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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Teaching Italian and reconfiguring citizenship: the case of language volunteers in migrant education

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**ABSTRACT:** Pro-migrant volunteering is often denounced as apolitical and patronising. Voluntary initiatives for immigrants' language education, then, have been accused of facilitating the neoliberal governmentality of migration, by fashioning migrants into precarious workers. Based on 20 in-depth interviews with volunteer language teachers in Lombardy, Italy, this article complicates such understandings, by shedding light on the tensions and ambiguities characterising volunteers' activities vis-à-vis the institutional governance of migration. Indeed, whereas such initiatives take on integration tasks for the benefit of the State, and thus can be accused of allying with the State in the governmentality of migration, against a background of growing nationalism, volunteering appears to develop people's empathy and solidarity beyond national belonging, questioning the division between citizens and non-citizens. In particular, it shows that volunteering in language education has the potential to transgress consolidated lines of inclusion and exclusion, turn volunteers from 'active citizens' into 'activist citizens', and offer resources of substantive citizenship to students. Ultimately, these 'humanitarian' actions by citizens belonging to the dominant society may represent acts of citizenship complementary to the initiatives of 'denizens'.

**KEYWORDS:** Acts of citizenship; Italy; language training; pro-migrant initiatives; volunteering

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## 1. Introduction

For many scholars of migration studies, pro-migrant volunteers are engaged in activities that can be straightforwardly characterised as humanitarian (e.g., Fassin, 2012). Starting from such understanding, this scholarship has long looked critically at pro-migrant volunteering. In particular, whereas pro-migrant activism

is viewed through the challenges it poses to an underlying unjust 'status quo', volunteerism is considered functional to this same configuration: apolitical and patronising support for people in need, alleviating the symptoms caused by the top-down governance of migration without addressing the root causes (e.g., Ticktin, 2011). However, the recent initiatives of civil society groups, that during the so-called 'refugee reception crisis' in Europe (Rea et al., 2019) have voluntarily provided support to migrants, led to a redefinition of the humanitarian field and 're-evaluation' of pro-migrant volunteering and its contentious character (e.g., Della Porta, 2018).

To more thoroughly develop this latter line of studies, this article reflects on how the activities of language volunteers in migrant education can be linked to the debate on citizenship and its redefinition 'from below', and especially on the literature on 'acts of citizenship' (Isin and Nielsen, 2008). Although, in general, this literature has primarily analysed the activities performed by noncitizens who, through visible and disruptive practices, claim and demonstrate their 'ability' to be citizens (e.g., Isin and Saward, 2013), this study follows the case of volunteers that are among the members of the 'majority society' in Lombardy, Italy. These volunteers, who already possess formal citizenship, are engaged in activities to help migrants as language teachers, one of the activities with a long history within the field of pro-migrant volunteering, but also among those criticised for its contribution to the normalisation of the precarious situation of migrants (Garrido and Codó, 2017; Codó and Garrido, 2014).

Building on the literature on the (a)political meaning of pro-migrant 'humanitarianism', and academic works that deal with acts of citizenship, this study seeks to analyse if these initiatives, and the respective language volunteers, can push beyond the framework of normative citizenship, and even alter perceptions and realities in the sphere of citizenship, or rather consolidate established borders and hierarchies of citizenship. To do so, the article proceeds through two sections outlining the main theoretical arguments and, then, moves to a methodological paragraph, before addressing the empirical material. Finally, the article concludes with a brief discussion that aims to summarise what emerges from the findings.

## 2. The debate on humanitarianism

Humanitarianism is defined as an approach to governing 'humanitarian disasters', namely situations of extreme precariousness, like environmental catastrophes or extreme violence (Fassin, 2012). It is primarily tied to the use of armed forces in disasters but has long shifted to cover activities that enhance social integration involving non-governmental actors, within and beyond the context of humanitarian disasters. Even before the so-called 'refugee reception crisis', humanitarianism had started to gain significance in the refugee and migrant question, to the point that the activities for the integration of migrants, carried out by Third Sector Organisations (comprising voluntary groups) in 'Western countries', usually fall under its banner (Parsanoglou, 2020). In the scholarly literature, humanitarian interventions have been the target of several critiques.

Such critiques start with the supplementary role that non-governmental organisations would play vis-à-vis the State. Indeed, 'humanitarian' organisations make possible the outsourcing of important services from the State. In the realm of migration, this means that humanitarian groups substitute the State in the provision of important services, thus making it easier for the governments to continue with the restrictive and neoliberal governmentality of migrants (e.g., D'Agostino, 2017); for example, saving on integration services outsourced to humanitarian organisations, States can commit with greater resources to contrasting migrants' arrival. Moreover, the inclusion of non-profit organisations within the governance of migration would have appeasing effects: on the one hand, it would give legitimacy to decisions that are seen as shared rather than imposed, lowering the level of conflict and the antagonistic potential of the civil society (Sandri 2017); on the other hand, making more tolerable the condition of migrants, it would mitigate socially explosive dynamics

(Bagelman, 2013). In other words, humanitarianism would act as a 'politics of ease' (ibid.), instead of identifying and contrasting the hostile migration regime. In this sense, humanitarianism would contribute to a dynamic of depoliticisation by which the political nature of decision-making and the conflictual potential against the 'status quo' is downgraded (de Nardis, 2017), affecting also the opposition toward the prevailing migration regime (D'agostino, 2017).

