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RESEARCH ARTICLE

STRATEGIC INTERPLAY IN TIMES OF CRISIS.

Opportunities and challenges for state-civil society interaction during the Swedish “Refugee Crisis” of 2015–2016

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ABSTRACT: From mid-2015 to early 2016, more than a million refugees and migrants arrived in Europe, after having crossed the Mediterranean Sea. Sweden quickly emerged as one of the main destinations they aspired to reach. During the so-called refugee crisis of 2015–2016, the city of Malmö became the management center for the reception of refugees. In this context, a series of interplays emerged between governmental institutions (GIs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and social movement organizations (SMOs) involved in helping the refugees. Looking at the refugee crisis in Malmö through the lens of an interactionist approach to contentious politics, this article analyzes the strategic interplay between SMOs, NGOs, and GIs in the different phases of the crisis, as well as scrutinizes the conditions that facilitated or hindered cooperation among the actors. Results show that the crisis initially strengthened the role of SMOs, but that in order to enter into lasting and established forms of cooperation with NGOs and institutionalized politics, SMOs had to meet three conditions: 1) have a clear organizational structure, 2) downplay their political ideology, and 3) assume a complementary position to the other actors involved. For most SMOs, this limited their maneuverability, leading them to adopt one of three possible strategies: adapting to the new conditions, challenging the rules and players of the arena, or exiting the arena altogether.

KEYWORDS: Sweden, refugee crisis, social movements, state-civil society relations, strategic interaction

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1. Introduction

From mid-2015 to early 2016, more than a million refugees and migrants arrived in Europe, after having crossed the Mediterranean Sea. While Italy and Greece were the primary points of entry into the European Union, most migrants sought to travel onward to countries with more welcoming asylum systems and labor markets. In this context, Sweden quickly emerged as one of the main destinations they aspired to reach.

During the fall and winter of 2015, Sweden experienced the largest per-capita inflow of asylum seekers ever recorded in an OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) country (Fratzke 2017; Malmö Stad 2016). About 12,000 people applied for asylum in Sweden in August 2015, 24,000 in September, 39,000 in October, and 37,000 in November. During these months up to 2,000 people arrived in the country every day, including unregistered refugees traveling on to other Nordic countries (Ghita 2016; Tanner 2016; Hansen 2018). Sweden alone received more than half of the total number of unaccompanied minors coming to the European Union, and in total, nearly 163,000 asylum applications were filed in 2015 (Fratzke 2017; Malmö Stad; Tanner 2016).

Most asylum seekers entered Sweden from Denmark through the city of Malmö. The city, which is located in the southern part of the country and connected to continental Europe by a bridge crossing The Sound, was the natural entry point and became the management center of the refugee crisis. This influx took both local and national authorities, as well as large parts of civil society, by surprise and required a plethora of actors to attend to the acute situation.

The case of Malmö was not an isolated incident. Rather, it resembled similar developments in several European cities at the time (della Porta 2018; Hamann and Karakayali 2016). The dramatic increase in international migration flows to Europe in 2015 has been referred to as “the long summer of migration” (della Porta 2018a, 2). In 2015, several countries, regions, and cities in Europe were faced with the challenges of large-scale migratory movements. As noted by Rucht (2018), opportunities for mobilization for and against migrants existed throughout Europe, following the “informal suspension of EU, national and local rule for dealing with asylum seekers and refugees [and] the heavy strain on EU, national and local administration facing the influx of refugees” (214). The situation has also attracted a great deal of scholarly attention and a flourishing of analysis on how European states and different types of actors responded to these developments (Ataç, Rygiel, and Maurice 2016; della Porta 2018a; Pries 2018; Rosenberger, Stern, and Merhaut 2018).

What makes the case of Malmö important, both empirically and theoretically, is the acute strain created by the situation in 2015–16 (Hansen 2018). In addition to the increase in the number of refugees, Sweden was not only country of passage, but also a country of destination. Although some unregistered refugees travelled on to other Nordic countries, most hoped to stay in Sweden. This created challenges concerning the management of their welcome, as well their integration into society (della Porta 2018a). Moreover, it must be considered that not having experienced a large-scale migratory flow since the Balkan wars in the early 1990s, Swedish civil society and Swedish governmental institutions (GIs) were unprepared to handle the situation (Ghita 2016).

In this article, the acute strain experienced during the autumn of 2015 is conceptualized as an exogenous shock, in which a sudden and significant change in external conditions sent ripples through large segments of Swedish society (Collier and Munck 2017; della Porta 2018b). The exogenous shock was embodied in the sudden arrival of thousands of migrants in Malmö. In the short term, it reinvigorated civil society and led to a dramatic increase in solidarity work for and with migrants. A series of projects concerning the provision of goods and services were developed. For instance, mobilization increased and new networks emerged, such as various welcome initiatives (Kleres 2018; Turunen and Weinryb 2019). In addition, established social movement organizations (SMOs) and established non-governmental organizations (NGOs) within civil society increased their activities to address the acute situation. Alongside GIs, they worked to provide refugees with food, medicine, clothes, legal support, accommodation, and practical advice. In the immediacy of the crisis, the necessity to provide refugees with basic needs both forced and allowed a deviation from the standard ways of operating, fostering new opportunities, both formal and informal, for interplay between SMOs, NGOs, and GIs (Verhoeven and Bröer 2015).¹ In the long term, some of these practices led to the creation of lasting ties among these groups, while at other times resulting in open conflict and rupture among the actors. More generally, the crisis contributed to a deepened debate and polarization between those for and those against generous migration policies, as well as significant policy changes in the areas of migration and immigration, leading to more restrictive migration policies.

