Who's afraid of the ‘beggar’? A psychoanalytic interpretation of the crises triggered by the begging of ‘EU migrants’ in Sweden

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Who’s afraid of the ‘beggar’? A psychoanalytic interpretation of the crises triggered by the begging of ‘EU migrants’ in Sweden

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ABSTRACT
The presence of poor migrants from the EU countries of Romania and Bulgaria (mainly Roma subjects) who beg in Swedish cities has since 2010 caused a collective crisis in Sweden, affecting Swedish identity and institutions such as the (local and national) welfare state. Employing a psychoanalytic framework, inspired primarily by Lacan and Žižek, we describe the various dimensions of this crisis and explain the socio-psychological processes that produce the experience of crisis. We argue that the reason the ‘EU migrant’/‘beggar’ produces these crises is because this figure is a symptom of the Real. Encounters with ‘EU migrants’ in the Swedish landscape become ethical encounters with the Real within three main realms: intersubjective (individual), national identity (collective), and political economy (institutional). The individual experiences an ethical crisis where no action in the meeting with a ‘beggar’ provides a satisfactory solution to the problem. The presence of ‘EU migrants’ also threatens to undermine the hegemonic Swedish self-image as a moral superpower. And the ‘EU migrant’s’ presence interferes with the nation’s desire to believe in its political and economic institutions. Finally, the attempt to satisfactorily locate responsibility for solving the problem of the ‘EU migrant’ reveals contradictions within capitalism, nationalism, and liberalism as they operate in the Swedish context.

Qui a peur du « mendiant »? Une interprétation psychanalytique de la crise provoquée par la mendicité des « migrants de l’UE » en Suède

La présence de migrants pauvres de l’UE qui mendient dans les villes suédoises provoque depuis 2010 une crise collective en Suède, qui affecte l’identité et les institutions suédoises comme l’Etat providence (local et national). En utilisant un cadre psychanalytique, inspiré principalement de Lacan et Žižek, nous décrivons les différentes dimensions de cette crise et expliquons les processus socio-psychologiques qui produisent l’expérience de la crise. Nous soutenons que la raison pour laquelle le « mendiant de l’UE » produit ces crises est que cette figure est un symptôme du Réel. Les rencontres avec « les migrants de l’UE » dans le paysage suédois deviennent des rencontres éthiques avec le Réel au sein de trois domaines principaux: l’intersubjectif (individu), l’identité nationale (collectif) et la politique économique.
¿Quién le teme al ‘mendigo’? Una interpretación psicoanalítica de las crisis provocadas por la mendicidad de ‘migrantes de la UE’ en Suecia

La presencia de migrantes pobres de la UE que mendigan en ciudades suécas ha causado desde 2010 una crisis colectiva en Suecia, afectando a la identidad sueca e instituciones como el estado del bienestar (local y nacional). Empleando un marco psicoanalítico, inspirado principalmente por Lacan y Žižek, se describen las diversas dimensiones de esta crisis y se explican los procesos sociopsicológicos que producen la experiencia de la crisis. Se argumenta que la razón por la cual el ‘mendigo de la UE’/‘mendigo’ produce estas crisis es porque esta imagen es un síntoma de lo Real. Los encuentros con los ‘migrantes de la UE’ en el paisaje sueco se convierten en encuentros éticos con lo Real dentro de tres ámbitos principales: intersubjetivo (individual), identidad nacional (colectiva), y economía política (institucional). El individuo experimenta una crisis ética donde ninguna acción en el encuentro con un ‘mendigo’ brinda una solución satisfactoria al problema. La presencia de ‘migrantes de la UE’ también amenaza con debilitar la autoimagen hegemónica de Suecia como una superpotencia moral. Y la presencia del ‘migrante de la UE’ interfiere con el deseo de la nación de creer en sus instituciones políticas y económicas. Finalmente, el intento de ubicar satisfactoriamente la responsabilidad de resolver el problema del ‘migrante de la UE’ revela contradicciones dentro del capitalismo, el nacionalismo y el liberalismo, ya que operan en el contexto sueco.

Introduction

Since at least 2010, a public debate has raged in Sweden concerning the presence of poor migrants from other European Union countries (often referred to more formally as EU-migranterna (‘the EU migrants’) and informally as tiggarna (‘the beggars’)) who beg in public space. The number of poor ‘EU migrants’ in Sweden (primarily Roma from Romania and Bulgaria) was estimated at around 4700 in late 2015 (Polismyndigheten, 2015). The reactions of Swedes to the presence of ‘EU migrants’ in Sweden have been visceral and strikingly polarised. On the one hand, hate crimes targeting poor ‘EU migrants’ occur regularly across the country (Delin, 2015; Pahrike, 2015). On the other hand, community groups, churches, and individuals have organised support for ‘EU migrants’ to help them meet their basic needs (Mansur, 2015). Lacking Swedish citizenship and the right of residence, ‘EU migrants’ do not have a guarantee of public welfare from the national or local state. We write ‘EU
migrants’ because the term is used in a non-literal sense – it is typically used to identify migrants from EU countries who beg in Sweden, and not with reference to all EU migrants in the country.

