STRUGGLES AROUND REPRESENTATION AND IN/VISIBILITY IN EVERYDAY MIGRANT IRREGULARITY IN SWEDEN

Abstract
This article explores tensions between visibility and invisibility of irregularity in Sweden. It focuses on irregular migrants' social rights and their self-representation. The analysis builds mainly on ethnographic material mapping migrants' and activists' experiences of seeking asylum, living in irregularity and/or getting involved in struggles for migrants' rights in Sweden. Furthermore, material from news media and political debate on migration and asylum rights is used to contextualise the interview material. The analysis suggests that the lived experiences of irregularity are shaped not only between systematic invisibility and violent forms of visibility but also visibility in terms of increased self-representation and autonomy. Furthermore, the analysis shows a shift towards increased social rights for irregular migrants from mid-2000s to 2013 and the establishment of irregular migrants as a social category and as political actors in their own right. However, the article also points towards increased repression against this 'new' category.

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Introduction

> Since REVA started it doesn't feel secure for the irregular migrants any more – there is more stress and they have arrested many. There are some who do not dare to go to school, even today. They do not dare to go out in the street; they stay at home. (Dehqan)

It is November 2013, and me and the interviewee (I here call Dehqan) are talking about 'REVA'. The project REVA (*Rättssäkert och Effektivt Verkställighetsarbete*/'Legal and Effective Implementation') was introduced by the police, the Prison and Probation Service as well as the Swedish Migration Board gradually from 2010, aiming to improve cooperation between these organisations in the area of migrant detention and deportation (*Dagens Nyheter* 2013; Migrationsverket 2012; Polisen 2013). Increased enforcement of deportations of refused asylum seekers was part of an agreement between the right-wing Alliance government of 2006–2014 and the Green Party. Paradoxically, the Green Party also succeeded in including demands for irregular migrants' rights to education and emergency healthcare in the same agreement (Regeringen 2011). This paradox has a parallel in Dehqan's account. He describes a situation in which irregular migrant minors have gained the right to go to school since June 2013, but in which his friends, who are irregular migrants, have been too scared to actually enjoy this right.[1]

The short quote by Dehqan illustrates some of the tensions present both *between* and *within* visibility and invisibility that I understand as inherent to positions defined by migration control, including irregularity, and that I here aim to explore in the Swedish context. These tensions are articulated when repression and fear coincide with strengthened social rights for irregular migrants. They are also articulated between the ways in which migrants are increasingly making themselves visible as political actors in order to claim rights and the vulnerability for control and repression that might come as a consequence (Papadopoulos, Stephenson & Tsianos 2008; Papadopoulos & Tsianos 2013; Tyler & Marciniak 2013). These tensions appear in my study not only in everyday experiences of irregularity but also in relation to irregular migrants as a collective political actor and as a category in social policies.

The purpose of this article is to explore irregularity as a lived experience shaped at the crossroads of the dynamics of border control, welfare policies, processes of racialisation and public discourses on migration and migrants. During the 2000s and early 2010s, the entitlement to several social rights for irregular migrants has been introduced in Sweden; hence, this group has become established as a category in social policy. Irregular migrants as political actors have also gained a greater presence in the public sphere. However, parallel to these developments, irregular migrants' security and mobility have also been severely curtailed. The conflict

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around forms of visibility has continuously intensified during the 2010s: in 2016, the amount of forced deportations doubled from the previous year and the police has established new practices for searching for people who have absconded, including demanding information about irregular migrants from the social services (*Sydsvenskan* 2017a).[2]

The analysis builds on ethnographic material mapping migrants' experiences of being asylum seekers, living in irregularity and, in some cases, getting involved in social movements for migrants' rights in Sweden. The material consists of 32 in-depth interviews with migrants, mainly asylum seekers with experiences of irregularity, and activists[3] in parts of the migration rights' movements in Malmö. It has been collected over two time periods, 2006–2009 (19 interviews) and 2013–2015 (13 interviews), within the frames of two projects.[4] The analysis is also framed by my own experiences as an activist in migration rights' movements in Malmö and by material from mass media and political debate on migration and asylum rights. The material has been transcribed and thematically organised.