This depoliticisation would be also apparent in how humanitarian actors define and frame the beneficiaries of their actions. It has been noted that humanitarianism is based on the belief in shared humanity that ignores the subjectivity of the beneficiary, also in their political dimension, thus reducing them to *bare life* (Fassin, 2012). Using Aristotle's distinction between *zoe* and *bios*, the philosopher Agamben (1995) defined *bare life* as one who is excluded from the political and juridical realms. Within critical humanitarian studies, this concept has been employed to emphasise how the humanitarian actors give priority to forms of help that respond to essential needs and the mere biological aspect of life (e.g., Ticktin, 2011; Fassin, 2012). Vis-à-vis migrants, then, humanitarianism tends to objectify refugees as mere victims (D'Agostino, 2017). In the same vein, critical scholars have also observed how humanitarian actors within the apparatus of forced migration management approach migrants as devoid of 'biographical life' (e.g., ambitions, qualifications, skills) and submit them to a set of activities and rules aiming to reorganise their lives according to the rules of the capitalist system (Brun, 2016; D'Agostino, 2017). This approach is a form of paternalistic disciplining that would depreciate migrants' skills and actual qualifications on the pretence of forming autonomous subjects (Brun, 2016); it is the product of neoliberal ideologies of the self-reliant citizen and 'civic integration' discourses – where the latter identifies an approach to migrants' inclusion which deems the immigrants themselves individually responsible for their integration (see Joppke, 2016). In particular, limiting to the role of humanitarian organisations providing language services for migrants, programmes teaching the national or regional language have been accused of allying with the neoliberal governmentality of migration in reaching their goals of labour flexibility and thinning of the state (Codó and Garrido, 2014; Garrido and Codó, 2017; Haque, 2017). Specifically, language learning would be legitimised with discourses stressing the idea of favouring migrants' labour opportunities (Haque, 2017). Consequently, language teaching would often entail transmitting a socialising agenda of crafting 'neoliberal individuals' and contributing to meeting the demands of capitalism for underpaid and insecure migrants' labour (Codó and Garrido, 2014).

One of the mechanisms by which all this is possible is the action of humanitarian 'exponents' such as volunteers. Except for some recent works (e.g., Sandri 2017; Della Porta 2018; Zamponi 2018), and unlike pro-migrant activists, who are viewed as political subjects challenging the status quo of an unjust social order, pro-migrant volunteers are deemed a band-aid within the domains of the existing social order. From this perspective, volunteers are considered merely as dutiful citizens involved in the above-mentioned dynamics of depoliticizations; specifically, they engage in the "antipolitics of care" (Ticktin, 2011), namely a depoliticized form of civic action. In particular, rather than motivated by ideological imperatives, volunteers would be mobilized by private emotions and compassion (e.g., Codó and Garrido, 2014). What is more, instead of fighting the assumptions supporting an unjust social order (e.g., classifications and hierarchies of migrants created by nation-states or within the migration regime), volunteers would legitimise it. Specifically, their approach to helping beneficiaries has been accused of (re)producing asymmetrical power relations and paternalism. Despite the 'good intentions', indeed, volunteers would often express patronizing behaviours and disciplining attitudes (see Darling, 2011). In particular, building upon the 'humanitarian' understanding of beneficiaries in which the provider of aid is perceived as superior to its receiver (Ticktin 2011), the volunteers' model of intervention is often directed to shape the behaviour of the beneficiaries, on the assumption that the provider recognizes better what is good for the receiver (Codó and Garrido, 2014).

Vis-à-vis this critical reading of humanitarianism, more recently a few scholars have juxtaposed a more complimentary understanding of humanitarian actions, especially concerning volunteers (e.g., Sandri 2017;

Della Porta, 2018; Feischmidt, Pries and Cantat, 2018; Fontanari and Ambrosini, 2018; Artero, 2019; Ambrosini, 2020). Against a background of growing civil society movements assisting refugees and migrants since around 2015 to and through Europe, as well as through America, scholars have started paying attention to the contentious character of those groups engaged in expressing their solidarity in so-called 'destination' countries and along migratory routes. In particular, this emerging literature has convened that volunteering can represent a form of resistance, and indeed that humanitarianism and politics may be entangled (Sandri, 2017). For example, in the context of Milan's pro-migrant voluntary groups, Artero (2019) maintained that pro-migrant volunteering has the potential to function as a micropolitical practice, aspiring to change an existing social order. In turn, Fleischmann (2017) shows how volunteers in Southern Germany, while avoiding defining their activity as political, try to influence the local society and protest against the hostility toward refugees.

Additionally, these works highlight that volunteering fosters the politicisation of supporters (e.g., Sandri, 2017; Artero, 2019). In other words, volunteering comes with transformative effects that question the conceptual distinctions between volunteering and activism (Fleischmann and Steinhilper, 2017; Zamponi, 2018). Particularly, the emotions arising in the context of support of refugees and asylum seekers do not inevitably result in a politics of empathy or pity but generate a critique of the 'status quo' and the provision of services that go beyond mere survival (de Jong and Ataç, 2017). Finally, as Vandevordt (2019) observes, humanitarianism can be considered subversive because of its oppositional meaning. Against a background of growing nationalism, 'crimmigration' (Coutin, 2011), and new borders, and without engaging in conventional politics, but just being adversarial to the wider political climate in which their activity takes place, these volunteers enter into the 'political battleground' (see also Ambrosini, 2020). Ultimately, these works introduced the political and contentious dimension into the domain of humanitarianism. However, in which sense this should intertwine with citizenship, and to what extent, is a question for the next section.

### 3. Citizenship beyond normative dimensions

Citizenship is a 'Janus-faced' concept (e.g., Fortier, 2016). On the one side, in its formal and normative dimension, citizenship represents mostly a legal status, bestowed by nation-states, that defines and demarcates populations. On the other side, citizenship may emerge 'from below' as 'substantive citizenship', namely the actual enjoyment of rights and belonging in a society; it is a process that comes from the capacity of individuals to identify with others, create an idea of unity, claim rights, and perform and feel citizenship (Lister, 2007). Formal and substantive citizenship do not always overlap, and the latter 'escapes' the dominance of the normative dimension thanks to the individual ability to 'create' citizenship, regardless of the legal status (Darling, 2017).