In February 2016, the government’s official investigator, Martin Valfridsson, presented recommendations to the Swedish state regarding how the presence of ‘EU migrants’ should be handled (SOU, 2016). Valfridsson condemned anti-panhandling laws yet also argued that the government should guarantee neither housing for ‘EU migrants’ nor schooling for their children. Additionally, he urged citizens to refrain from giving money to ‘EU migrants,’ and instead to donate to charities so as to provide more ‘long-term’ help and not encourage begging. The justification for these recommendations is the conviction that ‘EU migrants’ are not the responsibility of Swedish society, and that a long-term solution for their poverty can only be found in their home countries. The investigator thus seems to argue that the solution to this problem is to keep ‘EU migrants’ in their ‘right place,’ which is definitely not here. The message of the report seems somewhat paradoxical. After all, if the goal is to keep poor ‘EU migrants’ from coming to Sweden, why not outlaw begging? We suggest that the hesitancy to endorse a ban on begging reflects a fundamental crisis in Swedish society that is brought into relief by the presence of the ‘EU migrants.’ This is a crisis of national self-image that manifests juridically, politically, morally and emotionally at different levels of Swedish society.

The purpose of this article is to offer both a description of the various dimensions of the crisis triggered by the presence of begging ‘EU migrants’ in Sweden as well as a theoretical explanation for the socio-psychological processes that produce the experience of crisis. We employ a psychoanalytic framework in our analysis, and our focus is on the perspective of ‘Swedes’ rather than that of those who are classified as ‘EU migrants.’ We are interested in why these migrants cause reactions among ‘Swedes’ that are often irrational, illogical, and self-contradictory.

In an earlier study one of us interviewed 30 Stockholm residents about their reactions to the begging of ‘EU migrants’ in the city (Hansson, 2014). A coherent narrative emerged which understood Sweden as ‘the good society’ in an unjust world where no one should have to beg (cf. Hübinne & Lundström, 2011; Zelano, 2018). Street begging as a widely visible social practice has indeed been a relatively uncommon phenomenon in modern Sweden until the arrival of the ‘EU migrants.’ The absence of begging was explained by the interviewees as the result of a social contract between the Swedish welfare state and the citizen, where the state guaranteed a basic standard of living for all in return for a relatively high tax burden. As a consequence, the interviewees felt their own individual responsibility for the poor had been ‘outsourced’ to the state (cf. Barker, 2017). However, with the arrival of the ‘EU migrants,’ this ethical order was threatened, since foreigners are not included in this contract. In the absence of an official state responsibility, many informants felt an increased personal and moral responsibility for the ‘EU migrants.’ The presence of begging ‘EU migrants’ elicited a feeling that the individual was now expected to act, which triggered unease and anxiety that was handled in different ways. These strategies for dealing with the discomfort of the encounter with ‘the beggars’ were all grounded in references to a Swedish self-image; either the answer was ‘Swedish rectitude,’ emphasizing ideas of a Swedish work ethic and social order were everyone follows the rules, or alternatively, solutions could be found in traditions of Swedish equality and solidarity. Different understandings of ‘Swedishness’ were thus appropriated for largely incompatible solutions to the problem.
posed by the presence of the ‘EU migrants.’ It is in this way that we argue that the presence of the ‘EU migrants’ has triggered a crisis in Swedish self-image for many of the country’s citizens.

**A psychoanalytic perspective**

We turn to psychoanalysis for help in understanding the psychological dynamics (at the individual and collective levels) of the Swedish encounter with ‘EU migrants’ and the crisis it creates. Geographers employing psychoanalysis have provided key insights into the materialization of psychosocial experiences at different scales (Bondi, 2003, 2014; Callard, 2003; Kingsbury & Pile, 2014; Philo & Parr, 2003; Sibley, 1995). One theorist of psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan, has had a significant influence on recent attempts to articulate the spatiality of psychoanalytic processes. The most prominent interpreter of Lacanian theory is Slavoj Žižek. Melding Hegelian dialectics and ideology critique with Lacanian psychoanalysis, Žižek’s (2000, 2009a, 2009b, 2012) reading of Lacan provides the inspiration for the following analysis of the crisis in the Swedish self-image. We begin by reviewing some of the fundamental aspects of Lacanian theory, informed by Žižek’s interventions and our own interpretations of both theorists.

**The three orders of psychic life**

We start with the psyche. Lacan understands the psyche as constituted by the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. A human being enters into this relational order through the ‘mirror stage’ (Lacan, 2013a), a transformation which entails an alienation from an originary ‘pre-subject.’ As the infant recognises itself in the mirror (which should here be understood metaphorically), it identifies this external image with its own ego, which is born at this very moment (because the image of the body as an entity with clear boundaries organises the fragmented pre-subject into a seeming whole). The external image represents the ideal of wholeness, and the ‘ideal-ego’ in turn represents identification with this wholeness. The Imaginary then signifies the relation between the ideal-ego and the image of (ego-)wholeness. The identification with wholeness is tantalizing for the infant, as it facilitates the illusion of omnipotence, a feeling of mastery the infant desires. However, true mastery is thwarted by the fatal finitude of the human condition, and this universal condition produces a gap between the ideal-ego and the seemingly whole body. Lacan (1988) calls this gap the ‘lack’ that threatens the Imaginary ego and its identity as wholeness and completeness (but we prefer Moi’s (2004) choice of ‘finitude’ (and its three aspects: spatial, sexual and temporal) as a more accurate and productive way to identify this particular dynamic). As a result, the Imaginary is charged with narcissism and aggression, constituting drives that seek to overcome the subject’s finitude through attempting to realise wholeness in the external environment. By entering into the Symbolic, that is ‘the social’ structured by language and culture, the subject attempts to repress finitude by resorting to fantasy. Fantasy represents the subject’s attempt at understanding the social and at the same time is shaped by the social; it is a projection onto the social that places the subject in the social order with a particular status and role. Finally, the Real is that ‘which resists symbolization and eludes the Imaginary’ (Proudfoot, 2010, p. 510); in other words, the Real is the world as it exists beyond our own access to it. Thus the Real is often referred to as a psychic and ontological
excess to which we do not have access through language. For the subject, the Real is inherently ambiguous. As it represents the lack both within me and outside myself, the Real threatens the coherence of the subject’s understanding of itself and the world, particularly as it embodies the constant risk that ‘reality’ will intrude upon our fantasies to unsettle and contradict our carefully-constructed subjectivities.

