as stereotypes in conversations with the people of Slavonski Brod, and with many others that we had a chance to talk to. The process of transformation of impressions into stereotypes is particularly interesting in the following statement of a riot policeman who worked as train escort:

For instance, the Syrians, I like them the most. I mean, they have had most problems. Sometimes I talk to them on the train. Someone might tell you, for instance, that he studied at a university, someone might show you a picture of a house at the coast,

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during the war in the 1990s “tend to talk about the excitement and joy of getting sweets, toys or a pair of secondhand jeans that were ‘just perfect’ and so dear that it was ‘impossible’ to throw them away after the war” (2016: 96).

someone's Mom was left behind, or sister or brother, or loved one. And he shows destroyed streets, his university is destroyed. That's why I like them the most and I like talking to them. But these Afghans, Iranians, they are not much, not much for talking, you cannot communicate with them because they are reserved, they just keep quiet.

Finally, the distribution tent was also a space of communication between volunteers and refugees about where they came from and where they were going, whether they were sick, what clothes and footwear they needed, if they wanted to change their child's diaper. The communication was verbal and non-verbal, more or less focused on a particular problem or request; it depended on how well-equipped people on a certain train were, on the time of day or night, weather conditions, the mood, tiredness and character of those involved in it. The distribution tent also turned out to be the space of our frustration and anger over a lack of clothes of appropriate size, a chronic lack of footwear, unclear criteria as to how many of the needed items would be brought from the warehouse, because of summer clothing in January and February, torn clothes and footwear to be handed out, muddy and mismatched footwear, clothing that was moist and had a musty smell, because of the fact that you did not have the answer to most requests and questions, because of the inability to understand Arabic, Pashtu or Farsi, because police was entering the tent and shouting *jala, jala* (faster, faster), and the train would still be at the platform for another two good hours:

The clothes that the CRC is bringing is in a bad condition, old shoes are often torn and unusable, and caked with mud. Some clothes are torn and dirty, while others are inadequate because they are summer clothes. (Fieldnotes, 18–22 January 2016, Tea)

A man hands me back a synthetic blanket that he got in a previous country, thanks me and says he does not need it; an elderly woman complains about her new German shoes that she got in Macedonia, they are stiff, uncomfortable and cold, she wants to exchange them for used but more comfortable shoes, and we follow the instruction to give such shoes away sparingly, and to keep them as a "treasure" to be given only to those who are "most in need". (Fieldnotes, 18–22 January 2016, Renata)

The awareness of cultural conditioning of certain clothing practices and habits was most evident in the choice of – in our opinion – clothes that were too small or inadequate for the winter conditions. We would share our frustration with the other volunteers because the refugees did not want to take warm clothing that we offered them, frequently because of an imperative, which was not understandable to us, to have clothing items *small* and *tight*, if possible *jeans* and *pyjama* (tracksuit). One attempt to rationalize this frustration was offered by a coordinator of a Croatian NGO, who was employed at the camp from the beginning as part of public works:

The reason why we are missing things is because the crisis is now four and a half or four months long. In my personal opinion over 60 percent of the people are men, and Arabs are in my opinion also smaller than us. So that after four and a half months it is difficult to get donations from other people... Now these larger NGOs, they probably have the funds for this and they can buy them, but you should see that this is now really very long. So now it is no longer so simple to get so many small or medium trousers

or shoes sizes 40 to 44. On the other hand, similarly, this whole thing about the lack of clothes, this is partly a result of the fact that we, as non-governmental organizations which had no experience in working with refugees or distributing humanitarian aid or volunteers in general who came here because of pure enthusiasm, in my opinion and experience come here wearing rose-colored spectacles, as they say. Where it is believed that anyone asking for clothes needs it. So, we were completely uneducated as to the fact that you should check someone what he..., he asks you to give him shoes, and his shoes are completely okay. This is why many things are thrown away, for instance by the refugees. Why they ask for these things, I cannot say. On the other hand, as far as I have heard, but I haven't checked it, there is a cultural difference, where in their world if something is being given, you are required to accept it. So that people were given things that they do not really need, so that this lack of clothes... is a very complex thing, right.