In hindsight, we have come to understand the exogenous shock of 2015–16 as a catalyst of a “critical juncture” (della Porta 2018a). Originally coined by Lipset and

¹ In this article, the concepts of “interplay” and “interaction” refer to the relationships that developed among the players. We use “cooperation” when referring to concrete collaborative ventures that emerged from their interactions.

Rokkan (1967), the concept has been widely applied to demarcate periods of institutional challenge and change and times of stability and continuity (della Porta 2018b). Drawing on Robert (2015), we see how the refugee situation of 2015–16 constituted a “crisis or strain that existing policies and institutions [were] ill-suited to resolve” (44). The political and institutional changes that followed were often marked by the characteristics of a critical juncture: They were 1) abrupt, as marked by decisive choice points, 2) discontinuous, in that the changes represented a significant break with established patterns, and c) path dependent, in that they created new political and institutional legacies that shaped and constrained future political developments (Roberts 2015). Consequently, the shock ignited a period of uncertainty, political polarization, and contingency but also created opportunities for interplay, collaboration, and innovation. The critical period allowed for a questioning and renegotiation of positions, rules, logics, and power relations governing the issue at hand. Initially, the shock and uncertainty of the situation created a substantial degree of freedom in actors’ choices and political agency (Capoccia 2015; Collier and Munck 2017; Verhoeven and Bröer 2015).

The analysis of the refugee crisis in Malmö makes it possible to study the emergence of new formal and informal opportunities and practices of interplay between SMOs, NGOs, and GIs, as well as the factors that facilitated or hindered these interactive processes. The case also allows us to study the complexity of this interaction and illustrates how the generalized concepts of “social movements” and “the state” consist of a complex cluster of players. Instead of emphasizing antagonism between movements and institutionalized politics, our analysis aims at scrutinizing how various GIs interacted with segments of a social movement and at highlighting under what circumstances, with whom, and by what means this interaction came about.

This article proceeds with a presentation of the theoretical perspective and concepts used, as well as a description of the specificities of studying interactive processes in a national context marked by a corporatist and consensus-oriented political culture such as Sweden. This is followed by a description of the events of the refugee situation in Malmö with particular attention being paid to the phases of the crisis and to the actors involved. The following paragraphs are dedicated to the analysis of the data, which is guided by two main research questions: A) What forms of interplay between SMOs, NGOs, and GIs emerged during the refugee crisis? B) What conditions facilitated or hindered the interplay between SMOs, NGOs, and GIs?

Considering the interplay among these different actors, but still placing SMOs at the center of our analytical attention, we shed light on the conditions necessary for

the establishment and maintenance of relationships between SMOs, NGOs, and GIs. Results show that the crisis initially strengthened the role of SMOs in Malmö's public scene but that in order to enter into formal cooperation with NGOs and actors within institutionalized politics, SMOs had to meet certain conditions. In particular, in order to be considered as potential partners, SMOs needed to 1) have a clear organizational structure, 2) downplay or abandon their political ideology, and 3) assume a complementary and ancillary role to the other actors. These criteria narrowed the space in which SMOs could maneuver and, in the end, hindered possibilities of developing lasting connections once the crisis began to fade. As a result, SMOs adopted one of three different ways of responding to the conditions set by GIs and NGOs: adapting, exiting, and challenging the rules and players in the arena.

2. Reading the refugee crisis through an interactionist approach

Social movement studies have seen an upsurge in research focusing on the dynamic interplay among movements and the many actors with whom activists interact. Recent works have contributed perspectives, tools, and concepts to trace and describe how, why, and where strategic interactions take place, as well as how different actors are affected by the interplay (e.g. Duyvendak and Jasper 2015; Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Jasper 2004; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001).

Our starting point for this article is the perspectives and concepts developed within the interactionist approach to contentious politics, particularly by Duyvendak and Jasper (2015). The approach focuses on the ways in which political protestors strategically interact with a multitude of actors in a continual dynamic process, and the contexts in which this interaction takes place. In relation to previous research that has positioned social movements front and center of analysis, the interactionist perspective emphasizes the relevance of all actors involved in the interplay. In doing so, the approach moves beyond the perception of the state as a monolithic entity and, instead, highlights the plurality of state and non-state players involved in the interaction. Moreover, it seeks to study how and why they engage with each other in different contexts.

To disengage from the movement-centered vocabulary of previous research, Duyvendak and Jasper (2015) offer the terms "players" and "arenas," which we use in this article. According to the authors, players can be simple (i.e. individual) or compound (i.e. collective) actors "who engage in strategic interaction with some goal in mind" (10). Players are bound together by a collective identity and have a variety

of capacities at their disposal to pursue their goals. During the course of interaction, different players cooperate with, constrain, or conflict with each other and the main external constraints experienced by one player are the result of the actions of other players who have different goals and interests.

To analyze the interplay surrounding the refugee crisis in Malmö, research needs to begin with an in-depth analysis of the players involved. In this case, the number of players were multitudinous. In addition to individuals spontaneously participating in collective actions, the players included radical and moderate SMOs, established NGOs, religious organizations, various GIs (such as local governments, political parties, and the police), as well as individual politicians and civil servants. The interactionist approach encourages us to scrutinize the origin, nature, and goals of dominant players; how they operate; the means they use to pursue their goals, and the logics that make the players seek or refuse interaction with each other.

The concept of “arena” refers to the spatial-temporal context “where politics occur,” (Jasper 2015, 14) or, in Wolin’s (1960) terms, “where the plans, ambitions, and actions of individuals and groups incessantly jar against each other – colliding, blocking, coalescing, separating” (15). Not necessarily connected to a physical place, an arena is held together by formal and informal rules and resources, which allow certain types of interaction to take place. Arenas are constructed and reconstructed through the actions of players, and in most cases also take manifest forms so that one can actually watch the interaction taking place (Jasper 2015).