In the next section, I provide a brief conceptualisation of irregularity and a sketch of the context of the analysis. Thereafter, I discuss the theoretical framework around the topics of in/visibility, rights and representation within the broader postcolonial and antiracist scholarly interventions. In the following sections, I analyse some changes in the debates on migration and the conditions and rights of irregular migrants. The analysis focuses on tensions around invisibility and visibility in the clash between increased social rights and increased repression and in the subjective accounts of the interviewees in the two projects. The article concludes with a discussion about the ways in which the tensions around visibility and invisibility can be understood as following the logics of border control and everyday irregularity.

Conceptualising and contextualising migrant irregularity

The vocabulary of critical studies of migration and borders is, and needs to be, in continuous transformation. Among the range of available terms, I chose the concept of irregularity because I think it sheds light on the ways in which it is inseparable from 'regularity' and processes of regulation. However, I share with Bommes and Sciortino (2011: 18) a 'considerable uneasiness' with the concept and the need to underscore that irregularity is far from 'a total status that defines the individual, but only certain categories of the social transactions in which the migrant is involved' (*ibid*.). I conceptualise irregularity as a temporary position produced by structural social factors, such as border control and labour market dynamics, rather than as an identity or individual characteristic produced by deviations or administrative mistakes (Bommes & Sciortino 2011; de Genova 2002; Squire 2011) and as a field in which the conflict between (migrant) mobility and (state) control of this mobility is negotiated (Squire 2011). This perspective brings about an understanding of a broad range of migrants' collective and individual activities and strategies as carrying a potential for resistance in this field. Everyday strategies for survival and dignity are, along with more traditionally organised forms of social protest, part of what I conceptualise as migrant struggles. In this context, I have applied the concept of representation in terms of both self-representation – speaking and being visible, or not, in the public sphere – and visibility of narratives and images of irregularity and irregular migrants or the invisibility of such narratives and images.

As in other Nordic countries, Swedish policies and debates around irregular migration focus on refugee migration (rather than on labour migration that characterises, for example, the US debates on irregular migration). However, rather than trying to account for clearly defined and separated categories of irregularity, I think it is important to avoid the construction of simplified binary categories and instead pay attention to the general plurality and 'messiness' of situations and migration strategies through which irregularity come about. Irregularity can be produced through the routes and modes of control that are connected with migration for studies, labour migration, refugee migration, family reunification, etc., as well as the overlaps between these forms of migration. By including refused asylum seekers in the concept of irregularity, I aim to create a conceptualisation that captures these overlaps and that focuses on the mechanisms of state control of migrant mobility.

Theoretical approaches to irregularity, in/visibility and migrants' rights

The theoretical approach to irregularity in this paper is based on three central arguments. First, the categories of irregularity and regularity and the categories of migrants and citizens need to be understood as unstable, overlapping categories that constitute each other. Second, migration control and its technologies connect to a broader set of politics than the 'mere' control of borders and citizenship. Finally, tensions around invisibility and visibility in terms of representation are central to migrant struggles.

Irregularity is defined in relation to regularity. Anderson (2013) problematises different sets of imagined binaries and divisions between categories of migrants as well as between citizens and migrants and between irregularity and regularity. A one-dimensional focus on irregular inhabitants tends to implicitly suggest that 'full citizenship' is within reach on the other side of the migrant/citizen divide. However, citizenship is always differentiated and unfinished, and the differentiations and categorisations entailed in migration control have consequences in the lives and positions of not only migrants but also permanent residents and formal citizens (Anderson 2013; Anderson & Hughes 2015). Parallel to this, the tension between visibility and invisibility is not only limited to irregular migrants but also at work in the positions of racialised groups in general, including citizens.

