

# FLEXIBLE HOSPITALITY

N a s s e r T a f f e r a n t \*

**Abstract.** This article offers an excursion into the situation of migrants who share hope and precariousness in an open-air squat inner city of Lausanne, Switzerland. Whereas the countdown of their ejection is launched, they manage to survive by making dilapidated sheds more comfortable and finding help beside committed people and voluntary welfare organizations. Participant observation offers the opportunity of seeing mechanisms of stigma and marginalization on the one side, determining factors of resilience on the other side<sup>1</sup>. It contributes to the examination of the meanings by which the welfare state regulates social control of impoverished migrants and conditions of hospitality.

**Keywords:** *Welfare state, hospitality, migration, urban marginality, stigma, social control, resilience and participant observation*

**Résumé.** Cet article nous entraîne dans l'excursion ethnographique d'un squat à ciel ouvert à Lausanne, en Suisse, où des migrants luttent pour leur survie. Alors que le compte-à-rebours de leur évacuation est lancé, ils tentent de résoudre les problèmes du quotidien dans les petits cabanons de jardin qui leur servent de refuge précaire, avec l'aide d'association humanitaire. Subtilement, la méthode de l'observation participante met en lumière, d'une part, les processus de stigmatisation et de marginalisation et, d'autre part, les facteurs de résilience. Cela nous interroge également sur les conditions de possibilité d'un Etat social au bénéfice de migrants en détresse, perçus comme indésirables.

**Mots-clé.** *Etat social, hospitalité, migration, stigmatisation, contrôle social, résilience, observation participante*

**Rezumat.** Acest articol este o excursie etnografică într-un squat sub cerul liber din Lausanne, Elveția, în care migrații luptă pentru supraviețuire. În timp ce numărătoarea inversă a evacuării lor este lansată, ei încearcă să rezolve problemele vieții cotidiene în micile grajduri ale unei grădini, care le servesc ca

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<sup>1</sup> Nasser Tafferant took the photos that are included in this article.

refugiu precar, fiind sprijiniți de o asociație umanitară. Subtil, metoda observației participative evidențiază, pe de o parte, procesele de stigmatizare și marginalizare și, pe de alta, factorii rezilienței. Acest articol ridică întrebări cu privire la condițiile posibilității unui stat social în beneficiul migranților aflați în primejdie, percepuți ca indezirabili.

**Cuvinte cheie:** *stat social, ospitalitate, migrație, stigmatizare, control social, reziliență, observație participativă*

### Day one: an anonymous encounter



Lausanne, January 2012. As I'm walking to my office at dawn of a winter day, I notice through the mist several sheds. All around frost nipped shrubs in a deep silence. It occurs to me that I'm faced with deserted allotments that will rise again next spring. But I misread the reality. Nobody seems to occupy this place for a long time. Some sheds are damaged. Others disappeared without trace. Yet signs of life come to light: stack of rubbish, wood ash. Palm trees are swaying in the icy breeze, blowing to my face a nasty smell of fuel. Is it for real? These allotments aren't far from downtown. A few steps away, insurance companies and research laboratories rise up proudly. Several houses and a residential building are also part of the neighbourhood. The urban expressway, metro and university are ten-minutes walk from here. That ghost place inner city gives me a strange impression.

Suddenly an old woman is emerging from the darkness. She's walking slowly and carefully through the bush without lamp, following a snowbound path that is clearly printed in her mind. The garden sheds aren't designed to shelter

people; therefore it is necessary to wait for the right moment to relieve oneself, safe from prying eyes. Now there's no doubt about it: behind these wooden doors, people are engaged in a struggle for warmth, waiting for the mildness of the sunlight. The woman spotted me. She comes to rest, watching me going on my way. I pretend to be unaware of her presence. Upon my arrival at the office, I question my fellow workers about the dire situation close by. But no one is able to explain me what happened there.

