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Review of the PhD Thesis

“Asylum Procedures and Forced Labour of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Italy”

by Natalia Szulc

written under the direction of Prof. Maria Teresa Consoli

The doctoral dissertation by Natalia Maria Szulc MA, entitled “Asylum Procedures and Forced Labour of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Italy,” is a comprehensive study of the interplay between the Italian asylum system and forced labour. This topic is both timely and critical, given the growing concerns around the vulnerability of asylum seekers and refugees (ARs) who are exposed to labour exploitation during their stay in Italy and other countries. The research primarily focuses on how the asylum procedures either mitigate or exacerbate the risk of forced labour, a problem that often remains invisible within formal legal and political discourses. This thesis adopts an exploratory stance and presents a novel perspective on the structural failures of the asylum system.

Research problem and aim

The main research problem in the dissertation is the paradoxical situation where Italy’s asylum procedures, designed to offer protection to asylum seekers and refugees, simultaneously contribute to their exposure to forced labour. Hence, the central aim of the research is to explore the dual role of the asylum system: on the one hand, it functions as a protective

mechanism under international law, and on the other, it contributes to systemic exploitation due to procedural delays, inadequate protection mechanisms, and insufficient regulation. By focusing on Italy, a key country in the European migration crisis, the study addresses how the intersection of migration policy and labour markets places asylum seekers in vulnerable positions.

The research questions focus on four key areas: What is the overall state of empirical evidence concerning forced labour among ARs and its relationship with asylum policy? How do specific asylum procedures in Italy contribute to or prevent forced labour? To what extent can the theory of structural injustice be applied to the Italian asylum system? What practical solutions can be proposed to address these issues?

Methodology

The thesis employs a mixed-method approach utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data. The research design follows a sequential explanatory model, where a two-phase systematic review lays the foundation for subsequent qualitative research. The qualitative component involves focus groups with representatives from Italy's asylum system and anti-human trafficking networks.

The systematic review serves as the foundation of the research, systematically mapping and synthesizing existing empirical studies on the relationship between forced labour and asylum policies. It involves a review of 73 studies (selected out of 6401 initial records), which are then evaluated and synthesized to address gaps in existing research.

The qualitative data was collected from seven focus groups conducted in Italy with participants from anti-trafficking networks and asylum system officials. These focus groups explored practical experiences and insights into how Italian asylum procedures are

The research applies grounded theory to analyse qualitative data. This allows for generating an inductive theory based on empirical data to develop a substantive theory about the relationship between asylum procedures and forced labour. The grounded theory approach also supports a critical engagement with the data without pre-imposing hypotheses.

The analysis is framed within Iris Marion Young's theory of structural injustice, a critical theory that explains how social structures systematically disadvantage certain groups. Szulc argues

that the Italian asylum system functions as a structural injustice that perpetuates the vulnerability of ARs.

Structure of the thesis

The thesis (a 336-page work, of which the main body consists of 237 pages, the bibliography spans 43 pages, and the rest are appendices) is structured into seven chapters, with a logical flow that systematically builds on each preceding chapter. Here is a summary and evaluation of each chapter.

Chapter 1: “Introduction” provides an in-depth look at the research problem and contextualizes it within the broader framework of migration in Italy. It discusses the rising incidence of forced labour among asylum seekers, particularly since the refugee crisis of 2015. The author presents the motivation for the study, highlighting the gap in current research regarding how asylum procedures may actually contribute to labour exploitation despite being designed to protect refugees.

The introduction also outlines the research questions, objectives, and methods, framing the study within international human rights law, the Asylum Procedures Directive (APD), and the Italian Penal Code. The author refers to key concepts such as forced labour, human trafficking, and structural injustice, which are further elaborated on in later chapters.

The “Introduction” effectively sets the stage for the research, establishing a solid foundation both in terms of the relevance of the issue and the theoretical grounding. The reference to works of like Baczko’s and Mandić’s position the research within broader debates on refugee protection and labour exploitation. However, the discussion on structural injustice could benefit from more immediate application to asylum policies at this stage rather than deferring much of it to the later chapters.

Chapter 2: “Methodology” provides a detailed description of the research methodology, justifying the use of a mixed-methods approach and grounded theory. Szulc explains how the two-phase systematic review was conducted, adhering to the PRISMA guidelines, and how it informed the following focus group discussions. The chapter discusses the study’s limitations, notably the challenges of working with hard-to-reach populations, such as asylum seekers, and the ethical considerations involved in conducting sensitive research.