The refugee crisis of 2015–16 in Malmö and the contention surrounding asylum politics at the time can be seen as a new arena – a space for increased interaction among a wide range of players. Nowhere in Sweden did this take a more concrete form than at the Central Station in Malmö, a physical place where the interaction became manifest. Using the 2015–16 events in Malmö as a case study, we are able to study the dynamics of interaction: the tensions, collaborations, and conflicts that occurred; players’ representations of other actors; the opportunities for and challenges of interplay; and the gains and losses players experienced.

3. Specificities of the Swedish context

What makes Sweden particularly interesting for analyzing interactive dynamics between social movements and institutionalized politics is the socio-institutional context in which this interplay came about. In Sweden, relations between the state and civil society have for long been marked by what has been referred to as “the

Swedish model.” Primarily used to describe the political regulation of state-market relations and the political vision of a *folkhem* (the people’s home), the model also entails consensus-oriented and corporatist state-civil society relations, fostered by a persistent dominance of social democracy in political institutions and the labor movement (Peterson, Thörn and Wahlström 2018). During its forty-four years of uninterrupted government (1932–1976), the Social Democratic Party identified with and developed strong and active ties to the dominant social movements of the time, often referred to as popular movements (*folkrörelser*). This meant institutionalizing procedures for consulting and negotiating with movement representatives, recruiting movement leaders to government, funding movement groups and aiding in creating an infrastructure in which movements could operate. The inclusive, corporatist strategy of politicians and bureaucrats led to a political culture of consensus, characterized by negotiation, dialogue, and compromise, rather than a contentious and violent protest culture. For much of the 1900s, civil society tended to see itself, and to be seen, as a partner, rather than a challenger to the state (Jørgensen 2008; Micheletti 1995; Peterson *et al.* 2018; Lundberg 2011; Turunen and Weinryb 2019).

Much has changed in the last decades. Since the 1980s, the Swedish model has been partially dismantled and transformed, in part, due to the consequences of neoliberal reforms influencing both social democratic and center-right governments. This has meant an overall system shift and a turn towards more “market-oriented solutions,” leading to increased partnerships between GIs and economic actors rather than civic ones (Larsson, Letell and Thörn 2012; Peterson *et al.* 2018). The consensus culture in Sweden has also been challenged: more contentious forms of protests have been introduced into social movements’ repertoires of action, as well as new laws, restrictions, and repressive practices enacted, designed to govern domestic dissent (Jämte and Sörbom 2016; Wahlström 2011; Wennerhag 2017). In sum, the traditional Swedish model for state-civil society has been weakened but is still prevalent. For instance, it can be noted in the institutionalized connections between civil society and state actors, in funding and infrastructure, as well as on the municipal level, where interaction between civil society and institutionalized politics is often close.

While the corporatist structures and the consensus-oriented political culture characterizing Sweden foster opportunities for civic actors close to institutionalized politics, they have created constrains and limitations for others (Jämte and Sörbom 2016; Lundberg 2011). Jämte (2013) provides a preliminary insight into how activists during anti-racist mobilizations experienced their relatively close connection to state actors. Studying the anti-racist movement in Sweden from 1980 to 2005, he shows how different segments of the movement have experienced interactions with actors

from institutionalized politics, such as political parties. On the one hand, radical activists were often skeptical or hostile to any interplay, describing the state as a threat that sought to marginalize, stigmatize, and repress the radical segments of the movement. On the other hand, more moderate groups saw close collaboration with governmental institutions as necessary in order to achieve societal change. This said, moderates also described negative experiences of co-optation and state attempts to compete with and marginalize critical segments of the movement. Our case study makes it possible to deepen this earlier study and to interpret previous findings in light of politicians' and civil servants' representations of interaction.

4. The refugee crisis in Malmö as a case study: Phases and players

Identifying the refugee crisis of 2015–16 in Malmö as an arena, we can follow the interactive processes and study what happens when different players in this arena interact over time. Although obviously simplifying a non-linear and dynamic development, we have divided the episode into three phases. Each phase highlights major shifts that occurred in the arena as a result of the interaction among different players, their capabilities, and their goals. By doing so, we acknowledge that “social events don't happen all at once, but rather happen in steps: first one thing, then another, with each succeeding step creating new conditions under which all the people and organizations involved must now negotiate the next step” (McCall and Becker 1990, 6).

The gradual change of the arena: Three phases

From the very beginning of the arrivals of refugees in late August 2015, Malmö Central Station became the main theatre for the emerging refugee situation. Prior to GIs clearly establishing their presence at the station, civic actors had already stepped in. The first phase was characterized by the deep involvement of SMOs and NGOs in providing migrants with accommodation, food, clothing, legal and bureaucratic support, practical advice, as well as the coordination of the many people who showed up at Malmö Central Station to volunteer. In this stage, informal welcome initiatives became the face of civil society's response to the crisis. These welcome initiatives emerged partially from the action of “entirely new organizations typically mobilized through social media” (Kleres 2018, 2), and partially from a shift in the focus of existing SMOs. Consequently, during the first phase, the arrivals were largely assisted

by volunteers and activists in emerging informal groups, such as Refugee Welcome, local SMOs belonging to the radical left, or established NGOs (i.e. Save the Children, Red Cross) (Turunen and Weinryb 2019).

The second phase was characterized by the increased involvement of GIs that gradually established their presence at Malmö Central Station. In October 2015, a temporary transit area was opened outside the station to provide refugees with information, food, and clothes, as well as to ease the procedure of identity checking in collaboration with the national migration agency. Temporary accommodations were set up in public buildings around the city (i.e. schools and gyms), and local services (i.e. hospitals and social services) were involved in providing basic health and social support. During this phase, several projects targeting refugees were initiated in collaboration by actors from institutionalized politics and civil society, as will be discussed in more detail later.