Critical postcolonial and antiracist research has mapped the ways in which the approach of Swedish welfare institutions towards racialised citizens and residents, as well as political debates on issues such as migration, racism, discrimination and colonialism, is characterised by an interaction between invisibility and hypervisibility. Sweden's historical links with colonial legacies (Keskinen *et al.* 2009), as well as contemporary experiences of racism, have frequently been made invisible in national narratives, and when these issues have been given some space, the attention has often shifted from Sweden to racialised citizens as permanent 'immigrants'. Migrants and racialised groups are made invisible as a part of the Swedish population and as active participants in the labour market and social and cultural spheres. Nonetheless, these same groups are often exposed to a kind of hypervisibility through stigmatising, criminalising and/or victimising representations along with an under-representation in institutions and positions of power, which forces a visibility upon racialised individuals that makes them stand as representatives for an assumed collective (Ålund 2005; de los Reyes 2001; de los Reyes, Molina & Mulinari 2005; Statens Offentliga Utredningar 2005.

See also Leinonen & Toivanen 2014 for a discussion about racialised in/visibilities in the Nordic context).

It is important to understand the tensions around visibility and invisibility that irregular migrants experience in relation to these wider patterns in the Swedish context. They show the ways in which irregularity is not only shaped by specific processes but also integrated in societal structures more generally.

Just as irregularity is part of larger structures, so are the mechanisms of migration control, detention and deportations. They have effects beyond the 'mere' control of migrants: the goals of the EU and its states in the area of migration policies are a complex composition of the will to stimulate some forms of migration and stop others. The control practices *appear* to be absolute and strict but actually rather work to create a narrative about 'being hard on migration' rather than actually stopping migration (de Genova 2013; Tyler 2013: 71). Many mainstream political actors – both on the left and the right – seem to suppose that these signals about controlled borders are necessary to suppress conflicts that they assume will otherwise grow as a consequence of migration (for a critical discussion about these 'safe haven' narratives, see Yuval-Davis, Anthias & Kofman 2005). This is a perspective that runs the risk of reinforcing racist approaches to migration and processes of racialisation in which citizens who are not understood as 'Swedish' are described as 'strangers' and as a source of social problems. At the same time, most European states want to appear, to some extent, as adhering to at least the most basic commitments they have made in relation to human rights. In this way, humanitarian and repressive measures are tightly connected and interlinked in the processes of border policies (Cuttitta 2014). This connection is what de Genova (2013) has called the 'border spectacle' – underscoring how individual deportations, and border control in general, are not merely about administrating forced removals but have a more central function in terms of performing a sense of control and the threat of deportation in the eyes of migrants and citizens.

The character of migration policies as a spectacle has consequences for the conditions for migrant struggles and protests. Critical analyses have observed the risk that migration rights' movements reproduce and reinforce some of the structures they work against when they directly or indirectly mobilise the categorisations and subjectivities that state control of migration produces. Ticktin (2011) shows, as an example, how the French state and civil society have placed compassion and care as core values in their approaches to asylum seekers and irregular migrants, which privileges subjectivities marked with powerlessness and suffering over those marked with political agency and articulation (see also Fassin 2005; Pellander & Horsti 2017). In the UK, Anderson, Gibney & Paoletti (2011) have analysed how anti-deportation campaigns often tend to produce representations of migrants as 'worthy' of citizenship by virtue of their engagement in the community or their respectability. These kinds of representations are not subverting the ways in which the state categorises and divides migrants (Anderson, Gibney & Paoletti 2011).

According to Tyler & Marciniak (2013: 146-148), the visibility and rights claims of irregular migrants, manifested in the form of political organising and in the mere presence of irregular migrants and the questions about rights that this presence poses, carry the potential of not only challenging but also reinscribing borders and categorisation:

> [M]igrants and activists who engage in integrationist forms of migrant politics are involved in important forms of critical resistance to the exclusions of citizenship, but risk remaining

captured within the existing legal frameworks and prevailing regimes of sovereignty which they contest (Tyler & Marciniak 2013: 148).