One of the most well-established concepts to account for the creation of a 'citizenship from below' is the theory of 'acts of citizenship'. According to Isin and Nielsen, (2008), acts of citizenship are moments of creative breaks disrupting established scripts (like the divisive categorisation of citizens and non-citizens) and subjectivities to create new scripts and political subjects. Consequently, the logic of acts of citizenship emphasises the break with a dominant order and the enactment of social transformation. Indeed, acts do not need to be founded in law and are instead potentially illegal (Isin, 2009). For this reason, acts are often visible claims to rights, like demonstrations and protests, that challenge the law and may, sometimes, break it. Additionally, the concept of acts of citizenship is often mobilised to investigate the acts of those who are not considered political subjects, like irregular migrants (see Isin and Saward, 2013). The goal is not the acquisition of formal citizenship but elements of substantive citizenship which transform the 'actors' in the process. In particular, acts of citizenship, to be such, need to be both 'enacted' and bring about 'activist citizens'; the latter are actors that challenge the content and boundaries of citizenship, and are contrasted with 'active citizens', who engage in activities that 'work on' the existing citizenship (e.g., exercise their political rights) (Isin and

Nielsen, 2008). In other words, the concept of acts of citizenship describes a dynamic of power resistance that involves new onto-political forms of being.

With time, scholars have revised the notion of acts of citizenship as initially introduced by Isin and Nielsen (2008), especially by extending the range of acts of citizenship to draw on a more expansive account of 'acts'. Whereas originally acts were visible and disruptive claims of rights within a public domain where people constitute themselves as citizens, regardless of their existing citizenship status, for Fortier (2016) acts may "refer to both institutional and individual practices of making citizens or citizenship, including practices that seek to redefine, decentre or even refuse citizenship" (Fortier, 2016, p.1039). In other words, in this line of thought acts include also everyday and banal interventions by which people negotiate power-resistance in much less spectacular terms (Darling, 2017). Following this reading, Darling (2017, p.730) spoke of opening the analysis of acts of citizenship to the processes that, despite maintaining normative accounts of citizenship, are involved in constituting citizens. These acts generally hold uncertain and ambivalent positions; they often both resist and reinscribe power relations and can be embedded within technologies of governmentality (Darling, 2017).

In this same vein, Kallio, Häkli and Bäcklund (2015) drew a parallel between the notions of 'acts of citizenship' and 'lived citizenship'. With the latter, Lister (2007) identified a non-disruptive construction of substantive citizenship built via a set of relations and practices in various sites and scales that give individual and collective meaning to the notion of citizenship. Within this understanding, it has been maintained that daily relationships and practices are potential instruments of contestation and transformation of citizenship (Kallio, Häkli and Bäcklund, 2015); indeed, the 'lived citizenship' is a resource for the emergence of inclusive citizenship ideas of justice, respect for the intrinsic worth of all human beings, self-determination, and solidarity (Lister, 2007). From this perspective, acts of citizenship are not confined to political activities but include also social and relational aspects. In this sense, Gatti (2022) has recently suggested that acting together and the corresponding relationships arising between citizens and non-citizens can constitute acts of citizenship. Following Schwiertz and Schwenken's (2020) concept of 'solidarity citizenship', and analysing solidarity networks promoted from below by migrants themselves in alliance with 'native' citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic, she noted how relations between citizens and non-citizens can trigger a transformation from active citizens to activist citizens and create new forms of solidarity challenging the 'status quo' and claiming rights, recognition and belonging beyond forms of national exclusion.

Finally, more radically, Squire (2017) has even introduced the idea of 'intervention' within the theory of acts of citizenship; this designates initiatives or practices that potentially initiate new onto-political ways of being but whose ability to disrupt the 'status quo' and instantiate a new political subject is witnessed only fleetingly. Specifically, while acts are successful strategical actions within a strategically selective context, interventions advance in an intricate way to amass resources, skills and networks that can create "multiple openings for new subjects and scripts to emerge" (Squire, 2017, p.268). In other words, whereas interventions do not necessarily alter a position on the margins, beneath the surface they offer a platform for new political claims and strategies to emerge. Ultimately, through these understandings, acts of citizenship open to the analysis of processes that have uncertain and ambivalent outcomes but are potential instruments of contestation and transformation of citizenship.

## 4. Methodology

This article is based on 20 qualitative interviews with language volunteers in seven civil society language schools located in the Italian region of Lombardy, specifically in Milan and Lecco (a small city situated circa 40km from Milan). In particular, the seven schools are: *Scuola di lingua e cultura italiana di Sant'Egidio*, an

Italian language school established in Milan in 1997, which is part of an international Catholic community, Sant'Egidio<sup>1</sup>, *Lezioni al Campo*<sup>2</sup>, founded in 2015 by a group of citizens willing to provide language courses to asylum-seekers hosted in a reception centre in Lecco; *Fondazione Franco Verga*<sup>3</sup>, founded in Milan in 1978 to continue the activity of Franco Verga, a Deputy in the Italian Parliament with the Christian Democrats in the '60s, which provides (*inter alia*) language education to international immigrants; *Centro Come*, a project of the Catholic Caritas Ambrosiana, aiming from 1994 to provide integration services to immigrants in Milan<sup>4</sup>; *No Walls*<sup>5</sup>, an association that emerged after the 2015 'refugee reception crisis' events in Milan and provides language education and other services initially to asylum-seekers and currently to all immigrants; *the Italian school of Todo Cambia*<sup>6</sup>, an association born from a group of Milanese anti-racist activists in 2001; and *Naga-har's Italian school*<sup>7</sup>, the Italian language school of Naga, a long-established (1987) secular association, ideologically left-wing, providing mainly health-care and legal services to immigrants in Milan.

This selection maximised differences in terms of longevity and ideological roots to well-represent the 'scene' of civil society's Italian language schools in this area of Italy. Indeed, *Naga-har* and *Todo Cambia* are long-standing secular organisations that are politically left-leaning, *Sant'Egidio*, *Centro Come* and *Fondazione Verga* locate within the Catholic spectrum, while *Lezioni al Campo* and *No Walls* are newly-established secular organisations instituted quite spontaneously by citizens, under the impact of the 'Refugee Reception Crisis'. However, despite the differences, these schools have commonalities. Indeed, Italian classes are mainly run by volunteers and are offered for free or at low prices. All organisations provide Italian education, as well as other activities, to immigrants in a broad sense; apart from groups that focus on particular categorisations (e.g., *Lezioni al Campo* and *Naga-har's Italian school* to asylum-seekers), generally they are open to all foreigners, from the 'undocumented' to 'economic immigrants', or practically implement a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy vis-à-vis students' legal status. In all schools, according to the participants, students are usually young and recently-arrived (specifically in the case of *Todo Cambia* there are even classes for minors), with many exceptions though. Additionally, *Fondazione Franco Verga*, *No Walls*, *the Italian school of Todo Cambia*, and *Naga-har's Italian school* are part of *Scuole Senza Permesso* (that is Schools without Permit), a 'union' of schools constituted in 2005 in the province of Milan which aims to exchange ideas and share experience and 'good practices', as well as to realise initiatives in favour of migrants<sup>8</sup>.