We felt particular discomfort over the prohibition of distributing clothing and footwear to domicile people employed in public works, who frequently came to the camp wearing clothing that was completely inadequate for the winter conditions. Because of alleged theft of goods from the camp was cleaned by the volunteers in the night shift. The absurdity of the “humanitarian regime” where the poor domestic people are not entitled to aid, and not even necessary work clothes, and they simultaneously see pieces of clothing and food being thrown away. Their discomfort could hardly be alleviated by us telling them to talk to the local Red Cross, or by our explanation that by exchanging clothes the refugees are maintaining their hygiene and that they are throwing away shoes because they cannot afford to wear uncomfortable shoes, no matter how new they are. Finding ourselves in a position of “cultural translators” of refugee needs and practices we contributed to yet another absurdity that can be added to the concept of “humanitarian exception” (Petrović 2016) not only of the refugees but also of the socially vulnerable residents of Slavonski Brod.

However, the distribution tent was also a place of satisfaction, fulfillment and even joy, when we would, after sifting through half-empty shelves, find an appropriate piece of clothing with an exchange of smiles and thumbs up. As noticed by Duško Petrović in his description of the interactions in the distribution tent of the Slavonski Brod camp, we approached the infinite line of anonymous faces and unknown individual destinies “in the same way, and with friendliness”. We were sharing similar “emotion that you feel towards an ‘innocent’ life that is suffering, and the satisfaction at the possible release from suffering after providing aid. This fact shows that compassion can be generated from a violent reduction of personality” (Petrović 2016: 409). On the other hand, we are more inclined to embrace the premise expressed by Lévinas (1991) that the closeness of the face of another human being necessarily puts us in an ethical relationship with the other.<sup>15</sup> This ethical relation can have an advantage over knowledge and cultural or ideological

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<sup>15</sup> “The face resists possession, resists my powers. In its epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp. [...] The face, still a thing among things, breaks through the form that nevertheless delimits it. This means concretely: the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be it enjoyment or knowledge” (Lévinas 1991: 197–198).

judgments, and is manifested through “expression” and “sensible appearance” of the Other’s face (1991: 198), even if this face is “at the limit of holiness and caricature” (ibid). One example of the coexistence of these opposites in non-verbal communication was provided to us by a father of a family who, satisfied with what he was given, as a sign of gratitude, lined up his daughters, and looking us in the eye, gestured with his arm to show what/who the driving force of his life choices was. Anthropologically speaking, Lévinas (1991) points out that the face of the other, especially in existentially borderline situations, has the power to tear down established and conventional forms of interpersonal relations, and that the infinity contained in the wealth of human phenomena makes the foundation of the search for the transcendental in all human societies.

## BETWEEN HUMANITARIAN AND CONSUMERIST DYNAMIC

Surrounded by feelings of grief, tiredness, sorrow and pain at being in exile, at the death of friends or family members, and at the separation of families, the distribution tent would sometimes turn into a refuge and a place of rest, where families would gather on the floor waiting for a family member to choose footwear or clothing. This was a chance to hold their child, happy because of a toy or a sweet that they were given, to take their bag to the train, to bring them an extra backpack, to give them another pair of socks or gloves, to convince them to go to “Roda’s tent”.<sup>16</sup> In the liminal temporariness of the camp, in a dry and heated space of the tent, it was more about “regulation of time” than “regulation of space”, because its visitors could, at least to some extent, decide for themselves how long they would stay, and how they would move about the tent. This was a way to establish provisional normality, and the distribution tent could be imagined and experienced as a rudimentary bazaar<sup>17</sup> or a shopping center, where situations from everyday urban life are being repeated, where one talks about trivial things like one’s taste in fashion, where people flock to bargain over good shoes or high-quality blankets, where there is lively communication on both sides of the stand, intimate body touch, which is not procedural or

<sup>16</sup> RODA: *Roditelji u akciji* [Parents in action] is a non-governmental organization advocating dignified pregnancy, responsible parenting and safe childhood in Croatia (for details see <http://www.roda.hr/>). Breast-feeding counselors and volunteers from RODA were active in the Opatovac camp, where the refugees arrived first, and upon opening the Slavonski Brod camp, in cooperation with UNICEF, they developed a model of 24-hour support for breastfeeding, and provided support for mothers with small children. The tent of the organization was located next to the distribution tent, and there was a separate fence around it. Mothers with small children who needed to be breastfed or whose diapers needed to be changed, who needed clean clothes and medication were “triaged” by the volunteers as soon as they arrived in the distribution tent. Often, women would use their time in the RODA tent as a time to rest, despite the impatient family who had to wait in front, or crowded in the small vestibule of the tent.