The Symbolic constitutes ‘the Law’ for the subject. This big Other is experienced as demanding obedience to the Symbolic order, which maintains the norms and hierarchies of the social structure. The big Other emerges from fantasy, and it is through the big Other that we may sense enjoyment, or jouissance (Lacan, 1988). This enjoyment is a form of extradiscursive painful pleasure (Proudfoot, 2010). Extradiscursive in the sense that enjoyment represents a taste of wholeness, a dissolution of the self in a kind of ecstasy that feels like a healing of the incompleteness of the ego (i.e., finitude), an experience that is in a sense ‘beyond’ representation. But this enjoyment is painful and even threatening, as actually reaching completeness would dissolve our very subjectivity. Therefore, the Symbolic provides us ‘bearable jouissance,’ ‘neutralised’ through organised rituals cultivating and sublimating our drives and desire. Desire is always intentional: you always desire something (or someone). This ‘thing’ is labelled by Lacan (1998) as objet petit a, the object-cause of desire. Objet petit a works both as the object of desire as well as the object that puts desire in circulation. Because desire is our way of handling finitude, desire must always be in circulation, and the momentum of circulation is preserved due to the fact that the objects of our desire are never actually attainable. The objet petit a is projected onto the Real in our attempt to hide finitude at the same time that finitude constantly draws us toward itself.

The constitutional finitude alienates us from ourselves and the world; thus we can never really know the ‘other,’ our neighbour, because we have no way of circumventing fantasy. At the same time, we are dependent upon others because our very subjectivity is produced socially (and thus we can never even ‘really know’ ourselves). We necessarily experience others through the Symbolic (and the Imaginary), and these experiences are shaped by a narcissistic desire to incorporate the other into our ideal-ego and simultaneously purge the subject of the shadow. There are two sides to this process: either we project the shadow onto our image of the other, which distances ourselves from both the shadow and the other, or we idealise the other as the solution of our own incompleteness, which is ultimately a kind of ethical violence that disavows the other’s radical alterity (Räterlinck, 2014). This is the duality of desire.

The process of the Symbolic produces a fantasy of community and group identity (wholeness) through the use of common signifiers (language). Now it becomes clear how the three orders function at the level of the collective as well as at the individual level. At the collective level, the Imaginary is embodied by group identities. The collective ideal-ego is dependent upon the (re)presentation of the group as a coherent whole. The role of the Symbolic (through its structures of language, laws, norms, etc.) is to complete the Imaginary myths (of, e.g. group identity), while the Real (that which is inaccessible, or excess, to us) threatens the coherence of the work of the Symbolic/Imaginary.

The sublime object of ideology

Presently, the predominant group identity (collective myth) of the Imaginary is the nation. Žižek (1993, p. 201) conceptualises national enjoyment as circulating around a national Thing (the objet petit a), which refers to ‘the way subjects of a given ethnic community
organise their enjoyment through national myths’ (cf. Kingsbury, 2011). Racism can be understood as the fear that ‘they’ will ‘steal’ (or ruin) our national Thing (our ‘way of living’; cf. Jørgensen & Thomsen, 2016). It is the presence of outsiders in ‘our’ collective space that threatens our national Thing; they are, so to speak, ‘too close to home.’ The group’s own finitude and internal antagonisms fuel the projection of the latter onto outsiders, which makes our incompleteness of enjoyment their fault. The ‘immigrant,’ the ‘stranger,’ the nation’s ‘other,’ become symptoms of the Real.

Moving up one level within Žižek’s appropriation of Lacan, we can see how the political realm of ideology and hegemony operates according to the triadic logic of the orders. Žižek (2009a) understands ideology as an unconscious fantasy that structures reality; it is through ideology that we organise and consume our enjoyment and veil the lack within a particular worldview. Žižek’s understanding of ideology and hegemony was inspired by his reading of Laclau and Mouffe (2001). The latter argued that the political is a realm filled with eternal conflict between antagonistic discourses. A particular discursive order might establish a contingent hegemony, but it always threatens to disintegrate due to the topology of the political itself. Hegemony can never be an intact, coherent entity. This is also the case with discourse (i.e. ideology), as every discourse always already suffers from an impossibility of enclosing itself as a consequence of that which lies outside of representation that discourse cannot enfold (i.e., the Real). Thus every socio-symbolic identity is deemed to be an impossible goal. Laclau and Mouffe then draw the conclusion that “society does not exist”, that the Social is always an inconsistent field structured around a constitutive impossibility, traversed by a central “antagonism” (Žižek, 2009a, p. 142). Žižek – who speaks of ideologies instead of discourses – argues that Laclau and Mouffe do not consider ideology’s aspect of enjoyment to explain how the political is manifested. As ideology itself incubates desire, Žižek (2009a, p. 140) reformulates the idea as “Society doesn’t exist,” and the Jew is its symptom. ’The Jew’ represents the figure that ideology uses, through social fantasy, to foreclose its own impossibility. Žižek takes Nazi Germany’s anti-Semitism as an example. The Nazi ideology proclaims that society is a coherent totality, a healthy social body where each subject has a natural function and where conflict is absent. For Žižek, the class conflict of Depression-era Germany belies this ideology. The Nazi mythology could not acknowledge these conflicts, and therefore class antagonisms had to be transferred into a type conflict that was compatible with Nazism and which could simultaneously mobilise collective enjoyment. With support of fantasy, ‘the Jew’ was constructed as the cause of the lack of enjoyment of the national Thing. The completion of the ideology, then, ‘requires’ the extermination of ‘the Jew.’ The ideology proclaims that if it were not for ‘the Jew’s’ presence, society would be complete and we would all come together in enjoyment of our community. The point here is not that all ideologies are ultimately aiming at genocide, but that all ideologies need socially-constructed objects of desire which disguise an ideology’s own impossibility.