In their analysis of immigrant protests and rights claiming, Tyler & Marciniak (2013) approach this tension as a matter of conflict around in/visibility in terms of representation. Papadopoulos & Tsianos (2013: 181-182) understand the balance and/or tension between rights and representation as a central dynamic in contemporary politics (*ibid*.). The regulation of access to rights is a central form of differentiation that profoundly structures people's conditions. However, representation has come to be key in the negotiation as to who should or should not be entitled access to rights. When there is an imbalance between rights and representation, societal conflicts are laid bare. As an example, Papadopoulos & Tsianos describe the people in the French movement *Sans-Papiers* as a group with high levels of representation but a lack of rights, whereas the population in the French *banlieues* has formal rights but a lack of representation (*ibid*.). Returning to the Swedish context, the following section offers an analysis of some changes in the debates on irregular migrants' rights during the last decade in regard to in/visibility and the interaction and tension between rights and representation.

Continuities and shifts in the Swedish context

In early 2000s, irregular migrants hardly 'existed' as a category in social policy in political debate or in the media in Sweden. Politicians and the general public rarely addressed the lack of rights that characterised the everyday life of irregular migrants, and the welfare institutions and civil servants hardly reflected publicly upon their inability to include irregular migrants in their services. Irregular migrants were deprived of many social and political rights, and their 'right to have rights', as phrased by Arendt (1968), was not recognised in legislation or the public debate.

However, during the 2000s and 2010s, the field has changed in several complex ways. Debates about the health of children in irregular migrant families (Tamas 2009) and a campaign for 'refugee amnesty' but also the role of the unions in relation to irregular workers' rights were events during the years 2004–2007 that started to increase irregular migrants' visibility (Nielsen 2016; Sager 2011). In the form of protests, campaigns and claims from migrants, asylum rights activists, religious congregations, politicians and professional groups (as, for example, doctors, teachers and social workers), the debate grew over irregular migrants' rights to healthcare, schooling and membership in unions. The government commissioned official reports on irregular migrants' rights to schooling and healthcare, and social policies started to include the formerly 'non-existing' social space of irregular migrants. One can trace an increase in the application of the concept of irregular migrants (*papperslösa*) in reports and social policies across these years (Sager 2011), as well as in mass media and parliamentary protocols (Holgersson 2011).

In an agreement between the right-wing coalition government at the time and the Green Party, the first step was taken towards the introduction of the right to schooling for irregular migrant children, by 1 June 2013 (Skolverket 2015; Utbildningsdepartementet 2012), and towards the introduction of the right to healthcare at the same level as asylum seekers, by 1 July 2013 (Socialdepartementet 2012, 2013). In the cities of Malmö and Gothenburg, the programmes against domestic violence started to include irregular migrant women (Oskarsson 2013: 20ff). Some trade unions (the syndicalist

union SAC and also some of the unions within the Swedish Trade Union Confederation) opened up for irregular workers to affiliate or are finding routes to arbitrate for them in labour rights disputes (Gunneflo & Selberg 2010). In Malmö city council, the social services developed an interpretation of the Social Services Act that enabled support to irregular migrant minors without time limitation. Furthermore, irregular migrants as actors in their own right gained more space and visibility in the migration rights' movements as activists and spokespersons. Recent research in the field of critical migration studies in Sweden has analysed these different changes and developments (see, for example, an edited volume by Sager, Holgersson & Öberg 2016). A growing body of cultural productions, reports and student dissertations discuss different aspects of the causes and effects of irregularity and the growing resistance and solidarity. Irregular inhabitants have become a social and political category that has gained visibility in the media, social policy, political debate and artistic expressions.

Visibility and invisibility between autonomy and control

The increased visibility of irregular migrants as a category in social policy and as political actors has partly been promoted through the forms of acts that Isin (2008) has conceptualised as 'acts of citizenship'. The concept refers to acts that non-citizens perform when they act in ways that contribute to shifting or renegotiating the boundary between those who have rights and those who have not and between those who are included in the citizenry and those who are not. In this case, it is about those irregular migrants who have stayed despite refusals and threats of deportation and who have continued struggling for the right to remain, to claim social rights and to have a political voice, participating in asylum rights groups, organisations and campaigning. These acts have contributed to a shift in the boundaries around certain rights and political subjectivities.