<sup>17</sup> It is important to mention that it was migrants from the former Soviet Union and the Far East (China, Vietnam, Pakistan, India etc.) who were the main creators of popular open markets in Central Europe (the SAPA market in Prague, bazaars in Warsaw, the Dong Xuan market in Berlin), which are well known socioeconomic forms that oppose the new shopping centers and enable “people with fluid social statuses and complicated identities [to] navigate the global challenge of living lives in changing political systems and uncertain economic conditions” (Uherek 2015: 76).

related to surveillance. The distribution tent contained elements of the familiar – getting into the familiar characters of buyers and sellers, into the dynamics of a shop where you choose, refuse, and always expect something different. However, the refugees could not move about the boxes and shelves freely, mostly second-hand clothes were on offer, and trying on clothes was reduced to an improvised and rarely used fitting room. This was certainly not a consumerist spectacle typical of shopping centers, but the distribution tent with stalls of several humanitarian organizations, did to some extent follow the rules “of contiguity and association at work to assist you to make a selection” that Meaghan Morris used to describe the movement and activity in a shopping center (1999: 393). Although a comparison of consumption practices with practices of selecting donated clothes in a limited space where the expression of one’s personality (both of the refugees and the volunteers) was reduced to a minimum may seem ethically inappropriate, our experience provides us with sources for this kind of interpretation. We interpret refugees who keep showing us (an imaginary or a real) object of their desire in a pile of donated clothes as those who are not passive recipients/receivers of aid devoid of will, taste or wishes of their own. Many of them were, until not very long ago, inhabitants of cities with a long tradition of trading and cultural negotiation, adopting and combining what is best from the cultures of the East and the West.

During our three successive stays at the camp, the tract where we volunteered kept changing, resembling a shop more and more. Starting with piles of boxes overflowing with clothes, through new shelving to shop-like hangers, the space made us think more and more of a shopping center adapting to the needs of its users and servers, and people’s search for a specific article was becoming more profiled.



18 – 21 January 2016



5 – 7 February 2016



11 – 14 February 2016 (Photo: Tea Škokić)

The appearance of our “shopping center” has changed, new shelving and hangers came, the clothes are more neatly arranged, the articles are labeled, and the “menu” of clothing is neatly printed out in the form of a picture dictionary. But the arrangement of things is new and unfamiliar to us, so we can no longer find things as quickly as before. UNHCR has clearly separated its part and forbidden access to the things that they were distributing (the volunteers of the CRC work there). IHA volunteers have become sparse, and most things donated by the IHA (new shoes and jackets) are now “managed” by UNHCR and the Red Cross... Some things such as gloves, socks and blankets are now displayed in front of the fence (but with a clear UNHCR label), and people can take what they need themselves, although this, on the other hand,

prevents them from coming closer to the fence with volunteers and asking directly what they need, sometimes openly and “teasingly” (tight jeans), and sometimes shyly and with lot of discomfort – when they ask for underwear. (Fieldnotes, 5 February 2016, Renata)

On the whole, the transit camp could hardly become a residence and a place of “preparation for a new life”, a place of imagining a new existence and a place where, through “textile forms” (North 2016: 95), we reshape our personality, where true relationships within the camp community or the camp and the local community are created. However, the distribution tent did enable the recognition of at least fragments of refugees’ projection of their own life, through clothing and the non-verbal language that the actors used to renew and negotiate their identity and symbolically relate their past, present and future. This was “commodity semiosis”, when clothes turned into signs, and signs into clothes (Morris 1999: 406), as “dress communicates identity and dress practices reflect agentic processes that are situated within the flow of time” (Huisman and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2004: 2).<sup>18</sup> The sense of style which is always “a way of being in the present, a way of explaining visually to yourself, via the past (or many pasts) what the present is” (North 2016: 101), was also part of the “fashion taste” of the refugees, that partly conveyed their gender, ethnicity, religion, age or class. Thus, older women mainly refused light colors and tight models and asked for comfortable tracksuits, whereas girls and young women, in contrast, looked for tights and tight jeans, sports jackets and sports footwear.