The interviews were conducted between May and October 2021 with regular language volunteers. The interviewees were selected following non-probability sampling criteria, and specifically as a result of the expert judgement of key informants and 'snowball' sampling (Sharma 2017); in particular, building upon the personal contact that I already had, I contacted the school coordinators, who approached potential participants, asked for their availability, and finally introduced me. The resulting sample is made up of 6 men and 14 women, and participants' age range from 21 to 71, with a prevalence of participants with 50 years or more (13 interviewees). Their occupational status is diversified: there are 4 pensioners, 1 homemaker, 2 university students, and 13 workers. As for the latter, 7 participants work in the educational field (usually as public-school teachers), while the remnants are employed in different types of 'white-collar' jobs, from a medical scientist to market research analyst.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.santegidio.org/pageID/30104/langID/en/Schools-of-Language-and-Culture.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/LezioniAlCampo/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.associazioneverga.org/chi-siamo/fondazione-verga/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.centrocome.it/?page\\_id=2](https://www.centrocome.it/?page_id=2)

<sup>5</sup> <https://nowalls.it/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://todocambia.net/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://naga.it/attivita/centro-har/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.scuolesenzapermesso.org/>

The interviews were semi-structured and were conducted in Italian either online via video call (due to COVID-19 restrictions) or face-to-face, and lasted from 40 to 80 minutes. In the interviews, participants were invited to discuss aspects of their personal and professional stories and political orientation, and illustrate their motivations to volunteer, the events that led them to volunteer in that specific school, their practice of teaching, and the impact this experience had on their personal history and beliefs. The interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and subsequently, participants' names were pseudonymised. Finally, I employed a qualitative data analysis tool (*Taguette*) to identify, analyse, and report the main themes emerging from the data, following a thematic analysis approach (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012).

## 5. The crucial role of civil society initiatives in teaching Italian to immigrants

To contextualise this study, it is necessary to observe how the Italian language is not only a crucial element for immigrants' integration but a fundamental administrative requirement (Bianco and Cobo, 2019). Adequate knowledge of the Italian language is crucial for immigrants who want to apply for a long-term residence permit and is also required for citizenship applications (Bianco and Cobo, 2019). The compulsory knowledge of the language underscores the assimilatory character of the integration process in European countries (Joppke, 2016), as also emphasized by the introduction, in 2012, of the Integration Agreement in Italy; it was presented as a pact between the Italian State and certain categories of non-EU resident, this regulation affirms the necessity to learn Italian to a basic level (level A2), know Italian civic culture and obtain sufficient knowledge of the Italian constitution and normative to reside in Italy (Bianco and Cobo, 2019).

To provide the instruments to learn the language, the State delivers Italian language courses via two main venues: the ordinary and extraordinary reception systems (SAI – *Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione* – and CAS – *Centro di Accoglienza Straordinaria*), which provide classes only for asylum-seekers and refugees, and the Provincial centres for adult education and training (CPIA), public schools that offer Italian language courses to all regular immigrants, aiming at giving a basic language competence of Italian. Additionally, the same CPIAs organise exams to issue Italian language proficiency certificates to abide by the law requirements.

This system has different shortcomings. Notably, SAI and CAS classes are open only to a specific group of refugees. Here, CPIAs' lack of sufficient financial resources translates into limited hours of lessons and a high number of participants, and irregular immigrants are excluded from any linguistic education (Bianco and Cobo, 2019). Against this backdrop, it has been observed how many civil society organisations play a crucial role in filling such gaps. In several contexts, for example in Rome (Catarci, Fiorucci and Trulli, 2014), civil society groups (i.e., trade unions, voluntary associations, Catholic institutions, and NGOs) set up numerous educational programmes to cope with the many problems.

As emerging from the interviews, Lombardy organisations equally play a crucial role in providing resources to foreign language learners and thus fill the deficits of public institutions in the Lombardy region. For example, it emerges that often organisations substitute the state in taking the immigrants who need to prove their proficiency to the A2 basic level: generally, they offer courses that are modelled on the example of the CPIAs', and prepare the students to succeed in the language examination. Organisations have their educational approach and tools and, like professional teachers, language volunteers need to concretise and implement schools' didactics. For this reason, they undergo training — on the whole, they are taught by expert volunteers; often they have access to special training programmes. Despite the differences, in all these organisations the educational approach privileges a didactic aimed at the acquisition of communicative abilities in the daily context of life and work. In general, schools' didactics stress the importance of equipping students with a skill, the 'native' language, that makes migrants more 'usable' in the labour market (see Haque, 2017). Consequently, teaching Italian must be directed toward giving linguistic competencies useful to find quickly a job, rather than, e.g, focusing on normative grammar:

*“The Italian language is fundamental because ... If you don't have an adequate level of Italian it becomes complicated to find work”* (Simona, 45-year-old Medical Scientist, volunteering in 'No Walls')

This aspect is usually framed as part of the general objective to help immigrants reach individual autonomy, considered mainly as self-sufficiency. All this can resonate with the observation that within humanitarianism language education is a tool for the fashioning of migrants into 'neoliberal subjects', who need to achieve a sufficient level of self-sufficiency (Codó and Garrido, 2014; Brun, 2016; Garrido and Codó, 2017):

*“Our saying is ‘to teach a man to fish, not to give a man a fish’... Our classes help you in the labour market in order to encourage them to be autonomous”* (Martina, 62, Teacher, Lezioni al Campo)

Besides the Italian language, civic education is also taught during Italian classes. Provided also to abide by Integration Agreement's requirement to obtain sufficient knowledge of the Italian normative, these lessons address specific topics like the national health service, the labour market, immigration rules and laws.