The third and final phase marked the beginning of the end of the intensified mobilization. It started after the crisis peaked, when the shared sense of uncertainty and crisis among the players had begun to fade. This phase roughly began with the implementation of restrictive migrations policies and the removal of the temporary transit area outside Malmö Central Station, in late November 2015. At this point, the management of the situation was progressively integrated into the “standard” institutional services. During this phase, the needs of refugees were mainly handled through existing structures and procedures of local and national Swedish welfare systems. This said, actors within civil society continued to carry out autonomous initiatives aimed at facilitating refugees’ integration into the city. In the aftermath of the crisis, NGOs and SMOs developed specific projects targeting refugees’ needs, such as afterschool programs for refugee children, popular canteen and food banks, overnight shelters, and temporary accommodations.

During the second and third phases, some SMOs were invited to collaborate with GIs and NGOs within the temporary transit area or in other types of projects aimed at managing the crisis, while other SMOs were not involved or refused to cooperate with them. In the analytical section, we analyze in detail the emerging dynamics and practices of interplay among these actors, as well as the factors that facilitated or hindered the interaction among them. Before that, we turn to a more detailed presentation of the players involved.

Cataloguing the players

As pointed out by Jasper (2015), in order “to understand how protest arises, unfolds, and affects (or does not affect) the world around it, research needs to begin with catalogs of the players involved on all sides” (13). In this article, the catalogue Jasper calls for comprises three main types of actors that engaged in the provision of humanitarian help and services to the newly arrived migrants: GIs, NGOs, and SMOs.

The main responsibilities of the GIs were shared by Migrationsverket (the Swedish migration agency), Region Skåne (Skåne Regional Council), and Malmö Stad (Malmö Municipality). Region Skåne mainly had a coordinating role aimed at guaranteeing equal standards in the provision of services in the regional area where Malmö is located. Migrationsverket and Malmö Stad were both responsible for organizing the reception of migrants. Migrationsverket’s main responsibility was the coordination of reception, identity checks, and dispersion of the migrants throughout the country. Malmö Stad took responsibility for the humanitarian reception of refugees, establishing the transit area at Malmö Central Station, opening public shelters and, later, promoting the social inclusion of refugees and unaccompanied minors through their services.

Both international and local NGOs played an active role in the management of the refugee situation. Prominent NGOs were Red Cross, Save the Children, and Skåne Stadsmission (Skåne City Mission), but religious organizations were also heavily involved.² While Red Cross and Save the Children are well-known international NGOs, Skåne City Mission is a regional organization working on homelessness and social exclusion.

Six SMOs emerged as important in the management of the crisis: Refugees Welcome to Malmö, Refugees Welcome Malmö,³ Kontrapunkt (Counterpoint), Allt Åt Alla (Everything to Everyone), and Asylgruppen (The Asylum Group). It is not possible to detail the characteristics of each of these players in this article, but it is important to note that they had different starting points for their assistance and that their histories differed. Refugees Welcome to Malmö and Refugees Welcome Malmö did not exist before the crisis: they developed as informal apolitical welcome initiatives in direct response to the arrival of refugees. Asylgruppen, Kontrapunkt, and Allt Åt Alla

² Religious organizations played a crucial role in the provision of services to refugees during and after the crisis. The exclusion of these groups from the analysis does not dismiss their importance. We made several attempts to conduct interviews with representatives of local churches and mosques but were unable to involve them in the research. Since this article seeks to give equal attention to the different players in the arena, we felt we could not tell their stories without having heard their perspectives.

³ Refugees Welcome to Malmö and Refugees Welcome Malmö are two different SMOs.

were preexisting grassroots left-leaning groups. Asylgruppen i Malmö is an organization active since the early 1990s. It shares a critical perspective on the Swedish migration system and has specialized in helping asylum seekers and paperless migrants. Allt Åt Alla Malmö is a well-established, radical-left libertarian SMO involved in a wide range of civic and political activities, including advocating for migrants' rights. Kontrapunkt is a former "artistic hub" that during and after the crisis turned into a welcome center for migrants and people in need.

5. Data and methods

The narrative material on which this article is based was collected through semi-structured interviews with twenty individuals. We interviewed twelve activists from the SMOs engaged in helping refugees (Refugees Welcome to Malmö, Refugees Welcome Malmö, Kontrapunkt, Allt Åt Alla, and Asylgruppen). We also interviewed four representatives of the aforementioned NGOs (Red Cross, Save the Children, and Skåne City Mission). Lastly, interviews were conducted with four representatives of local GIs responsible for implementing institutional actions targeting refugees (Malmö Stad and Region Skåne).

The first interviewees were selected on the basis of previous research in the field and through an analysis of various document materials (i.e. research reports, newspapers, social media). Snowball sampling technique was used to identify further interviewees, and we applied a saturation criterion to determine when we had carried out an adequate number of interviews. The difference in the number of representatives of SMOs, NGOs and GIs is due to three main reasons. First, the number of involved SMOs was greater than that of NGOs and GIs, and the horizontal structure of most SMOs made it important to interview several people from each group. Second, our contacts in SMOs directed us to other key activists, while representatives from GIs and NGOs provided us with fewer colleagues to interview. Third, some people with prominent roles in GIs and NGOs during the crisis had changed jobs or location and were impossible to reach, while most SMO's key activists did not change from 2015 to 2018. All things considered, we have managed to interview key persons for each player, making it possible to reconstruct the different phases of the crisis, and scrutinize the logics that made the players seek or refuse interaction with each other.