### **One man's joy is another man's sorrow**



Reportedly by the newspapers, allotments existed since the 1950's, animated the neighbourhood in flower competitions, friendly barbecues and school public awareness of eco-citizenship. It was the good old days according to people who live along *Les Prés-de-Vidy*. Lately, the council of Lausanne had a vested interest in seeing this vast area transformed in cosy buildings, a huge mall including a swimming pool, schools and offices<sup>2</sup>. At first, people in the neighbourhood rejected the plan. Then, the council made an offer to the gardeners. They were told that they could benefit from a new site with better installations not far from here. In addition to that, those who want to preserve the sheds would be satisfied to watch them transported by helicopter, if conditions allow<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, young eco-friendly gardeners had the permission to grow

<sup>2</sup> The project « Metamorphose » is detailed on the council's website.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the migration of the allotments happened on May 2010. Eighteen sheds "flew" over the city in a distance of 400 meters to the new site.

vegetables and to live temporarily as a self-sufficient community in a house free of charge, until the launching of the building. However, those who live closer in a residential building felt that they were treated ungraciously. They had no option and feared to miss the quietness of the neighbourhood and the green field view. Some of them were so frustrated that they planned to move, even they spoke half heartedly. Not long afterwards, strains faded in the area, so the council was confident in its plan.

Everything seemed to turn out well in the gardens until the time when homeless migrants appeared in 2011. They had noticed the abandoned sheds and grasped the opportunity to live there, some alone, others with one's family. At first, they were not many but in the following days peers joined them. The council tried to seize control of this unforeseen situation in order to reassure the neighbourhood who anguished to cope with the troubles of the squat. Furthermore, getting rid of the migrants was necessary because their presence would hinder the building project. To this end, the council prompted surreptitiously the young gardeners to keep an eye on the migrants and to report any trouble that could justify police intervention. But for ethical reasons, gardeners refused to spy migrants. They even acted in the opposite direction by lending a hand and alleviated as much as possible their suffering, although they incurred the risk to be evicted in turn. Indeed, they were convinced that every people should live in harmony in this widespread and peaceful area.

Situation became so tense into the neighbourhood that the local press got hold of the story. In the newspapers, we could read impassioned testimonies that blamed migrants to be dirty and threatening. Holding the council solely responsible of the situation, an old woman mentioned that she was desperate and ready to go outside with a knife to take matter into her own hands. Others criticized council authorities for not destroying the sheds once the allotments were transferred<sup>4</sup>. It was clear that the newspapers echoed the sentiment of an edgy public to such a point that it normalized perceptions of undesirable migrants. Such preconceived ideas emboldened the young gardeners and voluntary organizations to support migrants who were afraid of reprisals and police harassment. Late 2011, the council attempted to evict the squatters. But the approach of winter buoyed the supports in favour of migrants. Voluntary welfare organizations demanded the authorities to postpone the eviction in order to avoid a humanitarian disaster. They also argued that the building project could not be launched because of the frost, therefore there was no need to rush. Finally council of Lausanne postponed the eviction next spring. It was an unexpected victory for the migrants.

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<sup>4</sup> More than twenty sheds were left without surveillance in the original site.

## Back to Day One



It's 11 a.m. I return to the abandoned allotments. Sky is bright and air remains cold. I wish I could encounter one of the urban castaways. However, nothing is happening in the squat. I suppose they left the sheds to go to downtown seeking for a better chance. This reminds me a fundamental characteristic of the squats: its relative inertia. Despite the plight of poverty, the bounds of opportunities remain passable<sup>5</sup>. The means by which some sheds were ingeniously rebuilt prove that. The squat is well located; the local area network is rapidly accessible. Mass consumption supplies with a stock of material possibilities that make streets generous. Thus, squatters bring back anything useful for their betterment. The particular care they took to make the sheds more comfortable is indicative of individual and collective resourcefulness. For instance, some sheds have been manually extended to a well-ventilated kitchen that avoids fuel poisoning. Walls are strengthened with woods, polystyrene and pieces of cardboard nailed with caps of bottles. The wooden doors are padlocked to secure personal goods. I also notice through the windows how tidy are the sheds despite their tininess. It is glaring that those who implemented the repairs are not only skilful but they also benefit from mutual aid. Moreover, decorations reveal the emotional content of the sheds, which had been made over little sweet

