



September 22, 2024

To Whom it May Concern,

It is great enthusiasm that I evaluate the dissertation, “Asylum Procedures and Forced Labor of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Italy” by Ms. Natalia Szulc from Adam Mickiewicz University as a **pass**.

This dissertation focuses on a rather understudied area of migration/refugee studies – host societies, positing that *how* host societies treat asylum seekers and refugees (ARs) impacts outcomes greatly.

The research is particularly focused on the relationship between asylum procedures and forced labor among ARs in Italy from 2015-2021.

This is, obviously, a topic that is incredibly important, has policy relevance, and is theoretically and empirically interesting. And yes, while we do know that there is some relationship between asylum policies and human trafficking -- we need to know more about this relationship. In general, this is a well-executed and important project that provides new data and advances our understanding of the relationships between AR and forced labor and AR practices more generally. I appreciate the great care that Ms. Szulc took in explaining her methodology and demonstrating her knowledge of relevant literature. Most importantly, she advances our understanding of this very delicate and obscure process of what happens between asylum seeking and protections are provided.

The following comments are meant to help Ms. Szulc plan for future articles and or a book project. If a book project is considered, this would require some major restructuring of the project and more of a direct focus on the empirical information. This does not come until after chapter 5 – which is far too late. A lot of what comes before Chapter 5 needs to be radically changed/summarized. However, I suspect that, in fact, she does have a lot more very important quotes/material that would be of great interest for a book project.

Some criticisms/weaknesses to consider:

1. I do not see this as mixed methods research. Although efforts are made to incorporate different kinds of data, I still see this as a qualitative dissertation. This is just fine but there are no regressions, no models, no statistical analysis.
2. I never got a sense of where this dissertation’s theoretical home, and at times (especially toward the end) I think the literature theoretically too much, ending as a sort of political theory dissertation. Moreover, although lots of articles are used/reviewed to look at AR

policy, theoretically this lacks grounding. What is this an instance of? Every scholar should think about this question: what is the larger phenomenon/question that is being asked/explore? To me, this is a great case study of the failure/challenges of implementation – and this is not addressed at all in the dissertation.

3. The dissertation uses and incorporates a great deal of law/EU and Italian legislation, but it never engages legal scholarship? A future project should address/engage legal scholarship in a more direct way.
4. The organization of the dissertation is lacking/hard to focus – too descriptive and not enough analysis. Future articles/book project should be more analytical, with a clear argument about what is important and why. At times, I lost the forest among the trees.

Some Questions:

1. What is this an instance of? In terms of your evidence, argument, and analysis, what is the broad theoretical contribution of this research?
2. You provide some great take home points and policy recommendations, but what does this dissertation say about the importance/role of international law and legal structures? These are engaged/detailed/described but they are not “taken to task.”
3. In this dissertation, there is no mention of cost/finances/or the economics of these policies or practices. Is this intentional, or do they not matter?
4. Again, this is important and timely research: what is next, and will you do with this research?

The Introduction:

Natalia makes “the case” for the urgency of this project, using recent data on the number of individuals at risk (15,000-17,000) meaning that this project has enormous ethical value as well. does a good job identifying the scope and domain of the problem as well as the research itself, justifying Italy as a key case in AR issues and forced labor. (17)

My research findings align with these conclusions: “modern slavery produced by the neoliberal globalization of labor.” – a lot of jargon here – explain what this means precisely.

Surprised that there seems to be little international law analyzed, engaged for this analysis.

Chapter 2. Methodology

Appreciate the focus on hard-to-reach population of AR and hard to reach topic of forced labor. Clear explanation of GT and the qualitative methods used. She suggests that this design “most closely” resonates with the constructivist grounded theory but does not explain. It should. P. 24 and 44 – need to explain what this means. And, moreover, why is this important?

Clarify why the use of MAXQDA software is helpful and perhaps clearly talk about the theme that were created to provide more empirical information in this chapter and for more thematic analysis.

P. 32: focus groups “are still not frequently used as a qualitative method in political science.” Really? This sentence should be more nuanced. However, since your study does not really rely chiefly on focus groups as your methodology, not sure this kind of emphasis is necessary.

You do not explain who was included in the focus group and details (numbers; population). Later indicates that not AR but representatives of anti-trafficking networks. Not sure if having just this group might bias data?

This chapter might need some restructuring; bounces around a bit and only explains the meta-analysis role later. With this said, and while I appreciate interdisciplinary work, the articles/literature review does not have a theoretical home or discipline or major body of work that is being addressed in this chapter.

Very sophisticated and careful information on coding process. This could be explained in more detail and why it is important and what this brings to the table.