The interviews focused on the roles, goals, and strategies of the SMOs, NGOs, and GIs and on the interviewees' views on the processual development of the arena. We

also asked interviewees about their view of other actors, obstacles to and possibilities for interplay, and the gains and losses experienced because of these interactive processes.

Interviews were conducted in English and were, on average, 1.5 hours long, providing thick material on the actors' perspectives of their interplay. In order to safeguard interviewees' privacy, their names have been omitted or changed.

The interviews were conducted in November and December 2018, approximately three years after the peak of the refugee crisis. This delay resulted in some particular challenges: some of the most active actors during the 2015 crisis were no longer in Malmö or even in Sweden, some had switched roles (from civil servant to activist or vice versa), and some had difficulty recollecting the events of 2015. However, this methodological choice was still preferred, as it allowed us to collect original material on the actors' perceptions and experiences of the interplay among groups, which both influenced their actions and willingness to interact with other actors.

6. The refugee crisis as an emerging arena of interaction

As stated above, the situation in Malmö in 2015–16 created specific conditions for the interplay between SMOs, NGOs, and GIs, arising from the combination of the critical moment, the collaborative and consensus-oriented culture of state-civil society relations, and the well-developed Swedish welfare system. Our analysis underlines that critical moments open possibilities for interaction because authorities are caught unaware, but also that civil society's ability to maneuver can be limited when authorities are efficient in providing solutions (as in the Malmö case).

During the intensified mobilization in Malmö, both these tendencies emerged and defined a combination of opportunities and constraints for SMOs, whose room to maneuver was determined not so much "by economic and political structures" as it was "imposed by other players with different goals and interests" (Jasper 2015, 9).

In the immediacy of the crisis, local authorities and local services found themselves unprepared. Several civil servants we interviewed underlined the unpredictability of the refugee crisis. A former employee of Malmö Stad described the crisis as a sort of tsunami, with only a few drops of rain providing a warning.

Something is happening, but we didn't really know what. [...] It was like a snowball effect. First there were a few drops, and then there are more drops [...] and then [...] we had like a flood gate opening. We went from five kids a night to ten kids a night, to

twenty kids a night. And when the largest influx, I think we had over a hundred children arriving in Malmö in one night. We had to scale up social services around the clock and start a whole new unit.

A similar narrative of the situation was provided by several NGO representatives, who also described the crisis as a sudden and unexpected emergency nobody could have foreseen. Despite the general goals and mission of these organizations to tackle humanitarian emergencies, Swedish NGOs had seldom, if ever, experienced an emergency of this magnitude in their “backyard.” Specializing in fundraising and advocacy, some NGOs discovered they lacked the necessary competencies and skills to deal with the immediacy of the situation. An interviewee from Save the Children underlined how the crisis came as a shock:

We don't have this experience of seeing humanitarian crisis so close to us in Sweden. We work very much [on this] at the international level with different methods, but it was the first time in Sweden that we realized that we needed to work more directly with the people. [...] It was really fast, because it was an emergency. It was like this feeling of emergency that we had never experienced in Save the Children in Sweden. It was really special and big.

While GI and NGO actors mostly described being unprepared for the arrival of refugees, several SMO interviewees described a relative readiness. Thanks to their grassroots and international networks, they knew a few days in advance about the movement of refugees from continental Europe to the Nordic countries. Moreover, SMOs' experience of quickly organizing events and mobilizing people into action became a resource when the emergency erupted. As one SMO representative said:

The news of refugees walking on the highway in Denmark reached us and some people started calling around. [...] “They are coming to Sweden, so they are going to arrive, and there's a lot of people, they are going to arrive late in the night. They will need a place to sleep. Could you do that?” So we basically gathered, had a fifteen-minute discussion and decided “yes, let's do it.” [...] And we already had gathered a lot of mattresses and a lot of things so we could easily do it, but we also made a call on Facebook and then people started donating. And we had an organization which was quite skilled and well trained in running events [...] big events with thousands of people and stuff. We had an organization that knew how to [deal with] logistics, security, food, volunteers, schedules, communication. In a few days we managed to adapt [our space] to housing instead of events.

In the critical moment of the emerging crisis, the absence of GIs and NGOs created a need and opportunity for the development of different types of welcome initiatives. To a large extent, these involved citizens who had not previously participated in SMOs but who wanted to help. For instance, the crisis fostered the birth of Refugee Welcome to Malmö and, more generally, activated loosely organized networks and informal groups of local residents (Kleres 2018; Turunen and Weinryb 2019). Asked to explain how Refugee Welcome to Malmö was born, a former volunteer of the organization stressed the spontaneity involved:

The whole thing originated from Sara [a pseudonym]. She has a lot of connections in Europe to other organizations and was getting text messages and Facebook messages about a lot of refugees on their way to Malmö by train, and that they needed food and clothes when they arrived. She gathered some friends and food and clothes and went down to meet them. And because there was such a big need of food and clothes, she kept sending out messages on Facebook, which a lot of people replied to. So first there were five ladies down there, and suddenly there were hundred, and two hundred of us down there.

Our analysis suggests that the immediacy of the crisis created opportunities for SMOs and informal networks to advance their position in the arena. Due to their organizational culture (self-organization, self-management, and an activist do-it-yourself mentality), they were able to quickly maneuver and fill the space in the absence and unpreparedness of GIs and established NGOs. Their readiness to provide direct help to the refugees empowered local SMOs as players in the arena. Indeed, several SMOs experienced rapid growth in their numbers, gained more visibility, and obtained greater recognition among local inhabitants (Weinryb 2015). As put by one activist:

[During the crisis] we kind of tweaked our organization, and basically it boomed, of course, with all the volunteers and people who wanted to help and donate [...]. We had a 24/7 organization running for six months.