Now we can move to the main argument of the article, which spatialises the theoretical framework articulated above. The reason the ‘EU migrant’ and associated figure of ‘the beggar’ causes such a multidimensional crisis in Swedish society is because the ‘EU migrant’s’ presence in Sweden is a symptom of the Real. The ‘EU migrant’s’ presence in the Swedish landscape amounts to a spatial and normative transgression (cf. Cresswell, 1996), and encounters with ‘EU migrants’ in the Swedish setting become ethical encounters with the Real within three realms: intersubjective (individual), national identity (collective), and
political economy (institutional). The meeting of Swedish citizen and ‘EU migrant’ in urban space exposes the very impossibility of the social. Another way of saying this is that the desire for wholeness is derailed by the reality of finitude. The local co-presence of the ‘EU migrant’ also activates crises at the collective realm of national identity, where hegemonic Swedish identity is generally understood as representing a kind of moral exceptionalism (Jansson, 2018; see also Barker, 2017). With regard to political economy, the ‘EU migrant’s’ presence interferes with the nation’s desire to believe in its political and economic institutions (the welfare state; cf. Zelano, 2018). Ultimately, the presence of the ‘EU migrant’ exposes underlying antagonisms already extant in Sweden. In the sections that follow, this argument will be elaborated with empirical data from the Swedish context.

**Reciprocity and the encounter with the real**

We begin by considering these dynamics as they play out at the scale of the individual, with a consideration of the begging encounter in the everyday landscape. This encounter can be experienced as ambiguous by the person being asked to give, as the request represents, in a market economy context, an abnormal social interaction due to the non-reciprocal nature of the exchange between strangers (McIntosh & Erskine, 1999). Several studies (Dromi, 2012; Hansson, 2014; Proudfoot, 2011) note that this ambiguity is at least partially associated with an uncertainty on the part of the giver regarding what the recipient will do with the money. This uncertainty produces an anxiety that is often expressed as a suspicion of the authenticity of the beggar’s need. Anxiety over how the poor spend their money has a in fact a long history in the West (Erskine & McIntosh, 1999; Geremek, 1987). Proudfoot (2011) connects this anxiety with the inherent ambiguity of the gift relationship itself. In the context of begging, there is a clear non-reciprocity in the giver/receiver relationship, which violates the general tradition of a cycle of reciprocal gift exchange (Mauss, 1990). Reciprocity establishes a kind of equivalence that is formally impossible in the begging context. This principle of reciprocity can operate at both the institutional and the individual levels. In addition, what counts as a ‘reciprocal exchange’ is an ideological question and culturally contingent.

Following Proudfoot’s (2011) reading of Lacan, we understand this anxiety in the begging encounter as grounded in the confrontation with ‘the lack of the other.’ We argue here that the lack in question is actually the finitude or incompleteness of the social itself, the lack of connection between myself and my neighbour. Because I am dependent upon my neighbour’s (and/or the big Other’s) recognition/confirmation of my ideal-ego, the confrontation with the finitude within ‘the other’ and ‘the social’ becomes the subject’s own finitude and, thus, impossibility. What causes anxiety in the encounter with ‘the beggar’ in the Swedish context is the radical violation of the fantasy that human beings meet each other on reciprocal terms. Following the anthropologist Marcel Mauss’ classic study *The Gift* (1990), we can argue that all societies are founded on gift relationships, where reciprocity in the gift exchange is always foundational. Even if the gift is articulated explicitly as ‘a gift’ (without a demand of reciprocity), the expectation of reciprocity can never be fully disavowed (Derrida, 1992).

Reciprocity can be considered an expression of fantasy’s necessary veiling of finitude within the Symbolic, in its ideological foreclosure of the Real (in this case, existential alienation). In other words, we desire ‘reciprocity’ in order to fill the gap between the subject and its
other, between myself and my neighbour. We constantly exchange gestures, words and services with each other in order to reinforce ourselves and the others in our identities (who we are), and ‘culture’ (fantasy through the Symbolic) supplies the norms and regulations for what counts as a ‘correct’ reciprocal exchange. This is what morality is ultimately about: the establishment of a social system of rules regarding which actions are ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ to guarantee a social order and a possibility to coexist with strangers and acquaintances without causing each other suffering and anxiety (see Kingsbury, 2017). Given our ontological understanding of morality as always contextually-produced and historically mutable, morality involves a social fantasy that always holds paradoxes and impossibilities: precisely as language cannot describe all sensations, a specific morality cannot offer a guide in all possible situations, which is why we speak of moral dilemmas. The Real is revealed in our norms and reality when we confront such dilemmas. Our psychoanalytic understanding tells us that to find oneself in a moral dilemma, where norms of reciprocity no longer apply, produces an anxiety that the individual wants to escape. At the same time, the Lacanian perspective points out that it is precisely in such moments, when the Imaginary and Symbolic orders betray us and we stand before the Real, that we may make truly ethical decisions, since we cannot trust anything other than our own responsibility to act uncertainly in an uncertain situation (Badiou, 2002; Lacan, 2013b; Zupančič, 2000). An ethical moment is thus an emotionally painful situation to find oneself in, regardless of the decision one makes.