*“We had this monothematic course that we call civic education. We teach the rules of the Italian State, the Constitution, the process required to apply for asylum ... We also explain practical things: how to get a health card, why you need it, what's for ....”* (Franca, 53, Pharmaceutical Researcher, No Walls)

In this context, some volunteers often consider themselves not only instructors of Italian but also educational figures teaching migrants how to correctly deal with Italian society, something which they find equally important as speaking Italian. In some cases, then, it emerged a patronizing approach by some volunteers. As Piero's interview below suggests, they feel responsible for transferring appropriate behavioural knowledge, starting from their punctuality in class. In his case, this also means offering an education stressing the respect of the norms.

*“Integration is also this. If there is a schedule you have to respect it, in class and elsewhere. If you want to be autonomous, you have to work and to work you have to follow the rules”* (Piero, 67, Pensioner, Centro Come)

This patronizing approach resonates with what has been observed in the critical literature on humanitarianism (Ticktin, 2011; Codó and Garrido, 2014). In particular, some volunteers reveal a paternalistic code of conduct; usually, older volunteers enact conduct based on the assumption that they recognise students' best interests. This behaviour is best-embodied by Lidia in the next excerpt, who recounts how she confronted a student. Her conduct, which does not appear shared in this extreme way by the majority of volunteers, can be considered a form of 'disciplining' of students.

*“Once, a student that I knew well, who was waiting for his asylum interview for a long time, came to me asking for money to migrate to France. I said 'yes, but if you go you're through with me! Indeed, you risk your asylum application. Be patient'. Recently, he obtained a permit and thanked me for that. I told him: 'I treated you just as if you were my son, because you were 19 and I'm 59'”* (Lidia, 59, Teacher, No Walls)

This dynamic couples with another ambivalent aspect that emerges from the fact that Italian classes represent also spaces of intercultural mediation where issues and problems emerge. Indeed, everyday racism,

bureaucratic issues, and personal problems are often discussed in class. It emerges that, in some cases, volunteers try to assuage the students by clarifying dynamics and motivations at the basis of the hostility of people and institutions, even if it means 'appeasing' the problem. In the next interview, for example, a volunteer discusses how she deals with the experience of everyday racism:

*“Sometimes they tell us about problems with racism, like people who don't respond to their questions. We explain that even if they're good persons, because they're black, maybe dressed a bit strangely, they can frighten people ... We also tell them to behave properly, be polite: to say 'excuse me' and then ask the question ...”* (Simona, 45, Medical Scientist, No Walls)

These dynamics (the substitution of the state in language education, the emphasis on giving resources for the labour market, the patronizing civic education, and the appeasement of problems) represent uncertain and ambivalent aspects that appear to corroborate the perspective on humanitarianism accusing pro-migrant volunteerism of being instrumental in taking forward the 'status quo'.

## **6. Beyond 'bare life': language classes as a resource for migrants' substantive citizenship**

The interviews, however, reveal that language education cannot be reduced to the exaggerations of the critical literature on humanitarianism. For starters, I want to point at those elements that, contrary to a critical reading, favour migrants' substantive citizenship. As seen, substantive citizenship defines a condition where one feels and acts as a part of a socio-political community, regardless of his/her formal membership. Humanitarianism can be an obstacle to all this: giving priority to forms of aid that respond to essential needs and the mere biological aspect of life, humanitarianism tends to reduce beneficiaries to 'bare life' (Ticktin, 2011; Fassin, 2012). However, in the interviews, it emerges that language education initiatives give resources for substantive citizenship in different ways.

First, our participants reveal an idea of linguistic education that considers the mastering of the Italian language as an instrument for helping students express themselves and participate in their 'new' society. Also, volunteers are animated (if not primarily) by the idea of helping immigrants to 'take the floor'.

*“Take the floor’, that's how the course is called ... our role is fundamental because the language makes you part of the citizenry”* (Livia, 54, Market Research Analyst, Fondazione Verga)

*“I want to teach Italian because ... I want that everyone has the right to express what they want to express”* (Maria, 60, Homemaker, Fondazione Verga)

To do so, language classes are usually designed to create 'peer-to-peer spaces' where the active and equal participation of the students is encouraged through group works, projects, and role plays, thus bypassing traditional directive methods (e.g., frontal lessons):

*“Especially with 'advanced' students, my lessons are not only frontal ... I turn the lesson upside down, I ask them to write a paper and then they do the lesson”* (Diego, 53, Freelance Private Teacher, Fondazione Verga)

This is done also with activities outside the scholastic context. All the organisations offer several social activities besides language classes; among them, there are sports events, city tours, pairing migrants with sponsor families, legal help desks, vocational training, and labour consulting. One can see these activities, which are not primarily focused on mere survival, as evidence that humanitarian action can move from bare life to social existence (see also Artero 2020). As one participant uttered:

*“In some cases, we also organised parties ... Talking and playing music are ways to express yourself as well as being together and creating togetherness”* (Carla, 51, Teacher, Lezioni al Campo)

The benefits of these activities for students appear to be evident to our participants. Although this study did not gather the opinion of the students, volunteers recounted the transformation that some of them underwent throughout the Italian classes:

*“[In class] at the beginning we always see some shy students that at the end of the course experienced an incredible transformation obtaining the ability to take the voice... [because] there is nothing that you have to say or do to become a good Italian or Milanese citizen ... In my opinion, the language ought to give you the possibility to participate.”* (Livia, 54, Market Research Analyst, Fondazione Verga)

Language volunteers maintain that, consequently, they help students to grow personally, socially and professionally, too. Although I noted how didactics stress the importance of the language as a resource for equipping migrants with a tool to find quickly a job, and consequently a minimal level of self-sufficiency, volunteers are not committed only to teaching the basic command of the language necessary to obtain the least-qualified jobs. Given that obtaining a job is greatly beneficial for the development of social and human capital and individual self-confidence (Phillimore and Goodson, 2008), according to many participants their schools provide also *ad-hoc* courses for advanced learners. Additionally, to help their students, some admit to regularly offering lessons aiming at giving language skills to 'climb the ladder of success' and meet their ambitions:

*“At a certain point, some students start to look for a different, more qualified job. Their basic knowledge of Italian limits their ambitions. So, at this point, you continue to work on this need ... you teach how to speak and write better to support this desire”* (Loredana, 42, Teacher, Todo Cambia)

More importantly, these initiatives foster inclusion beyond the imposed liminality (Piacentini 2015, p.436) prescribed by the current migration governance. If the critical literature on humanitarianism considers language education an instrument to reduce beneficiaries to 'bare life', there are elements in this study that underscore how language volunteers rather approach migrants as subjects with ambitions and qualities, and rouse students' capacity to perform and feel citizenship throughout a set of relations and practices.