Our analysis also shows how the immediate involvement of SMOs produced openings for interplay between SMOs, NGOs, and GIs. The dialogue among these groups emerged as a strategic choice for all the actors involved. When local and national GIs and NGOs arrived at Malmö Central Station to provide services to refugees, they arrived in an arena already occupied by “cumbersome” players. SMOs were already meeting refugees’ basic needs through their own initiatives and

networks, and they demonstrated capabilities and strengths that could not be easily ignored or dismissed by the other players. In particular, the GIs' and NGOs' need for volunteers seem to have made it necessary for them to engage in a dialogue with SMOs. In the critical moment of the crisis, local inhabitants' and activists' willingness to provide time, energy, and goods around the clock—a resource that was mostly mobilized and organized by SMOs—represented a pivotal resource for the management of the emergency. One of the activists summarized SMOs' strengths as follows:

Institutions didn't have any capability. I mean, our capability is that we move very quickly. We are not a bureaucracy that needs to take into consideration how decisions are made. I mean, our ability to act under crisis is much greater than that of the municipality or the Swedish migration agency.

Moreover, SMOs' ability to bend formal rules and their willingness to engage in conflict with government authorities were seen as strategic resources by the NGOs, who were sometimes frustrated by their need to maintain a good relationship with GIs.

[As an NGO] we are bounded to the organizational, [...] not laws, but you know, we have a framework of what we can and what we cannot do. For example, we're not supposed to give individual support to individuals. [...] But [SMOs] can do whatever they want to do with money. They can really hand out money, but we cannot do that at all. It's like "okay, you can do this, because we see this need, that we can support you in this, but you do the actual work in it."

In relation to the different types of resources connected to different players, SMOs controlled human capital (in the form of activists/volunteers) and had the needed organizational flexibility and broad repertoire of action that GIs and NGOs did not. However, NGOs and GIs had access to or control of important material assets (i.e. funds, spaces, and trained knowledgeable professionals, such as lawyers, interpreters and skilled social workers) that SMOs often lacked. These resources became increasingly important to assure the continuity of the players' actions beyond the acute emergency.

Our analysis highlights how none of the actors involved in the management of the refugee crisis in Malmö was completely self-sufficient. As a consequence, strategic interplays emerged as players attempted "to get others to do what [they] want[ed] them to" (Jasper 2015, 19; Verhoven and Bröer 2015). At the same time, the various

players critiqued each other. SMOs questioned the inadequacy, inefficiency, and inflexibility of the GIs and NGOs in that they were not always able to provide the direct help refugees needed and sometimes obstructed the attempts of SMOs to assist. GIs accused SMOs of stepping over boundaries and disregarding certain rules that safeguarded the refugees. They were also critiqued for taking on responsibilities without having the necessary expertise. Moreover, the fluid and undefined nature of SMOs was interpreted as a lack of long-term stability and of limited accountability. In sum, GI representatives tended to portray SMOs as an important resource that needed to be managed, coordinated, and contained in order not to become problematic.

7. Opportunities for and challenges of interplay

Between the first and second phases, the arena was gradually reconstructed. This happened through the strategic actions of different players, who tried to either take or maintain control of the management of the crisis. In particular, local GIs attempted to take control of the situation, while utilizing the resources of SMOs and NGOs. In practice, this occurred through the creation of new forums (i.e. formalized moments of dialogue and consultation) as well as a series of partnerships (formalized collaborations) between GIs and some of the other players in civil society. For instance, at the temporary transit area, some of the SMOs were invited to take part in consultations with GIs and NGOs. Also, some SMOs were asked to collaborate and continue to provide direct support to refugees while others were not. As recalled by one of the activists:

We were invited into the [temporary transit area at Malmö Central Station]. [...] I think we met twice a week, which sounds insane, but it was. This big group of people who were down at Malmö Central, basically. The Red Cross, Malmö municipality, the migration agency, Refugees Welcome and MSB [the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency], which is like the authority for safety in Sweden [...]. Anyone who in any way was involved had a big meeting twice a week, Tuesdays and Fridays, to [get an] update on the situation.

On the one hand, the establishment of new forums and partnerships could be read as a victory on the part of SMOs, in that their presence and relevance were recognized. On the other hand, our analysis shows that SMOs were gradually curtailed. From our data, Swedish institutions emerge as slow, but efficient machines.

Following the initial turbulence, the creation of a temporary transit area at Malmö Central Station and the increasing controls at borders marked the beginning of a restructuring of the power relations within the arena, with local and national GIs gradually taking control of the management of the crisis. In the words of one of the interviewed activists:

Local authorities and the Swedish migration agency were very disorganized at first. Even if they could have organized receiving people, they didn't know what to do with them. They didn't have any places to put them over the night. They couldn't register them. They couldn't feed them. There was nothing they could do. For the first two months, they were completely dependent on the volunteer organizations. Not that they wanted to say that they were, but they were, obviously and actually. But once the borders were closed and they managed to intercept all refugees they were able to control the situation.

The GIs' recovery of institutional control was possible through the strategic opening and closing of the aforementioned possibilities of cooperation. While prominent NGOs were often invited to participate in forums and partnerships, only some of the SMOs were. Our analysis suggests that three main factors conditioned the inclusion of SMOs in cooperative ventures: 1) the organizational structure of the SMOs, 2) the level of politicization of the SMOs, and 3) the complementarity between the tasks and strategies of actions of the SMOs and that of the other actors.