Radford (2001) shows how the meeting with a beggar is an example of a situation where no moral principle can be used in all cases without one being forced to deviate from the principle. The only principle ‘guaranteed to work’ is to refuse to give at all, which represents a negation of moral action (Radford, 2001). From the experiences of the interview study (Hansson, 2014) and how the problem has been formulated in the Swedish press (e.g. Cnattingius, 2016; Nilsson, 2015b; Nycander, 2014; Rosenberg, 2015; Rothstein, 2013), we can say that the (imagined) social contract between Swedish citizens and the welfare state has in a paradoxical way disarmed this particular moral dilemma by outsourcing the moral responsibility from the individual to the authorities. This transfer allows a citizen to elude the dilemma of the Real by choosing the only strategy ‘guaranteed’ to work, and at the same time convince oneself of one’s morality by way of belonging to a welfare society that takes care of the problem on one’s behalf. But as noted above, it is more difficult to refer to this social contract in the meeting with a ‘foreign beggar.’

As a relatively new phenomenon, the Swedish encounter with the ‘EU migrant’ must in some way be integrated by fantasy into the notion of a (materially false) reciprocity. Otherwise, the encounter with the ‘EU migrant’ reveals the Real behind the fantasy of reciprocity: ‘real’ reciprocity in social relations is impossible, and nothing in our social reality is ‘given.’ The spatiality and visuality of this traumatic encounter serves as a haunting reminder of finitude, especially given that even if an individual decides to make a ‘truly ethical’ decision at a particular moment, the meeting that provokes the decision will be repeated again and again so that it becomes a regular part of the Symbolic. Likewise, this process simply reinforces the absence of a conventional moral reciprocity.

Thus, even if one drops a few coins into the ‘beggar’s’ mug, ‘they’ will stubbornly remain in one’s daily field of view. In this way ‘they’ fail to live up to the expectations of reciprocity by ‘disappearing’ after the completion of the ‘ethical’ act. In larger Swedish cities, the number of ‘beggars’ is such that it becomes almost impossible to give money to each one you pass, and you cannot either be sure which ones are more ‘deserving’
than others. As a well-meaning person, it quickly becomes obvious that whatever you do, you will ‘fail.’

This severe structural inequality thus dooms ‘the Swede’ to ‘sin’ against the hegemonic values of humanitarian compassion, as there is no ‘correct’ individual response to the problem. This dilemma produces anxiety, which ‘Swedes’ deal with through three strategies. The first constructs the ‘the beggar’ as an object-cause of desire for one’s self-image as a ‘good moral subject.’ In other words, one projects the Ideal-ego onto ‘the beggar,’ enhancing one’s self-image as a good person by helping in some way. All over Sweden, private citizens are opening their homes for ‘EU migrants,’ organizing fundraising events, and acting in other ways (Andersson, 2015; Mansur, 2015). We also see more modest gestures, such as selecting out one’s own ‘personal beggar’ for regular assistance. Different sources recount the ways that such people justify and explain their engagement: it ‘feels good’ to help someone, it gives you a purpose in life, it makes you sleep better, etc (e.g. Adolfsson, 2015; Björkman, 2016; Ek, 2015; Hansson, 2014; Olausson & Iosif, 2015). Could it be that these are (to some extent) different ways of making ‘the (big) Other,’ through the medium of the neighbour, confirm one’s goodness?

A second anxiety-reducing strategy is similar to the first, where projection produces the ‘beggar’ as an object-cause of desire, but here the aim is to generate ‘undeserved’ negative emotions within yourself, to assist in the project of eliminating these ‘interlopers’ who hinder your freedom of movement and violate your ‘right’ to traverse urban space without being bothered (cf. Blomley, 2010; Sennett, 1996). Hansson (2014) finds a seemingly irrational insistence among some interviewees that all ‘EU migrants’ are immoral ‘gypsies’ or members of criminal mafias. We should emphasise that some of those who beg in Sweden have been subjected to human trafficking, and a few seem to be participating in criminal activities (Bjurbo, 2017; Polismyndigheten, 2015). That said, there are already laws against human trafficking on the books in Sweden, which can be used without banning begging; but the fact that a few people are exploited is often translated by certain private and political actors as proof that all ‘beggars’ are criminals.

The ‘beggars’ are further understood as making unjust claims on the pedestrian’s attention and emotional engagement, as well as constituting obstacles in public space (Dagens Nyheter 2015; Gelin, 2016; Hansson, 2014; Karlsson, 2014). In its more extreme cases, demanding their ‘right to pass freely’ (Blomley, 2010) might be thought of as acts of revenge against ‘beggars’ for taking something which does not belong to them (i.e., attention, emotion, public space) (Giertz, 2015; Mossige-Norheim, 2015; Nilsson, 2015a; Östlund, 2015). Justice has to be reimposed; reciprocal relations have to be preserved. The ultimate solution here is to expel ‘the beggars’ so that the previous order can be restored – by violence, or by law (which, in the end, is the same thing).