CHAPTER 3. RESULTS OF THE TWO-PHASE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Very thorough and comprehensive review of existing literature and nice visual of publication dates, methodological approaches, and, most importantly, thematic coverage.

You note that vulnerability and precarity are two central themes of existing research, but you do not follow up on this later or integrate it more into your analysis. You certainly could and should.

A strength of this chapter is you are extremely thorough and clear with concise take home points about what informed the research project and guided the research.

Of course, in some future publication/book, a lot of this can be shortened, moved to footnotes and summarized. For a dissertation this is important and necessary, but for a book project (that you want someone to read) it is less necessary.

Chapter 4. Asylum procedures and the refugee protection in Italy.

Finally, **this chapter turns to the empirical part** of the dissertation looking at and analyzing asylum procedures in Italy, with a focus on three distinct stages: access; identification, and reception to examine: to what extent do the procedures ensure effective access to rights and protection for asylum seekers?

This is a rich chapter that could have benefited from less description of Italian laws and more analysis of these laws or new empirical information. A lot of this chapter reads like different parts of government/legal handbooks – and it shouldn't.

This is an overly theoretical chapter that needs a summary at the beginning or analysis at the end.

The chapter starts getting interesting on page 116 when it discusses Italian practices and what really happens – rather than describing all the laws that engage these issues. Again, the laws are important in terms of what they say, but a future publication should summarize and analyze and not just list the legislation.

On page 130 – for example and at the end of this first paragraph, there should be some analysis – some suggestion of the information that will follow and how it relates to the overall argument of the dissertation. The rest of this section is really quite interesting and important but not sure if it is the author's analysis or taken from somewhere else. This is the challenge/problem of using so much of the specific legislation – it makes it hard to follow/decipher your argument.

4.4--- THE MEAT!! I was hoping for some of this earlier. I felt like I had to wait a long time until I was learning more about the actual relationship between ARs and force labor – those here it become trafficking.

Although the chapter is meant to focus on the challenges with implementation, the way this chapter is organized and written the challenges are hidden – not in clear focus. There is a lot of good data here, but it is hidden or obscured without you telling us what to pay attention to.

Chapter 5: Results

This is an **even more interesting chapter** with relevant and illuminating quotes and tons of really important information. However, I thought I was going to read more about the theory of social injustice (SI) here– isn't it supposed to be weaved into/reflected/demonstrated in this chapter, but it is not. This is/could be a really important way to frame these events/circumstances but here the theory is not integrated. It should be mentioned/explained at the beginning if so.

Some great take home points about what the challenges are and how they impact forced labor: importance of human factor, cultural mediators, awareness, normalization, continuum of exploitation, tailoring procedures,
(5.1.2: Exposing **trough? P. 156**)

Arrival and registration process: crucial as are territorial commissions (TC), but have they been mentioned/explained previously? 163. This could be very important for other cases.

Gems like 5.2.2 “Dublin procedures not only hinder assistance to human trafficking victims but may also increase the risk of subsequent exploitation” 168.... lost/needs to be emphasized more.
5.5.1 – I think what you mean here is that these additional elements have to do with the system as a whole rather than specific parts of stages.

In this chapter I would have liked to know more about the forced labor and what this looks like.

P. 196: such an important statement – perhaps the central argument of this research: **“we are facing a situation where the only form of legalizing residence is by applying for asylum.”**

Chapter 6: Discussion

This is where the dissertation really gets interesting – and I feel like I am learning a great deal. These are the details that are most important for you to elevate and analyze.

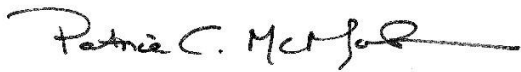
For the future: this is where your article should begin – with some of the take home points about what is actually happening and why. However, there is a whole implementation literature that you have not really engaged. This has most of your really juicy empirical data and some hidden, surprising take home points. Here too the chapter needs culling because hard to prioritize the most important points from the “general background” information (and what is most obvious/known). Great take home points and recommendations. Thoroughly enjoyed and learned from this chapter.

More details about the specific forced labor and perhaps how certain aspects of the process might impact different kinds of forced labor would be interesting and perhaps important to your overall argument and conclusions.

In closing, let me say that this is a fine piece of academic research that demonstrates a clear focus on an important theoretical, empirical and policy issue. I believe that the findings have resonance outside this environment and could, if revised for policy, could have an important impact on changes in the system.

Ms. Szulc demonstrates a clear understanding of how to conceptualize, frame, and carry out a complex academic project and, from my perspective, has thoroughly exceeded the threshold for successfully defending her PhD. I award a grade of a **pass**.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Patrice C. McMahon". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

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