The focus group method is particularly well-suited for exploring the procedural gaps in the asylum system, as it enables first-hand accounts from officials and NGOs working directly with ARs. The use of MAXQDA for qualitative coding ensures a rigorous analytical process, and the author presents examples of how codes evolved during data analysis, adding transparency to the research process.

The methodology is well-justified and transparent. Combining systematic reviews and focus groups provides a solid empirical foundation for the research, enhancing its credibility. The chapter also demonstrates a good balance between theory and practical research execution.

Chapter 3: “Results of a Two-Phase Systematic Review” presents the systematic review findings, which examines the relationship between forced labour and asylum systems across a vast body of literature. The systematic review maps the evidence base, identifying both strengths and gaps in the research. Notably, the review highlights the lack of detailed studies that examine specific asylum procedures and their direct impact on forced labour. Much of the existing literature focuses on broader migration policies or human trafficking without delving into the procedural nuances of asylum systems.

The author presents several key findings from the review. A significant portion of the literature focuses predominantly on sexual exploitation, while fewer studies address labour exploitation. Additionally, the research is geographically dispersed, with only a limited number of studies concentrating specifically on Italy or the EU asylum system. Furthermore, there is a notable gap in empirical studies that explore the practical implementation of asylum laws and their unintended consequences for asylum seekers and refugees (ARs).

The systematic review is thorough and insightful, successfully synthesizing the current state of research and identifying critical gaps. Szulc fills a significant void in the literature by focusing on asylum procedures. However, while the review is extensive, the transition to the empirical work in subsequent chapters could be smoother, with more explicit links between the gaps identified and the specific research questions posed in the study.

Chapter 4: “Asylum Procedures and Refugee Protection in Italy” shifts to a detailed examination of Italy’s asylum system. The author outlines the procedural stages that ARs must navigate, from registration to first and second reception, and discusses the role of international protection mechanisms. Szulc provides an in-depth analysis of how the Italian system

implements EU asylum directives, specifically the Asylum Procedures Directive (APD) and Dublin Regulations.

Key points include the prolonged duration of asylum procedures, which often leaves asylum seekers and refugees (ARs) in limbo for months or even years, heightening their vulnerability. Additionally, access to legal information and proper identification processes is inconsistent, creating opportunities for exploitation. Reception facilities are frequently overcrowded, underfunded, and poorly managed, further marginalizing ARs.

This chapter is an excellent case study of how asylum procedures work in practice and the ways in which they may inadvertently lead to forced labour. The use of primary data from legal documents and secondary data from reports by international organizations adds to the chapter's rigor. The discussion on the procedural failings of the Italian asylum system is compelling and highlights the urgent need for reform.

Chapter 5: "Results – Empirical Findings" presents the outcomes of the focus group discussions. Szulc identifies two core categories that emerged from the data. The first is protective elements of asylum procedures, such as the right to appeal and access to legal aid. The second is exploitive elements, including long processing times, lack of transparency, and inadequate reception conditions.

The focus groups reveal that certain aspects of the asylum process, particularly the length of time it takes for ARs to receive a decision, directly contribute to their exploitation in the labour market. Participants from anti-human trafficking organizations note that ARs often resort to working in informal sectors to survive, making them vulnerable to forced labour.

The empirical findings are robust and offer critical insights into how asylum procedures function in practice. The use of focus groups to gather data from individuals directly involved in the asylum and anti-trafficking systems is a notable strength. The analysis is well-integrated with the theoretical framework, particularly the discussion on structural injustice.

Chapter 6: "Discussion" applies the empirical findings to the theory of structural injustice. Drawing on Iris Marion Young's work, Szulc argues that Italy's asylum system is a prime example of structural injustice. ARs are systematically disadvantaged by procedural delays, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and inadequate protections, all of which create conditions ripe for

labour exploitation. The author proposes that asylum procedures can be understood as a form of avoidable harm that perpetuates inequality and exploitation.

The chapter also critiques the notion of Italy as a “safe country” for asylum seekers, arguing that the asylum system fails to protect ARs from harm. The discussion emphasizes that structural injustice in the asylum system is not inevitable but results from policy choices that could be reformed.

The theoretical depth of this chapter is a major strength of the thesis. Szulc demonstrates a nuanced understanding of structural injustice and effectively applies it to the Italian asylum system. The discussion is thought-provoking and pushes the boundaries of current discussions.

Final Chapter 7: “Conclusions and Recommendations” summarizes the research findings and provides policy recommendations aimed at improving the Italian asylum system. Key recommendations include reducing the time required to process asylum claims and ensuring that asylum seekers and refugees (ARs) have access to legal information and representation throughout the process. Additionally, improving reception conditions is essential to reduce ARs’ vulnerability to exploitation. Finally, enhancing cooperation between the asylum system and anti-human trafficking networks is also strongly recommended.