## **7. Language teaching and the redefinition of the social order: beyond national borders and against normative citizenship**

One of the most criticised aspects of humanitarianism is that it would (re)produce exclusionary societal boundaries. These boundaries encompass hierarchical relations between citizens and non-citizens as well as the watershed between deserving and non-deserving migrants (e.g., Ticktin, 2011; Fassin, 2012). However, in this study, the linguistic aid offered by volunteers appears to transgress consolidated lines of inclusion and

exclusion and build relations of solidarity that can potentially contribute to a redefinition of citizenship on a broader scale.

In this regard, the first thing to notice is the access policy of many schools. Consequently, as seen earlier, schools are open to all foreigners, from the 'undocumented' to 'economic migrants'. The priority is to ensure a learning opportunity for all.

*“Our school tries to meet the linguistic needs of any foreigner who lives here, regardless of their legal situation”* (Alberto, 23, Student, Sant'Egidio)

As noted, by teaching Italian, these organisations facilitate migrants' quest for a job or for finding a better one as well as their personal and social growth. All this contrasts with the dynamics of marginalisation toward immigrants. In particular, by opening doors to irregular immigrants, usually excluded from formal educational opportunities (e.g., CPIAs), these organisations oppose the most tenacious lines of exclusions from the citizenry (see also Vandevoordt, 2019):

*“We collaborate with other organisations and even public authorities in order to find a place and ‘redeem’ anyone, especially refugees and irregular immigrants, trying to put them back on a path leading to their regularisation”* (Simona, 45, Medical Scientist, No Walls)

Complementary to this is the relational approach which is established within the classes. While several volunteers have a ‘professionalised’ profile (e.g., have attended training or are professional educators), their effort is not to treat the immigrant learners as ‘students’ but, as seen, to create a non-discriminatory and welcoming context that would favour horizontal communication within the class. The welcoming approach is a crucial element in the development of nonprofessional and friendly relationships between students and volunteers, for the interviewees. As one of the volunteers narrated:

*“[As the time passes] we inevitably become friends to them, rather than only teachers”* (Piero, 67, Pensioner, Centro Come)

The emerging nonprofessional and friendly relationships appear to yield several consequences. Firstly, they approximate the ideal of solidarity, namely the model of horizontal power relations and mutual modes of relating (Schwiertz and Schwenken, 2020). This dynamic can represent the rise of solidarity beyond national belonging and can contribute to challenging exclusionary discourses. Specifically, it appears that often in classes there arise bonds that transcend the nation-state as the locus of belonging. This dynamic contrasts with the lines of inclusion and exclusion based on ethnic-ascribed attributes, that depict immigrants as substantially different from natives. In this context, Italy, where many media and politicians depict foreigners as 'criminals', and ethnic-ascribed attributes, together with cultural attributes, represent an important element in the idea of 'Italianness' for many Italians (see Guglielmi, 2020), this dynamic appears to go just in the opposite direction of breaking down divisions between citizens and non-citizens.

*“When you meet them you realize that, well, maybe they have a different skin colour, sure there're some differences ... but we have much more in common”* (Alberto, 23, Student, Sant'Egidio)

The sense of solidarity is perhaps more immediate for young teachers like Alberto since students are usually young as well. Indeed, as suggested below by Livia, the age gap between older teachers and students can make their relationship more formal, beyond teachers' intentions – and maybe contributes to the paternalistic

approach of older volunteers previously observed. However, as she stressed, there are also indications that the feeling of solidarity characterizes also older volunteers' actions:

*"I started teaching when I was still quite 'young' but after 15 years I became older and I've realized that students treat me differently now, with extreme courtesy and formality sometimes... However, with some I still create relationships that go well beyond school, a relationship that I would call of intense solidarity if not friendship"* (Livia, 54, Market Research Analyst, Fondazione Verga)

The 'peer-to-peer' approach of the courses seems to instigate in the teachers the identification with the students and their problems (as we will observe later), or at least an atmosphere of respect between native and non-native which conflicts with a sense of superiority:

*"Getting to know them made me humbler ... I speak Italian and English but there I discovered that people from francophone Africa know French, or at least they understand it, the Gambians know English, and everyone speaks their local languages, thus you feel very 'small', and you say: 'I'm not better than them'"* (Maria, 60, Homemaker, Fondazione Verga)

Finally, several volunteers maintain that language classes and the other services provided by their organizations can redraw the lines of exclusion and inclusion in the local community. For starters, some groups have experimented with activities putting in contact migrants with natives at the local scale, like pairing migrants with sponsor families during Christmas dinners<sup>9</sup>. For them, these activities have the merit of enlarging migrants' relational network and social capital, as well as making migrants feel more strongly part of the community. Although it is not possible here to establish the actual effects, indeed, some affirm detecting a higher level of acceptance towards migrants in those contexts (small towns, neighbourhoods) where their activities were carried out. Additionally, beyond these special initiatives, they suggest that their initiatives build up transversal networks and provide resources that can contribute to a redrawing of the local 'citenry', beyond the adherence to the 'normative citizenship'.