So far, I have described these shifts towards increased visibility of irregular migrants as political actors and as carriers of social rights, in terms of a relative political 'success' effected by the acts of citizenship of irregular migrants. Yet, this increased visibility did not only increase migrant autonomy but seems to also have turned into a mode of control. In February 2013, the border police in Stockholm introduced the REVA project (Legal and Effective Implementation). It had already been evaluated for two years in Malmö, and the amount of deportations had increased by approximately 23 percent during that period (*Dagens Nyheter* 2013). During the 'test lab period' in Malmö, REVA had been criticised by migrants, activists, healthcare workers, non-governmental organisation workers and local politicians for the insecurity and fear produced by the intensified police activity in the city (*Tidningen Re:public* 2012). When REVA was launched in Stockholm, the outcry was even louder: systematic controls in the Stockholm metro made migration control more visible to the general public (Schierup, Ålund & Kings 2014). The arguments above about the risk for disciplining and control connected with being visible and represented as a category (Papadopoulos & Tsianos 2013; Tyler & Marciniak 2013) seem to be reflected in this repression against irregular migrants that was growing along with the improvements of their rights.

Based on ethnographic work in Southern Europe, Papadopoulos & Tsianos (2013) argue that those analyses of migrant struggles that centre the analysis on citizenship and formal belonging might fail to include people's strategies for staying invisible – which are central to

many migrants' struggles to gain or create liveable everyday spaces. They are not referring to invisible as in hidden away indoors due to fear of deportation but in terms of being located outside the frames of representation and categorisation. In a situation where no formal rights are within reach, Papadopoulos & Tsianos argue that a life under the radar, which enables mobility and the building of security and continuity through mutuality and networks with other migrants, is the main – and sometimes only – form of struggle that many migrants are able to embrace (*ibid*.). This position could be problematised through questions about its applicability to people who are in life situations/phases in which they need to stay in one place, hence making the need to be included in a rights-entitled category key to their situation. However, despite these limitations, it is interesting to consider the double-edged character of visibility and representation specifically in relation to the developments analysed here.

The REVA project is obviously not a unique phenomenon in Europe or in Sweden. Rather, the project is a consequent step in the ongoing intensification of control and repression of migrants in the EU (Guild 2009). Since the second set of interview material was gathered, further dramatic changes have taken place that have reinforced the turn of the newly gained visibility and representation into forms of control. Starting in the summer of 2015, the struggles of migrants to enter and travel through Europe became particularly intense and visible. While Swedish politicians in early autumn 2015 talked about openness and humanitarianism as responses to the so-called 'refugee crisis', the borders were practically closed a few months later. Thereafter, the way in which irregular migrants were represented and described changed quickly. In October 2015, the Minister for Migration at the time, Morgan Johansson, said in an interview: 'If you haven't received a residence permit, you are no refugee. Then you should go back to your home country' (*Sydsvenskan* 2015). In the article, 'irregular migrants' were described as the absolute opposite of 'refugees' and demanded to leave to create space for 'real' refugees. This statement points towards the problematic ways in which representations can shift and become filled with new meanings. A terror attack in Stockholm city centre in April 2017, in which five people were killed and several injured, caused an even more drastic shift in the representations of irregular migrants. As soon as it became known that the suspect was a refused asylum seeker staying irregularly in Sweden, politicians started suggesting harsher measures of control (*Dagens Nyheter* 2017; *Sydsvenskan* 2017b).