These first two strategies reflect the duality of desire as it relates to the objet petit a as discussed above. The third anxiety-reducing strategy is ethical disavowal, with reference to the outsourcing moral responsibility to the welfare state. In this case, the ethical Real of the presence of ‘the beggars’ does not interpellate the ‘Swede’ as a subject with moral responsibilities. A complicating factor is the fact that ‘EU migrants’ are not legally entitled to the regular, non-contributory benefits of the Swedish welfare state – nor from the other EU member states, for that matter (Giubboni, 2015). However, local authorities (such as cities) are indeed still legally responsible for the well-being of all residents of the authority’s territory. However, in spite of this legal responsibility (which, admittedly, is
largely ignored), the common response to the plight of ‘EU migrants’ is still: *they are Romania’s responsibility*; moral responsibility is thus outsourced to the state of which these migrants are citizens (e.g. Busch Thor & Eclund, 2015; Hansson, Juntti, Åberg, Ericsson, & Olsson, 2015; Holmberg, 2014; Lindström, 2014). The original vision of an EU citizenship thus falls victim to welfare nationalism (O’Brien, 2016).

Some politicians have tried to argue that giving money to people who beg does not help them, that it can be counterproductive by cementing poverty and preventing them from accessing better solutions (Regnér & Valfridsson, 2015). It is interesting to consider what the claim that giving money ‘does not help’ might really mean, especially since in much media reporting, what is made clear by the poor immigrants is that money is in fact very helpful to them. But one thing that giving money definitely does not do is make ‘the beggar’ go away. And we suggest that removing these transgressive individuals from Sweden’s urban landscapes is the (un)stated goal, the underlying desire.

**The Swedish national identity’s encounter with the real**

We now move from the scale of the individual to the national scale. Sweden is occasionally referred to as a ‘moral superpower’ (Dahl, 2006; Jansson, 2018) due to its 20th century evolution into a modern welfare state characterised by solidarity, geopolitical neutrality, interest in human rights, and a public embrace of feminism and anti-racism. These characteristics are main components of the Swedish national self-image, as is clearly suggested by the reactions to the presence of the ‘EU migrants.’ In contemporary Sweden, there are three ideas that are of particular resonance for large segments of the population: *folkhemmet* (‘the people’s home,’ a reference to the welfare state), *arbetslinjen* (‘the work line,’ or the political goal of promoting wage labour and reducing welfare payments), and a liberal-humanist belief in the equality of all people.

The Swedish self-image as a moral superpower produces a sense of righteousness grounded in a national ideal-ego. This self-image obscures the shadow of structural racism, which has a long history in Sweden (perhaps most prominently in the treatment of the indigenous Sami population (Pred, 2000)). Of particular relevance to the present discussion is the history of anti-Roma racism in Sweden. The opportunities to obtain employment, education and housing by the Swedish Roma have been restricted by the state and civil society for centuries. Roma were not granted asylum during World War II, hundreds of Roma were sterilised by the state, as late as 2010 more than 80% of Swedish Roma were unemployed, and it was acknowledged in 2013 that the police had been keeping registers of Roma in Skåne county (Arbetsmarknadsdepartementet, 2014; Kott, 2014; Tydén, 2002). Roma have been an important ‘constitutive other’ of Swedish national identity for centuries, embodying the Real of Swedish society that needs to be repressed and excluded. However, in public discourse Swedish anti-Roma racism is often framed as an *historical* issue, a former sin which by now has been sufficiently atoned for. Ironically, Swedish politicians have defended evictions of ‘EU-migrants’ from their provisional tent camps with the argument that they do not want to return to a past when Swedish Roma were forced to live in informal settings (Persdotter & Eriksson, 2016).

In the final section, we will consider how ‘the beggar’ reveals three fundamental assumptions of the discourse about begging as being untenable. ‘The beggar’ pulls back the curtain to show the Real (i.e., the inner contradictions or antagonism) of each of
these assumptions. This consideration shows how the crisis produced by ‘the beggar’ rests at the intersection between the economic order (capitalism), the political order (nationalism), and the ideological/moral order (liberalism). It is this intertwining of three fundamental aspects of material reality in Sweden that make the encounter with ‘the beggar’ so deeply troubling – and ‘impossible’ to solve.

The Swedish institutional encounter with the real

Our analysis in this article has gradually moved from the locus of the individual to the scale of national institutions. Here our focus is on the institutions of the political economy (capitalism), the nation-state (nationalism), and ideology (liberalism). As an integrated whole, the ‘smooth’ functioning of these institutions relies upon certain assumptions which supply individuals with rationales for the material reality they face in their everyday lives. These assumptions serve as ‘truths’ upon which social relations and individual/collective self-perception are based; they are indispensable for the work of social fantasy to structure reality as a coherent ‘whole.’ A crisis, however, is produced by the introduction of ‘the beggar’ as a visible component in the Swedish landscape, which forces these ‘truths’ to confront their respective ‘Reals’. We consider three assumptions here, each related to their respective institutions: 1) wage labour as capitalism’s ethical justification, 2) the structuring of social moral responsibility according to the logic of the nation-state, and 3) the liberal-humanist idea of equality of all people as articulated in the law.

Capitalism

Let us start with the role of wage labor within capitalism. The main problem associated with ‘the beggars’ is that they do not ‘work.’ Capitalism of course depends on wage labor, and the problem confronting ‘EU migrants’ is that their activities in Sweden do not conform to the prevailing notions of what counts as ‘work.’ As wage labour is considered the only legitimate source of income, the logical solution then is to engage everyone in gainful employment. This idea has a long and powerful history in Sweden, crystallised in the so-called ‘the Swedish model’ and a pillar of the folkhem (and lives on today in the ‘workfare’ project of arbetslinjen, the political program promoting (forced?) wage labour for everyone, especially for those receiving public assistance). But given that capitalism necessarily produces a ‘reserve army’ of unemployed, the goal of providing gainful employment to everyone (within liberal capitalism) is impossible. Furthermore, many ‘EU migrants’ say that they initially come to Sweden in order to work, but upon arrival they find that the labor market cannot accommodate them, so begging becomes the only option to produce an income (Djuve, Friberg, Tyldum, & Zhang, 2015; Stadsmissionen, 2016). Many of these migrants lack schooling, knowledge of Swedish or English, and many are illiterate. To run programs targeted at ‘EU migrants’ would probably be characterised by opponents as alienating unemployed Swedish citizens and permanent residents (many of whom have been granted asylum and also need to find employment).