*"One of our former students now speaks well in Italian and works in the centre of Lecco. He's an outgoing person and has made more friends than I have. Even if he's a 'foreigner' he's part of the local community... He represents extraordinary evidence [against anti-migrant discourses], more than all the words I can say ...."* (Carla, 51, Teacher, Lezioni al Campo)

In other words, learning spaces appear to prefigure and contribute to building a different social order contrasting the one based on the ideal of likeness and national citizenship.

## **8. Volunteers from active to activist citizens**

In the critical literature, volunteers and activists are often contrasted. From this perspective, volunteers are perceived as benevolent service providers who act as a band-aid within the domains of the existing social order, whereas activists direct their efforts toward challenging the 'system' that maintains this same unjust social order (e.g., Ticktin, 2011). Yet, the findings show how the questioning of the status quo becomes integral

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<sup>9</sup> For example, *Lezioni al Campo* organised the so-called *Natale in Famiglia*, and sant'Egidio conducted a similar activity according to its volunteers; see <https://www.leccotoday.it/eventi/natale-in-famiglia-profughi.html>

to the volunteers' activity. These elements arguably illustrate how volunteers have the potential to embody not only the figure of the 'active citizen' but also of the 'activist citizen'.

The interviewed volunteers present variegated ideological and political backgrounds: for example, there are teachers with a long left-wing political militancy, but the majority did not engage strongly with politics. Nevertheless, to justify their volunteering, all participants not only emphasize their efforts as benevolent actions directed toward relief from suffering and showing empathy. Indeed, these elements interact with motivations concerning 'solidarity', 'justice', and 'equality' when justifying their actions. In this context, unlike analyses where volunteers appear quasi-unconsciously political (e.g., Fleischmann and Steinhilper, 2017), our participants show a consciousness of the political meaning of the help they give. Against a background of growing nationalism, polarization, and criminalization, even those who did not have a strong political profile said that their activity becomes 'politicized'; this not because their political orientations tend uniformly toward a certain political area, but because it positions them in contrast with anti-migration rhetoric and politics that are mainly expressed by right-wing politicians.

*"We organise courses, we help immigrants, we try to include them against a hostile context... If you do all that, well, you're identified with a certain political area, the 'left', which is more favourable to immigrants"* (Lidia, 59, Teacher, No Walls)

This opposition toward anti-migration politics emerges also when asked about the migration governance they would champion. Vis-à-vis this question, participants split roughly into two main groups. A few calls for the unmitigated right of people on the move. Advocates of 'open borders' refer to the impacts of globalization and the rights of people's mobility. Their discourse poses a challenge to the principles of national citizenship and thus seeks to challenge the very foundations of migration governance:

*"We have sought globalisation, especially from an economic point of view ... thus, immigration will grow, and moving from one place to another should become a right for all"* (Alberto, 23, Student, Sant'Egidio)

*"I believe that the world is everyone's home and therefore everyone can decide where to live, regardless of borders"* (Pasquale, 30, Special Aid Teacher, No Walls)

Others express a more moderate position recognizing the legitimacy of the nation-state to restrict and select immigrants' arrivals but defending the right of the migrants who are 'here' to be included. In particular, advocates of this position highlight the 'good character' and positive contribution of migrants, thus resisting the idea of immigrants being detrimental to Italy (Musarò and Parmiggiani, 2017). Additionally, they would like to see a greater effort by the state in fostering integration; this idea contrasts those facets of migration governance favouring the labour of underpaid and insecure migrants (Anderson, 2010).

*"Immigrants make a positive contribution. We should be grateful to those people who come here to work as domestic helpers, carers, sweepers, bricklayers ... since they are here, let's help them to integrate! They are a resource, but we have to invest in them"* (Felice, 71, Pensioner, Todo Cambia)

The affinity with one of these two groups does not strictly follow the affiliations with the organisations: some volunteers express moderate positions in each 'school' while 'open-borders' positions are taken also by teachers of *Sant'Egidio*, *Fondazione Verga*, *Lezioni al Campo* and *No Walls* as well as in the left-leaning organisations of *Naga* and *Todo Cambia*. Perhaps because the practice of volunteering appears critical in

forming and strengthening such viewpoints. In fact, dealing with immigrants has undoubtedly an impact on our respondents. On the one hand, discussing with students about their life could involve reflecting on one's own social position and attitudes. On the other hand, sometimes volunteers experience directly the daily problems of immigrants. For example, when volunteers accompany migrants to public offices or look at a rental flat, they face discrimination:

*“I help some to find a house... [at the beginning] I had this feeling of outrage because I found out that when they know that the prospective tenant is an African man they say no”* (Carla, 51, Teacher, Lezioni al Campo)

These experiences raise awareness of the manifold racism in society and trigger indignation. Like the following participant maintains, volunteers "become aware of all the difficulties foreigners can face. Much more; we see them first-hand". In this regard, most of the interviewees reported to have already had a negative perception of the level of racial discrimination in Italy; some, instead, recognise how volunteering has induced a sharp change in their perception. It is important, however, to emphasise that 'getting to know' these problems does not generate pity toward immigrants but criticism of the governance of migration and its actors. Participants, several times, raise major concerns about, for example, the media depictions of immigrants or government policies, and became sceptical about institutional policies. Consequently, they tend to question the status quo and the decisions made by people in power, and some even problematize their subsidiary role — an attitude contradicting their characterisations as appeasing actors in some works (e.g., Malkki, 1996):

*“The problem is that where the voluntary associations are active, the institutions are absent”* (Simona, 45, Medical Scientist, No Walls)

In particular, as put forward in other works (e.g., Fleischmann and Steinhilper, 2017; Artero, 2019), the findings show that participants often develop as 'experts'. This means that they educate themselves, and acquire a critical and historical awareness of the migratory processes, not only by practically doing but also by e.g., reading texts and attending seminars. All this can also lead to 'activism'; like the activists described by Zamponi, 'apolitical' practices end up "to represent a first step in the development of political participation" (Zamponi, 2018, p.99) that expresses via taking part in street protests and more traditional forms of engagement. A prime example comes from the next interviewee:

*“At first, I acted out of curiosity towards the ‘other’. The political discourse came later ... little by little, I started to read, to follow some situations, I started to make some more political reasoning ... so I became a bit more active. Before I was just a teacher, then I took part in demonstrations, we made posters, and then we also did a series of things ...”* (Loredana, 42, Teacher, Todo Cambia)