Szulc also proposes a theory of change, outlining steps that could be taken to make Italy a genuinely safe host country for ARs. The recommendations are grounded in the empirical findings and offer practical solutions for policymakers and practitioners.

The conclusions are well-argued and supported by the research. The recommendations are practical and feasible, offering clear pathways for reform. The theory of change is a valuable addition, as it provides a framework for implementing the proposed reforms.

The thesis also contains several appendices:

- Appendix 1: “PRISMA 2022 Checklist from Systematic Review”
- Appendix 2: “Systematic Review Protocol”
- Appendix 3: “Tables with synthesized studies from the Systematic Review”
- Appendix 4: “Focus Groups Protocols”
- Appendix 5: “Survey for further research”

The appendices add significant value to the dissertation by providing transparency and replicability to the research process. They reinforce the study's methodological rigor and provide practical tools for other researchers interested in conducting similar studies. Their inclusion ensures that the study is theoretically rich and methodologically sound, allowing for critical scrutiny and potential replication.

I would like to pay special attention to the last appendix, a quantitative survey proposal for future research that could serve as a roadmap for expanding the current research into a more generalizable format. Proposing a future survey demonstrates that the researcher is forward-thinking and recognizes the limitations of the current qualitative methods. This may lay the groundwork for future empirical research that could confirm or expand upon the findings of this dissertation.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the thesis

Strengths of the thesis

One of the major strengths of this thesis is its comprehensive research design, which **integrates both qualitative and quantitative methods**. Szulc successfully utilizes a two-phase systematic review combined with focus group discussions, ensuring a robust and multi-dimensional understanding of the research problem. The systematic review in Chapter 3 synthesizes empirical studies on the relationship between asylum procedures and forced labour, laying the groundwork for qualitative exploration in later chapters. This multi-method approach allows the author to bridge theoretical gaps in the existing literature with practical, first-hand data from stakeholders within the asylum system in Italy.

The focus group discussions conducted with representatives from Italian anti-human trafficking networks and asylum system officials provide critical insights into the on-the-ground realities of how asylum seekers experience the system. This approach allows Szulc to uncover nuances that purely quantitative studies may miss, such as the ways in which delays in asylum procedures and lack of legal information exacerbate the vulnerability of ARs to forced labour.

The mixed-method design adds depth and credibility to the findings, making the research both exploratory and explanatory. This design ensures that the study does not merely theorize about the relationship between asylum procedures and forced labour, but grounds these ideas in real-world experiences and legal analysis.

Another key strength lies in the **theoretical innovation of the research**. Szulc applies Iris Marion Young's theory of structural injustice to the asylum system, arguing that the asylum procedures in Italy constitute a form of avoidable harm that perpetuates exploitation. This theoretical framing is relatively novel in the context of asylum and migration studies, which often focus on immediate legal protections rather than underlying structural inequalities.

In Chapter 6, Szulc argues that the systemic inefficiencies and delays in asylum processing constitute a form of structural injustice. She asserts that while the asylum system ostensibly exists to protect individuals fleeing persecution, its procedural delays and failures create conditions where ARs are left without basic protections, making them vulnerable to exploitative labour practices. The asylum seekers' liminal status—caught between the formal economy and informal labour sectors—serves as a clear illustration of how structural injustice manifests in this context.

This application of structural injustice offers a fresh lens through which policymakers and academics can examine the asylum system. It goes beyond surface-level critiques to suggest that the very framework of the asylum system is flawed and that these flaws have direct, harmful consequences for ARs. The theoretical innovation provides a new contribution to the field, potentially inspiring future research on asylum and migration policies globally.

A significant strength of the dissertation is its **focus on practical recommendations** aimed at improving asylum procedures to protect against forced labour. Szulc does not merely analyse the system's shortcomings; she provides actionable solutions grounded in the empirical findings of her study. The use of a theory of change in the conclusion adds further value by proposing a structured framework for implementing these changes.

In the final chapter, Szulc outlines several recommendations for improving the reception conditions of asylum seekers, such as reducing the length of asylum processing times and improving access to legal information. She also calls for better cooperation between asylum systems and anti-human trafficking networks to ensure that ARs are not exposed to forced labour during the long waiting periods in asylum centres. Additionally, Szulc proposes reforms to Italy's second reception system, highlighting how underfunded and poorly managed facilities exacerbate the vulnerability of asylum seekers to exploitative labour.

In my opinion the practical focus of the thesis enhances its policy relevance, making it more than just an academic exercise. By offering clear and actionable recommendations, Szulc bridges the gap between research and real-world application.