<sup>18</sup> In their research of clothing practices of Bosnian refugees in the American town of Burlington, Vermont, Huisman and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2005) concluded that “refugee women oriented toward the present” when using their traditional dress in America “to teach others about their Bosnian identities and origins”, but that they “oriented towards the future” when preparing to return to Bosnia for a visit (cf. 2005: 58, 61).

I experienced several cases when young, intelligent and amiable people, who did not know whether to take a comfortable warm jacket or not, and who looked well-dressed and dressed with “style” (the young man had a ponytail and a tubular mini scarf around his neck and a relaxed style of communication, the girl had a black scarf which covered her hair and a small black fur coat) took note of my compliment about their new look, which was what made them decide to take the sports jackets, just like in a real shop. Just like others, I use the argument that the fact that the jacket is of slightly larger in size is only an advantage because they can wear layered clothing underneath, and that the weather in Slovenia and Austria is much colder; usually this type of persuasion does not work, what is more important is the compliment about looking good (“it fits you very well!”). We have a chronic lack of underwear for both sexes, people ask for it slightly reluctantly, men show the edge of their undershirt, women the line of their bra... A cultural puzzle was caused by a reaction of an older man who used a bottle to pour water on his feet wearing socks, and then put on his shoes over his wet socks, this was certainly not washing one’s feet wearing socks, cold weather and lack of comfort is an unsatisfactory explanation, perhaps he had blisters because of his new or uncomfortable shoes; on another occasion Tea was told by a man that he did not want to take off his shoes in front of the ramp and try on new ones because his feet smelled bad, he did not want to “hurt” her. (Fieldnotes, 5 February 2016, Renata)

Clothes as the most visible material part of politics of “cultural transgression” and cultural “amalgamation” from the very first meetings of the East and the West, was also evidence of the eclectic imagining of oneself in the future, of the capacity of imitating styles that the refugees supposed would best represent them in their new environment. Whereas men, especially young men, did not use clothes to mark their social status, ethnicity or religion, intercultural imagining was particularly visible in women’s choice of clothing, in their wish to harmonize their clothing practices with “past habits, future possibilities, and emergent events” (cf. Huisman and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2004: 20). If, as Morris claims, the shopping center is “a mirror to utopian desire” (1999: 397), then the distribution tent was at least a shard of that mirror, a reflection of the desire to find a happier home in an imaginary culture of plenty.

## CONCLUSION

Today, several months later, we can equally talk about our frustration because of the political solution for the “refugee crisis”, as well as about our concerns and doubts about inadequately interpreting textile and (con)textual signs that pointed to “unequal power relations and other ‘dangerous’ subjects” (Bourgois 1990: 43). Not to mention the not necessarily conscious, but deeply lived shame over the fact that we are citizens of a country that even superficially informed refugees considered a highly undesirable destination.<sup>19</sup> From

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<sup>19</sup> Refugees as citizens “rating with their feet”, do not see Croatia or the other Balkan countries as their destination but as “disqualifying countries that they deem to be not sufficiently ‘European’ – not fulfilling their ideal of ‘Europe’ as an obscure object of desire” (Heller et al. 2015). A recent study into attitudes and preferences of asylum seekers in Croatia showed that these are most frequently migrants who “due to