In some cases, like Loredana's, this process can be explicitly favoured by 'leftist' organisations such as *Naga* and *Todo Cambia*, which are also embedded in political movements<sup>10</sup>. In these organizations, language volunteers are invited to attend seminars, protests, and sign petitions. However, this process does not involve only (and does not concern all) volunteers in these associations. The practice of volunteering appears to have stimulated a process of discovery and conscientisation also in those volunteers lacking a strong political

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<sup>10</sup> In particular, both *Naga* and *Todo Cambia* have long been part of political movements concerning, e.g., the so-called Bossi-Fini law, the Salvini Decree, or the opening of an expulsion centre in Milan. For an overview of their initiatives: <https://todocambia.net/iniziativa-sociali-e-culturali/>; <https://naga.it/notizie/>

background or an affiliation in a politically-charged organisation, for example as Carla and Maria's viewpoints below illustrate:

*"When you people behind the events, when you know their story, you cannot remain indifferent. You get involved and you're 100% committed"* (Carla, 51, Teacher, Lezioni al Campo)

*"I didn't know anything about this migration, and this experience put me in contact with a different reality that enriched and changed me"* (Maria, 60, Homemaker, Fondazione Verga)

Ultimately, rather than dutiful citizens, volunteering thus seems to have the potential to transform participants from 'mere' active citizens to activist citizens' who seek to leave a mark on this world:

*"I'm a person who wants to take part, who doesn't just want to watch"* (Marcella, 66, Pensioner, Naga-har)

## 9. Conclusion

Against a backdrop in which the critical literature on humanitarianism often denounces pro-migrant volunteering as apolitical and 'conservative', this article wondered if and to what extent the language education provided by voluntary groups can represent a political intervention and an activity contributing to a redefinition of citizenship 'from below'. The findings started showing apparent 'complicit' and 'conservative' implications of language schools. As seen in section 5, indeed, language volunteers appear to take on integration tasks for the benefit of the State, confirming the harsh accusations, toward a catch-all conception of 'humanitarianism', of representing an ally rather than a dissonance in the governmentality of migration. In particular, by preparing immigrants for the successful competition of the language test, they substitute the public authorities and partake in a 'neoliberal' devolution of services from the public to the private domain. Additionally, by complementing language classes with civic education, they may be accused of fashioning migrants into subjects functional to the precarious labour market. In some cases, it emerged a patronizing and disciplining approach in some volunteers.

The rest of the findings, however, complicated and questioned such understanding. Language volunteering has a contentious and political character, if we consider political those initiatives that challenge an existing social order (Sinatti, 2019): volunteering entailed activities aiming at making students express and participate in their new 'society', and in so doing questioned the reduction of migrants to 'bare life' (section 6); in a context where ethnocultural attributes represent an important element in the idea of 'Italianness' for many Italians, in language schools there emerged relations of solidarity that appear to go just in the direction of breaking down divisions between citizens and non-citizens (section 7); finally, the solidarity emerging in the 'peer-to-peer' space of the classes seemed to instigate in many teachers the desire to acquire a critical and historical awareness of the migratory processes, which can potentially lead to political activism (section 8).

In this sense, the notion of acts of citizenship has proved useful for coming to terms with the potential of language volunteering. According to Isin and Nielsen (2008), acts of citizenship are moments of power-resistance that involve new onto-political forms of being, namely 'activist citizens', political subjects that challenge the content and boundaries of citizenship. This notion has been recently revised by scholars to become an analytical tool to explore a wide range of dynamics. Through these redefinitions, it embraces also acts that are non-disruptive and banal. From this perspective, acts of citizenship are not confined to political activities but open to relations and practices in the everyday life that can trigger a transformation (Gatti, 2022)

or 'sit on the fence' between resisting and reinscribing power relations, holding uncertain and ambivalent positions (Darling, 2017).

I believe that the initiatives of these language schools fit into this 'scholarship'. Specifically, they represent instances of acts of citizenship's interventions. With 'intervention', Squire (2017) has embedded into the debate on acts of citizenship those initiatives, practices, or actions generating resources, skills and networks that do not necessarily disrupt the 'status quo' and instantiate a new political subject but still hold the potential to open opportunities for new political claims and subjectivities to emerge in the long-run. Accordingly, the findings underscored how language volunteering provides students with resources that can feed their substantive citizenship, and hence potentially transform them into 'activist citizens'. More properly, then, they show its transformative potential vis-à-vis the volunteers. Indeed, unlike the literature on acts of citizenship, which usually focuses on subjects excluded from current political communities, here the attention has concerned 'humanitarian' acts performed by members of the 'majority society'. As seen, acts of citizenship cut across the boundaries of normative citizenship; in principle, they can be enacted by non-citizens and citizens alike, as long as they have a transformative potential (Squire, 2017). Language volunteering exhibits such a transformative potential. In particular, in sections 7 and 8 I observed that the coming together of immigrant students and native teachers, and the relational approach in classes, facilitated the development of relations that approximate the ideal of solidarity. Consequently, it emerged that this solidarity had an impact on volunteers' awareness of the deficiencies of the migration governance. Specifically, it appeared that some underwent a process of subject formation that has the potential to turn 'active citizens' into 'activist citizens', with the questioning of the status quo that becomes integral to the volunteers' activity.

Ultimately, with this account, I hope to both open the scholarship on the processes involved in constituting citizens (e.g., Lister, 2007; Isin and Nielsen, 2008; Darling, 2017) to the analysis of humanitarian acts performed by members of the 'majority society', and contribute to the broader discussion on the political character of humanitarianism (e.g., de Jong and Ataç, 2017; Della Porta, 2018). In particular, I hope to have shed light on how 'humanitarian' actions by citizens belonging to the dominant society may represent acts of citizenship complementary to the acts of citizenship of 'denizens' like refugees and migrants with precarious legal status in the same way the political activism of regular citizens has been recognized to be critical in articulating migrants' claims of citizenship and socio-political rights.

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