There are also broader issues here. Paulsen (2017) has pointed out the irrational character of the global arbetslinjen doctrine: given the fact that natural resources are already being consumed at an unsustainable rate, the rationale for the expectation that
everyone will engage in wage labour cannot be society’s material survival, but rather that wage labor becomes the goal in itself. In other words, jobs need to be ‘created’ not because society is failing to produce enough wealth to provide for the population, but because society needs individuals to *deserve* the income they receive. Furthermore, ‘the beggars’ are not just unemployed, some of them may also be ‘unemployable’ within the currently existing labour market. This subset then constitutes the *pauperism of the relative surplus population* (Marx, 1906), leading us to an ethical Real of capitalism: the fact that not all humans have a ‘societal utility’ according to the current capitalist societal order, and thus they have no *place* within the system (unless they could function as strike-breakers or used as a tool to lower wages and undermine organised labour). This is an insight that the Swedish welfare state ideology cannot accept.

**Nationalism**

This brings us to the second assumption, the idea that moral responsibility for others is understood through the logic of state-centric nationalism. There are actually two parts to this assumption: the first relates to the taken-for-grantedness of the state’s responsibility for the well-being of individuals residing within the state; the second is located in the challenge to citizenship-based rights (and the concomitant responsibilities) that ‘the beggar’ represents. The doctrine of nationalism (Flint & Taylor, 2011, p. 159) divides the world into states that are responsible for the well-being of their citizens. This responsibility is regulated through the mechanism of citizenship. Thus, the state has ultimate responsibility for the individual, provided that the individual has either citizenship or an equivalent legal standing in relation to the state (such as in the case with refugees or labor immigrants). In the case of ‘EU migrants’ in Sweden, the idea expressed in Valfridsson’s report is that the Swedish state has no responsibility to provide for them, since they are citizens of other EU member states and are only visiting Sweden temporarily. Valfridsson argued further that if ‘EU migrants’ were granted privileges of citizenship in the absence of actual citizenship, even more of ‘them’ would come to Sweden and potentially overwhelm the entire welfare system (Brevinge, 2015). The only ‘logical’ solution then is for Romania and Bulgaria to begin to meet their responsibilities to their own citizens, so that the latter do not need to leave their home countries. These responsibilities cannot thus be transferred to other states without the whole logic of statehood collapsing. The refusal of Sweden to treat ‘EU migrants’ as citizens preserves the clarity of the state’s moral responsibility – that is, it is *national*, not *universal*.

The transference of moral responsibility for individuals in need from the citizen to the state excuses those who ignore the needs of ‘EU migrants,’ since they can reasonably lay responsibility at the state’s door. The Swedish state, in turn, can reasonably lay responsibility at Romania and Bulgaria’s doors. The problem with all this reasonableness is of course that the reason that ‘EU migrants’ come to Sweden in the first place is that the states of Romania and Bulgaria have shown neither the will nor the capability to deal with the very deep problems behind the migration of their poorest citizens. We consider the disavowal of responsibility for the ‘other among us’ as a manoeuvre to save the Symbolic order of the Swedish capitalist state and the Imaginary of the nation itself. In this sense, ‘the beggar’ is more ‘Real’ than ‘the refugee,’ because the latter has a more clear legal and ideological relation to the state than the former (Hansson & Mitchell,
The beggar points to the failure of the nationalist/capitalist system to attain closure in a way that ‘the refugee’ does not.

Liberalism

This brings us to the third institution, the ideology and philosophy of liberalism. The assumption here is the equality of individuals before the law. This assumption is ubiquitous in the discussion of the ‘EU migrants’; for example, allowing ‘EU migrants’ to camp on public or private land without permission would give them legal ‘advantages’ not available to Swedish citizens (SOU, 2016). However, the same idea has been used to argue that the Law (in the sense of the welfare state) should also be available to help ‘EU migrants,’ which is a different interpretation of ‘everyone is equal under the law’ (this reasoning rejects the use of citizenship as a determining factor when deciding whom the state will help) (Civil Rights Defenders, 2017). In other words, either the ‘EU migrants’ have not fulfilled their obligations to society, or the Swedish state has not fulfilled its obligations to the ‘EU migrants.’ The fact that it is possible make opposing arguments from the same assumption suggests that we are approaching the Real. In his report, Valfridsson argues that the Law does not provide ‘EU migrants’ rights to housing, education, and social benefits. To provide such benefits would be to discriminate positively in favor of one group (‘EU migrants’) over others (citizens). But the assumption of equality under the law (and the reciprocal responsibility of the state to its citizens and the citizens to the state) is based in a further (unrealistic) assumption of the equality of all citizens/residents. As France (1910, p. 87) wrote, ‘In its majestic equality, the law forbids rich and poor alike to sleep under bridges, beg in the streets and steal loaves of bread.’

The presence of ‘EU migrants’ in Sweden reveals the Real of liberalism, the fact that everyone is not equal under the Law, even if they are technically equal under the law. The Law does not even prevent long-time residents and citizens of Sweden from experiencing poverty and homelessness; when it comes to ‘EU migrants,’ the law is only relevant as a tool to repress the larger failure of the Law. ‘EU migrants’ have not had the possibility of entering Swedish society (the Law) on equal terms, and thus they face the long arm (and iron fist) of the law.