the very beginning, we were aware of the fact that humanized, but deeply ideological, limited and monitored process of supplying the refugees and their transit, was mimicry for biopolitical “triage” and separation of people into refugees and migrants, into “legal” and “illegal” migrants, into those who are entitled to be protected and received in Europe and those who are not. Moreover, the experience of contested and oftentimes irreconcilable demands of voluntary engagement and critical reflection on our participation in the process of “normalizing abnormality” of the precarious humanitarian regime confronted us with challenges that were both close to and remote from the usual anthropological practice. Having in mind the ethical burden of such demanding human and research situation, we were grateful for every moment of “epiphany” – like the one captured in the photograph of 13 February 2016, where mother and daughter, with a dombura, are waiting for an injured brother and son – that transcended the everyday normal and the camp normalizing experience. If, as considered by the “radical anthropologist” David Graeber – the ontological capacity of imagining and pursuing more egalitarian forms of sociality is the most revolutionary tool we have (2015: 65), then we can say that our imagining and pursuing of a more humane rather than humanitarian relationship is what we consider more valuable than our anthropological record of it. As opposed to our culturally produced understanding of economical, practical and purposeful dressing in the winter months, our embodied volunteer practice of the “welcoming ethos” in the restrictive camp environment resulted in rare, but invaluable glimpses of true human contact.

Moreover, many ethically and emotionally challenging inter-actions that we found ourselves in a direct encounter with the “ungraspable face of the Other” (Lévinas 1991)<sup>20</sup> undermined our understanding of ab/normality, in/acceptability and in/appropriateness, and probably had a long-term effect on our understanding of the human destiny. A smile, a touch, a fleeting experience of closeness and recognition brought



13 February 2016 (Photo: Tea Škokić)

circumstances beyond their control [...] become reluctant asylum-seekers who feel trapped in the country and aspire to leave” (Valenta, Župarić-Iljić and Vidović 2015: 95).

<sup>20</sup> As claimed by Lévinas, the Other is not *beside* nor does s/he stand *opposite* me, s/he is “the idea of the other in me” (1991: 50). In a relationship with the Other “proximity in absolute separation” is always at work, which means an ethically and cognitively challenging inter-relationship with an uncertain result.

about the power of co-creating the spirit of the “culture of the bazaar”, the humanity and immediacy which – regardless how short and fleeting it may be – suggested a peace-time everyday life where, as described by writer Aleš Šteger “[refugees] will be able to grow old and die in peace, and where their offspring will be able to grow up freely and with dignity” (2015: 51).

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## SHOPPING CENTAR NENORMALNE NORMALNOSTI: ETNOGRAFIJA DISTRIBUCIJSKOG ŠATORA U IZBJEGLIČKOM KAMPU U SLAVONSKOM BRODU

Kritički antropološki pristupi vide kamp za izbjeglice kao prostor “humanitarnog upravljanja” (Agier 2011) u kojem ponajprije surađuju humanitarne organizacije, socijalne službe i policija dočim su izbjeglice “uznemirujući element” (Agamben 1998), nesubjekti čija se slobodna volja, sloboda kretanja i govora te izražavanja osobnosti svodi na minimum. Kao etnografkinje i volonterke doživjele smo tranzitni kamp u Slavonskom Brodu kao *assemblage* (Ramadan 2012) prostora, vremena, praksi i odnosa koji su se tamo odvijali i čiju su dinamiku određivale pravno nejasne procedure “trijažiranja” izbjeglica/migranata. U središtu je analize distribucijski šator koji se, unatoč nadziranom boravku, pokazao kao jedino mjesto “slobode” u smislu razgovorne interakcije te upravljanja vremenom i prostorom, kako za izbjeglice tako i za volontere. Prevladavajuća aktivnost u distribucijskom šatoru bila je donacija odjeće i obuće što nas je nagnalo da iznova etnološki promislimo odjeću kao kulturni artefakt i neverbalni jezik kojim izbjeglice pregovaraju svoj identitet te simbolički iskazuju svoju prošlost, sadašnjost i budućnost. Osim opisa nenormalne normalnosti distribucijskog “bazara” ili “shopping centra” kao globalno prepoznatljivog *genius loci*, izložile smo i autoetnografske refleksije o kulturnim, moralnim i emotivnim učincima nepredvidljivih susreta-događaja s “nedokučivim licem drugog” (Levinas 1991), koji dovodi u pitanje naše egzistencijalno i povijesno iskustvo.

Ključne riječi: strah od migranata, humanitarno upravljanje, nenormalna normalnost kampa, kamp kao *assemblage*, antropolog kao volonter, semioza odjeće