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<sup>5</sup> Florence Bouillon, *Les Mondes du squat*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 2009.

homes. Nothing is made needlessly in this lively place. Space of relegation, the squat also offers refuge that tends to a social organization<sup>6</sup>.

Yet desolation is a fact. I notice on the frozen ground a stack of white spirit bottles. That reminds me the fuel that I previously smelt. In fact, they're used as combustible to the detriment of the health; walls of the sheds give off a strong musty smell; pieces of cardboard spread out the ground do not prevent from dipping shoes in the mud; toys point out presence of children. I guess that people left the squat in order to seek the heat of downtown; I mean generosity and above all warmed sites.

As I'm preparing to leave the squat, I see a man who spotted me from a short distance. He's standing up straight in front of his shed and looking at me with suspicion. I wave to him hoping that he will interpret my gesture as a friendly expression. So he does. I come towards him, looking for a conversation. After shaking hands, I tell him that I don't mean any harm. I'd like to know how he manages in this poverty-stricken place. The man is about thirty years old although he looks older. He speaks a little bit French, enough to understand each other. He came with his wife and three children from an impoverished Transylvanian village looking for a job and a better situation in Switzerland until dream turned rapidly to nightmare. In this place, he appreciates the relative comfort of the shed by comparison with the "bunker". That's the pejorative nickname that is given by many homeless to the shelter of social services where families are separated, and where things turn often nasty according to rumours. Within the squat, families live close to each other. Some of them came from the same village. That makes links of solidarity easier. Moreover, the man tells me that the presence of the young gardeners is a blessing in this context of mass suspicion. In fact, migrants can count on them for any practical service: recharging phones, filling a bucket of drinking water, asking for vegetables, giving an emergency call, asking time, for a direction or a translation...

In return, migrants accept participating rules that were established by the gardeners for the common good. Man also confides me that these participating rules preventing the squat not only from the outside's dangers but also from the inside's intimidations. That's a reality: some of the squatters don't have any scruples. They survive by any means necessary even if it means fighting. That's the reason the man stays in the squat with his two little daughters while his wife and his older boy are begging in downtown. According to him, some sheds have been inspected although doors were padlocked. Lack of watchfulness may throw you in the street. The only way to keep its roof is to guard permanently or to be stronger and intimidating. I also learn that these kinds of troubles appear as well as within a community than between foreigners from different countries. For instance, Romanians and Latin Americans suspect generally each other. As much

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<sup>6</sup>Abdelmalek Sayad, *Un Nanterre algérien, terre de bidonvilles*, Paris, Editions Autrement, 1995.

as possible, young gardeners stepped into these troubles in order to pacify the ambiance, because troubles impact necessarily on the social control of the squatters. Each time an act of violence is detected in the neighbourhood, police is called and a patrol intervenes rapidly in the squat. Local press also reports any sensational news to the detriment of the migrants. After talking, the man invites me to follow him into his shed. Inside, two daughters are sleeping under a stack of blankets. The whole family share the same bed, which takes too much place. That makes the room warmer and explains why there's nobody outside. The man offers me a coffee and questions about my work. I answer that I'm teaching at the university nearby. It's not really the truth but I want to answer concretely. Telling I'm sociologist is abstract and could be particularly obscure in this poverty situation where misunderstood is not welcome. He looks at me without saying any words, with an expression of confusion in his eyes. I suppose he feels rather worried after talking with me, but also disappointed that I could not give help immediately up to his needs. The little girls are slowly emerging from a deep sleep. Before leaving the man, he's asking for a little help. He aims to connect his shed with the house of the gardeners by a cable to bring electricity. The distance is about fifty meters. He wants advices to find such a long cable, not expensive. I promise that I'll inform him. Fifty meters... That's the distance to bring light of hope.