Weaknesses of the thesis

While the focus groups provide rich qualitative data, the **selection of the qualitative research is restricted to stakeholders like asylum officials and NGO representatives**. The lack of direct engagement with asylum seekers themselves is a significant limitation, as it means that the study relies heavily on secondary accounts of how asylum procedures impact ARs.

Although the focus groups yield important insights into the procedural failures of the asylum system, Szulc does not directly interview the asylum seekers who are most affected by these failures. This absence leaves a gap in understanding the personal experiences and testimonies of those who have been subjected to forced labour due to procedural delays or inadequate protection.

A more diverse dataset that included asylum seekers' perspectives would have enriched the analysis and provided a more complete understanding of the human impact of structural failures. The research might be perceived as overly reliant on institutional perspectives, missing out on the lived experiences of those directly affected by forced labour.

While the **focus on Italy allows for detailed analysis, it also limits the broader applicability of the findings**. The Italian asylum system is unique in many ways due to its geographical location as a Mediterranean entry point for asylum seekers. This makes it difficult to generalize the findings to other EU member states with different asylum procedures, social welfare systems, and labour market conditions.

Szulc discusses how Italy's reception conditions contribute to forced labour, focusing on Italy's specific legal and procedural frameworks. However, the study does not explore how these findings might apply to other countries in the EU, such as Germany, France, or Greece, where the asylum process and labour market conditions differ significantly.

This geographical limitation restricts the comparative potential of the study. While Szulc's findings are highly relevant to policymakers in Italy, they may not be as applicable to other EU countries facing different challenges in their asylum systems. A broader comparative analysis

would have increased the general relevance of the research and provided a more comprehensive framework for addressing forced labour within asylum systems across Europe. The thesis follows a grounded theory approach, which is appropriate for exploratory research. However, its **sole reliance on this methodology without a comparative framework limits the study's capacity to connect its findings to broader theoretical constructs or similar phenomena in other contexts.** A more comprehensive framework that included comparisons with other national asylum systems would have provided a more holistic understanding of the issue.

Focusing on grounded theory allows Szulc to develop a substantive theory about the relationship between asylum procedures and forced labour – which is positive. However, the study does not engage deeply with existing theoretical frameworks beyond structural injustice, nor does it compare Italy's asylum system with those of other EU countries, which could have offered a broader theoretical understanding of how different asylum processes may lead to similar or differing levels of exploitation.

However, I would like to point out that the work's strengths significantly outweigh its weaknesses. Also, from my perspective, highlighting the work's weaknesses is more aimed at suggesting future research directions – particularly with more extensive comparative studies in mind. I believe that Natalia Szulc has developed an interesting scientific framework that can be used for further, broader research.

Conclusions

The PhD thesis by Natalia Szulc demonstrates a strong grasp of the theoretical foundations within the migration and asylum policy field, particularly in its application of Iris Marion Young's theory of structural injustice. By applying this theoretical framework to the Italian asylum system, the author showcases a nuanced understanding of how asylum procedures can exacerbate vulnerabilities to forced labour. The dissertation further engages with the theoretical discourse around refugee protection and human trafficking, indicating a well-developed command of both international human rights law and asylum legislation. supports the conclusion that Szulc possesses the general theoretical expertise required for the doctoral level in the field.

The thesis clearly demonstrates Szulc's ability to conduct independent scientific research. The use of a mixed-method approach, including a two-phase systematic review and focus groups with key stakeholders in the asylum and anti-human trafficking networks, reflects her methodological proficiency. The rigorous design of the study, the comprehensive data collection, and the subsequent analysis underscore her capacity to undertake complex research independently. Additionally, the empirical component of the study, which synthesizes insights from systematic reviews and focus groups, further highlights her ability to navigate and integrate multiple research methods, contributing valuable empirical knowledge to the field.

The dissertation presents an original solution to a significant issue by exploring the intersection of asylum procedures and forced labour, an area that has been underexplored in previous research. By framing the Italian asylum system as a structural injustice, Szulc provides a novel perspective that enriches both academic discourse and practical understanding of the vulnerabilities faced by asylum seekers and refugees. Her research offers original findings on the inadequacies of asylum procedures and their unintended consequences, contributing new empirical evidence to the field. Moreover, the policy recommendations proposed by Szulc, grounded in her empirical findings, present actionable solutions for mitigating forced labour among asylum seekers, further reinforcing the originality and applicability of her work in both the academic and practical realms.

These conclusions affirm the quality and originality of Szulc's work, justifying her candidacy for the doctoral degree. Therefore, in my opinion, the thesis fulfils the conditions for the PhD degree in the discipline of political science and administration and may be allowed for public defence.