The organizational structure of SMOs

The organizational structure of the SMOs seems to have had a crucial importance in determining the extent of SMOs' cooperation with GIs and NGOs. By organizational structure, interviewees from NGOs and GIs refer to the internal structure that allowed actors outside of the SMO to quickly identify persons with key functions and responsibilities. These individuals were also expected to act as guarantors for the fulfillment of each player's obligations.

Our analysis show that in order for cooperation with GIs to develop, SMOs had to formally define their organizational structure. In general terms, SMOs were expected to organize like NGOs, that is, to put in place a clear organizational structure and definitive roles and responsibilities in relation to decision-making procedures. Consequently, the SMOs that the GIs directly cooperated with were those that, despite beginning as loose networks, formalized their organization by creating an

association and a clear internal structure. This is the case, for example, with Refugee Welcome to Malmö, that after regular coordination meetings with the GIs, created new regulations for their internal management (Turunen and Weinryb 2019). One of the activists recalled:

We all gathered at Malmö Central Station and had our first meeting; the people who were then going to become the board of the organization, who basically identified that the administrative [...] like, the structure [...] we need to. [...] We closed down, people could no longer post in the Facebook group, so we could start having structured information, all of those things. [...] And then, about a week after that, I suggested that we should form an organization. Because then we were just a group of people. [...] We actually formed an organization, which was the reason for why we could later on start working with the municipality.

The absence of a clear organizational structure also seems to have complicated the interactions between SMOs and NGOs. The development of dialogue and collaborative projects between SMOs and NGOs appeared to be dependent on identifying one or more leaders, even if informal ones, within the SMO. In this context, SMOs characterized by a more horizontal organizational structure struggled to communicate with the other players. One of the activists described the difficulties as follows:

We had a very hard time cooperating because they have hierarchy in their organization, and we organize flat. [...] It was a hard time [...]. I think we have not reached a position where we can actually work together. I think that is a pity. I think it's a huge problem for us as a movement, that we are not able to cooperate even with organizations that are so similar to us ideologically.

The level of SMO politicization

The second condition that facilitated or hindered interplay concerned the level of politicization of the SMOs. In this case, the possibility for cooperation with GIs implied that the SMO wasn't recognized for, or were prepared to abandon, their political positions. Being perceived as politicized, or radical, complicated interactions with GIs to the point of blocking emerging cooperation. This is illustrated by a Refugee Welcome Malmö activist, who recalled their interaction with a local municipality nearby Malmö:

We were going to apply for funding, and we had a really great dialogue with the people working in the municipality. They were really interested in doing this together with us. And they, they'd bring it to the politicians [...]. Then they are like, "no, we can't work together with them, because it's a leftist organization." And it's so fascinating how everything that is about assisting someone or offering a little bit of support, all of a sudden becomes "left."

Our analysis shows that GIs would not collaborate with SMOs known for their radical politics and contentious approach, also excluding them from public recognition. A radical activist described this exclusion in relation to a public event organized by GIs and NGOs:

It was a big event [...] in Malmö, the big square. And all the different parties were invited, and also some humanitarian groups. We were not invited, but [another SMO] was. I got the knowledge that this was going on, and I asked them if they were preparing a speech. They weren't, so we made a suggestion that maybe we could do one together. Because we were prepared to make a speech, but we didn't have the possibility, we weren't invited. We kind of sneaked in through the other SMOs. [...] We wrote it.

Also with regards to cooperating with NGOs, SMOs mainly seem to have been accepted as collaborative partners if they left their political identity and position "at the door." In these interactions too, "politics" was often understood as something that complicated things, created tensions, and hindered the practical goal of helping refugees. An NGO representative explained his position:

For me, personally, it's not a problem, because we often have the same agenda, and the agenda is to help the people that need help. And then we have our different reasons, or, like, backgrounds. [...] For me, if we can focus on that [helping people], I can work with anyone. [...] But we have to focus on that, and not the political agenda in any way. Because that may differ, obviously [...]. Like, for example, if there's a political agenda, we can't do that together, but we can focus on the group of people that we need to help.

The depoliticized nature of the initial mobilization has been noted in existing research on the refugee crisis in Sweden. According to Kleres (2018), much of the early mobilization was driven by moral shock, feelings of compassion, and the desire to uphold human dignity, rather than seen as political acts. This was supported by a general apolitical framing of the issues in public discourses, which both provided an

opportunity for and hindered interplay. As noted, for those players who agreed, accepted, or adapted to the apolitical framing of the situation, collaboration with NGOs and GIs was possible. At the same time, this made it harder for organizations and groups known for their political profile to cooperate.

SMOs as complementary players

The third factor affecting the possibilities for interplay concerns the complementary role of SMOs in relation to GIs and NGOs. In order for cooperation to take place, SMOs benefited from not being perceived as competitors or challengers by the other players in the arena.

From the perspective of the GIs, “complementarity” meant that SMOs could be invited to participate as long as they held an ancillary position and did not disrupt the activities of the GIs. The empirical data indicate that GIs tended to close opportunities for interplay with SMOs that were so efficient and organized that they competed with institutional efforts, even if they had a largely collaboratively oriented approach, Kontrapunkt being a case in point. In the immediacy of the crisis, Kontrapunkt turned its headquarters into a shelter and provided refugees with accommodation and food, playing a pivotal role in the management of the emergency. All interviewees, except the GI representatives, acknowledged Kontrapunkt’s crucial role in the management of the crisis. One went as far as to question why their organization got public funding when Kontrapunkt did not:

Four months after the crisis [when we were no longer active] we got a huge economical donation from Malmö Municipality. We were rather irritated by that because we thought Kontrapunkt should have had that money instead. Because of our own rules, we could not pass it on to Kontrapunkt. That was a tough situation because they really needed the money. [...] And then stupid Malmö City gave it to us.