Once one rejects the explanations of the poverty of ‘EU migrants’ based on cultural or biological racism, one comes to the conclusion that their genuine, involuntary poverty and vulnerability has to be seen as a consequence of an unjust material inequality, caused by the temporal and spatial accidents of birth in an unequal global society. This naked fact necessarily undermines the assumption of liberalism we have been discussing here; it constitutes the Real of liberalism and at the same time ties together the Law with nationalism and capitalism.

To summarise this part of the argument, these Real contradictions we identify here within capitalism, nationalism and liberalism represent a process of passing responsibility onward, away from the subject itself. That is, if the ‘beggar’ is not my (the individual’s) responsibility, it is because responsibility lies with the state. But if it’s not the state’s responsibility (when the ‘beggar’ is not a citizen), it’s then the responsibility of the ‘beggar’s’ home country. When the home country does not take responsibility, the chain breaks, and the problem remains. In that sense this way of thinking amounts to a failure in Real terms, but it succeeds in the terms of the Imaginary and Symbolic. In other words, the ideology works to suppress the problematic finitude revealed by the ‘EU migrants,’ but this success is tenuous, as the Real is always knocking on the door.
The circle is never completed. In the absence of jobs (capitalism), the problem is referred to the welfare state, but in the absence of citizenship (nationalism), the problem is then referred to the home country, but in the absence of a solution there, there is nowhere to go other than the demand that ‘they’ work like everyone else (liberalism), because anything else would simply be absurd.

**Conclusion**

To recapitulate, the reason the ‘EU migrant’/‘beggar’ produces the crisis we have identified in Swedish society is because this figure is a symptom of the Real. Encounters with ‘EU migrants’ in the Swedish landscape become *ethical* encounters with the Real within three main realms: intersubjective (individual), national identity (collective), and political economy (institutional). The individual experiences an ethical crisis where no action in the meeting with a ‘beggar’ provides a satisfactory solution to the problem. The presence of ‘EU migrants’ also threatens to undermine the hegemonic Swedish self-image as a moral superpower. And the ‘EU migrant’s’ presence interferes with the nation’s desire to believe in its political and economic institutions (the welfare state). The attempt to satisfactorily locate responsibility for solving the problem of the ‘EU migrant’ (which is different from solving the problem of, e.g. ‘poverty’) reveals contradictions within the realms of capitalism, nationalism, and liberalism as they operate in the Swedish context. This broken chain of responsibility will likely only be solved within the existing system by removing the problem – that is, to remove ‘EU migrants’ from the Swedish landscape.

We have sought to show how a psychoanalytic political ontology can help us understand how political institutions, discourses, and (individual and collective) psychic lives can be seen as two sides of the same coin: their construction and the internal relations of their constitutive elements similarly shaped by the Imaginary and Symbolic orders, and these elements strive to repress or cover over their Real aspects with help from the social fantasy that is provided by the Big Other’s mediation. The relevance of this analysis to political practice is grounded in the way in which a confrontation with the Real (i.e. the ‘impossible’ that reveals the *arbitrariness* of identities and hegemonies) generates anxiety and produces a need to overcome the subject’s disintegrated condition. This vanquishing happens most often as a kind of ‘flight’ from the potentially traumatizing (or subversive) by applying defence mechanisms (such as aggression, narcissistic sublimation, denial or repression) to save the contingent order, whether it involves the individual’s self-image or the state’s legitimacy. *But*, just as a successful therapeutic analysis demands a painful and lengthy resolution of the analysand’s taken-for-granteded about one’s self and others, in the confrontation with the Real there is *also* room for insight and critical thinking about the gap between the present and the possible. This is what gives life to the idea ‘another world is possible’ (Brenner, 2009).

It is telling that the debate about begging in Sweden has had enormous difficulty moving beyond the established framework of opposing poles between ‘we should ban begging’ and ‘we have to show solidarity and compassion’ (as if solidarity and compassion pay for houses, clothes, and medical care) (e.g. Sveriges Radio, 2017). ‘Moving beyond’ in this context would actually involve questioning, in particular, capitalism, nationalism, and liberalism. To ‘traverse the fantasy’ (Lacan, 1998, p. 273; Žižek, 2015) is surely a risky and painful process, but it is ultimately the only path to a lasting solution.
Until then, the ‘beggar’ sits at the intersection of capitalism, nationalism, and liberalism, shaking her paper cup half-filled with coins, rudely revealing the contradictions of modern Swedish society specifically, and the larger political-economic system more generally. This humble cup has the power to shake the foundations of the dominant Swedish self-image because of the ways in which it, through its spatiality, intersects with the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real. It is a symptom of the finitude that always gets in the way of the desire for (individual and collective) wholeness, that reminds us that the fantasy of completeness will always betray us in the end.

Note

1. On 17 December 2018, Sweden’s Supreme Administrative Court (Högsta Förvaltningsdomstolen) overturned a lower court’s ruling rejecting Vellinge municipality’s ban on ‘passiv pengainsamling’ (passive collection of money) in certain places in the municipality, arguing that the ban does not violate the law because it only forbids this activity in these well-defined places (http://www.hogstaforvaltningsdomstolen.se/Domstolar/regeringsratten/Avgöranden/2018/2149-18.pdf). The highest court thus effectively cleared the way for the municipality’s ban on begging to take effect, which means that it is now permissible for municipalities in Sweden to ban begging (in certain places) for the first time since 1982.

Disclosure statement

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