### **It is well known: prejudice is prejudicial**

These notebook's extracts underline the various forms of social control in a context where impoverished migrants ask for hospitality. Within the space of few months, the city of Lausanne demonstrated its inability to seize control of the deleterious atmosphere that hovered over the neighbourhood to such a point that it has been criticized for its lack of interventionism. Considering this point of view, the indecisive attitude of the council impacted on the events in the detriment of migrants in such a way that it was regarded as a process of passive marginalization. The fact is that the council didn't bother to understand the demands of migrants, just as the local press understated their talks in many instances. Sometimes processes of social disqualification don't need to break out into public disturbance. Furthermore, we explain the steadfastness of the authorities by the fact that Lausanne is a city where the fear of undesirable foreigners is linked to the perception of mass begging in public sites, a subsistence activity that is often bestowed upon Roma lifestyle<sup>7</sup>. This preconceived idea contributes to strengthen the stigmatization of the Roma to such a point that many people believed that the squat was exclusively occupied by them, whereasthey co-existed with migrants who came from other countries. Others believed that the squatters refused categorically to quit Switzerland

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<sup>7</sup> Jean-Pierre Tabin, René Knüsel, *Lutter contre les pauvres. Les politiques face à la mendicité dans le canton de Vaud*, Lausanne, Éditions d'En bas, 2014.

although empirical studies stress not only phenomenon of commuting but also move with no return<sup>8</sup>. After all, for many migrants, begging is a way of preparing the departure. Finally, we have to reconsider the impression of victory born out of the postponement of the eviction. In fact, leaving the migrants in the squat is a way of control them<sup>9</sup>.



In this context of multi level violence – from stigma to physical harassment - factors of resilience must be found in the stock of social opportunities like the interconnection between migrants and support organization<sup>10</sup>. In the case of the squat, we have to notice the strategy of resistance that young committed gardeners put into action. Peacefully, they invested a lot of time and energy to promote a sense of community by establishing common rules. This had a double impact: first, migrants were not left to themselves. Then, by helping each other, they regained dignity and proved

<sup>8</sup> Monica Battaglini, Monique Eckmann, Iulia Hasdeu, Pauline Savelieff, *Roms en cité. Témoignages, participation et politiques publiques*, Genève, Editions IES, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Following the theory of disciplinary society developed by Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze emphasizes that social control in modern societies will be more effective by distance and out of walls thanks to the breakthroughs of information and communication technology.

<sup>10</sup> In Lausanne, organization OpreRromis actively engaged (<http://www.oprerrom.org>)



that self-sufficiency enables to alleviate vulnerability. Without a doubt, the suitability of such strategy is linked with the social properties of the young gardeners who invested ethical skills into the struggle. That means to be aware of the law. In fact, some of them studied political sciences at the university. Several times, they were united with assurance facing the police to protect physically and legally the migrants who thought that they could be expelled forcibly, no matter the circumstances.

To conclude, it is essential to recall that voluntary organizations and self-help initiatives are an alternative to the welfare state, especially when social services or political orientation are restrictive. Anyway, conditions of hospitality are a transnational political matter that could not be efficient without paying attention to the other here and beyond. On 30<sup>th</sup> March 2012, the sheds were destroyed in a mood of stress. Some migrants left the squat at dawn of the day. Others chose to stay until the final. District attorney, journalists, people from the neighbourhood attended the last hours of the squat. Suddenly, to everybody's surprise, some migrants rushed into an abandoned greenhouse that was not on the destruction plan. Others decided to rescue furniture in the rubble, ready to sleep outside, under the stars. They established the new camp closer to a residential building. Another round inner city was launched.

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