The need for complementarity also emerged in the relationships between SMOs and NGOs. NGOs were more likely to engage in cooperation with SMOs than GIs, but due to competition because of similarities in practices, targets, and tasks, SMOs were often forced to accept an ancillary position or to abandon the cooperation. As one of the NGOs’ representatives, formerly engaged in one SMO, recalled:

I’ve seen how the counter productivity between organizations is so bad. I was frustrated because it was impossible to work together on many things [...], coming from a volunteer organization that nobody really listened to – we tried, but it was so hard.

*[...] And I saw the bigger organizations, like “you should do this, but you didn’t do it.”
[...] It was so frustrating. [...] There was still some competition between the different organizations.*

The need for SMOs to take a complimentary position to facilitate cooperation with GIs has also been noted in existing research. Following the trajectory of Refugees Welcome to Malmö, Turunen and Weinryb (2019) describe a gradual co-optation of the organization, turning its mobilization from an effort to “challenge the state on a dignified reception of the refugees” to an organization “serving cinnamon buns, sandwiches, and fruit in tandem with the state” (13). In order to cooperate, the organization had to drop its autonomous supplementary position and align itself with the expectations and regulations of the state.

Reshaping strategies

Taken together, the three conditions narrowed the space in which SMOs could maneuver; they were allowed to cooperate in assisting refugees and received full recognition only under specific circumstances. In the reconstructed arena defined by the strategic action of the GIs, SMOs had to decide if they wanted to be “in” or “out.” As put by one of the activists:

In the end, we heard that Malmö Municipality had a dinner to thank all the volunteers who helped with the refugee crisis. We heard it afterwards, we were not invited. [...] But this is very typical of Malmö Municipality. [...] You are in or you don’t exist.

As a result, SMOs reshaped their strategies in relation to the changing conditions within the arena, opting for one of three approaches:

- 1) Adapting – staying in the arena and adjusting to the rules for participation, as defined by the GIs. SMOs that opted for this approach underwent a process of institutionalization and normalization that, in the long run, allowed them to engage in long-term cooperation with GIs and NGOs. However, this approach also resulted in internal disputes, sometimes followed by members joining other SMOs and by a gradual decrease in activity.
- 2) Exiting – abandoning the arena. After the initial stage of the crisis, some SMOs decided to avoid interaction with GIs and NGOs, focusing their energies on other issues and arenas. These SMOs stopped providing direct assistance to refugees, claiming that this was the duty of institutions, not civil society. In so doing, they

safeguarded their organizational structures, ideals, and positions from normalization and institutionalization, but they also entered into conflict with their members and other SMOs that interpreted their decision as an abandonment of the struggle and those in need.

- 3) Challenging – continuing to provide services to refugees, but doing so autonomously, without interacting with GIs or NGOs. In this case, SMOs decided to “compete” with GIs, providing services for refugees by setting up alternative shelters, canteens, and helpdesks. By creating a parallel autonomous structure, the SMOs challenged the rules and conditions set by NGOs and GIs. In so doing, they became more prominent political actors in the city, mobilizing new adherents and constituents. However, the activists acknowledged that the decision to challenge GIs on this issue made cooperation in other areas more difficult.

8. Conclusions

Using the refugee crisis in Malmö as a case study, this article has shed light on the forms of and conditions for interplay between SMOs, NGOs, and GIs in times of experienced crisis and strain. By analyzing the strategic interaction among these players, we have identified under which conditions cooperation occurs and the different strategies developed by SMOs to handle the criteria for cooperation established by other players in the arena. By focusing on the processual, dynamic, and strategic elements of these interactions, we have contributed to the research on the interplay between SMOs, NGOs, and GIs.

We have shown how the positions and roles of the different players were not set in stone, but rather, were the subject of constant readjustment. In the immediacy of the crisis, SMOs quickly took a central role by strategically deploying their skills and resources (i.e. flexibility, quickness of mobilization, do-it-yourself attitude). The gradual increase of NGO and GI involvement forced SMOs to re-adjust their strategies, re-think their roles and, in some cases, abandon the arena.

Leaning on Jasper (2015), we show how “cooperation is a more common form of strategic interaction than conflict” (11) but that these two can also go hand in hand. By creating opportunities for interplay and strategically managing the opening and closing of possibilities for dialogue and collaboration, GIs changed the arena in their favor. The conditions set for cooperation in the reconstructed arena implicitly and explicitly made it difficult for several SMOs to participate. In the face of the conditions established for interplay by GIs, SMOs pursued various strategies, ranging

from adapting to exiting by creating parallel and competing structures. Established NGOs applied similar criteria for interplay. While more open to cooperation with SMOs, they too created conditions for interplay, which several SMOs found hard to adjust to. In line with previous research, the case of Malmö supports the assumption that in countries characterized by a corporatist and consensus-oriented political culture, more critical or radical SMOs have limited room to maneuver. While creating opportunities for SMOs willing to adapt to the conditions set by GIs and NGOs, others risk becoming the subject of exclusion or marginalization (Jämte and Sörbom 2016; Lundberg 2011; Turunen and Weinryb 2019).

The necessity of reducing the complexity of the case (in terms of players, length of the period being studied, observable dynamics of interaction, etc.) has certainly resulted in a simplification of the interactions, motives, and logics that made it possible for some players to collaborate and others not. While this analysis has mainly focused on the interaction among compound (collective) players, future research would benefit from analyzing the influence of personal relationships, pre-existing and emerging friendships, and hostilities among simple (individual) players on the dynamics of interplay. Moreover, while this article does not focus on the role of emotions in structuring the arena and the interplay, future analyses would also benefit from studying how feelings of compassion, guilt, rage, fear, etc. influenced the strategies of different players.

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