The struggles of different groups for rights and representation have always carried a risk of reproducing divisions into worthy and non-worthy subjects of rights. Furthermore, visibility and inclusion in the categories of the welfare state and social policies might come with a risk of increased repression, disciplining and/or stigmatising. Another event that points towards the double-edged character of increased visibility and presence as a category in social policies is the increased deportation of irregular migrants, as shown in the statistics of 2016 and early 2017, which one could argue to be a direct consequence of the improved social rights: the police in the south of Sweden contacted social services for the addresses of irregular migrant families who were in touch with them for social welfare (*Sydsvenskan* 2017a). In the last example, the connection between the group's appearance as a social policy category and repression is striking: their possibility to get social welfare shaped police strategies.

One more example is the way in which one in Sweden, during the winter of 2015/2016, could follow a rather drastic shift in relation to the category of 'unaccompanied minors'. This was by then a

categorisation that had been used mainly by social welfare officers and organisations representing unaccompanied minors. However, during 2015/2016, the category of 'unaccompanied minor' transformed into a stigmatised category described as destructive for the society (see, for example, this debate article by Lalander *et al.* 2016).

These events show how easily visibility can turn from something experienced as 'positive' into a threat and a form of control. I claim that the understanding of visibility as double edged is particularly relevant for understanding the interplay between rights and representation in the Swedish context, where categorisations of different social groups and boundaries of belonging have been central for the distribution of welfare services and rights as well as for disciplining and social control. It is also here that several scholars have identified a specific aspect of irregularity in Sweden: the lack of legal status and the threat of deportation have relegated people to a very limited social space (Sager 2011; Sigvardsdotter 2012).

Visibility and invisibility as everyday experience

The tension between visibility as a route towards autonomy and as a measure of control has a parallel in the more subjective experiences of irregularity, but here the focus is more on invisibility. As mentioned above, irregular migrant children were granted the right to go to primary and secondary school in June 2013 – in the midst of the most intensive period of discussions about REVA and police presence in the streets. As the legislation on schooling for irregular migrants did not include a guarantee that schools would be a sanctuary from police intervention, a risk remained that some people would be too scared to go to school despite their new right. Similarly, in relation to the rights to healthcare, a psychiatric doctor at the Unit for Children's Psychiatry recently explained in an interview that his work with irregular migrant children and youth was being severely damaged by the activities of the police. The children were worried because the police were calling regularly to ask about children who attended the clinic and they had also heard rumours about 'the REVA police' waiting outside the clinic (*Tidningen Re:public* 2012, 2015).

However, long before REVA, many irregular migrants – although not all – were scared of being in public spaces. In the interviews I conducted with refused asylum seekers during 2006–2009, many interviewees articulated their subjective experiences of irregularity in a way that was connected to the tension between visibility and invisibility (Sager 2011): a tension between a wish to be invisible – to stay away from control, detention and deportation – and a wish to be visible – as an autonomous human being and as a political subject.

Floriana and her husband Ismail fled to Sweden with their three children from the persecution they were exposed to in Macedonia in 2003. Their asylum application had been refused, and they had absconded from their contact with the authorities in order to avoid deportation. They had lived in that situation for around a year when I interviewed them. Floriana and Ismail often expressed fears about being found by the police:

> We were so afraid when we went outdoors, so we split up into groups. Some of us walked further ahead and some on the other side of the street a bit behind. When we saw a police car, the children got so scared they jumped and tried to hide in the bushes. We were totally struck by panic (Floriana).

Floriana, Ismail and their three children were literally hiding indoors; the few times when they went outside, they were extremely nervous.

In their fear of being found, caught and deported, they were aiming for invisibility. However, while their fear was sometimes so intense that they were ready to 'hide in the bushes', this family was also active in the campaign for refugee amnesty that was going on at the same time. They expressed their view that, through that engagement and their participation in the study, they wanted to change their own situation and also to share their experiences and raise their voices about a situation they understood as relatively invisible to those in Sweden who did not have direct contact with asylum seekers.

Another interviewee, Mira, described a similar dual approach to the issue of visibility and invisibility. Mira had escaped from threats and harassment in Kosovo, where she belonged to an ethnic minority. After a few years in Sweden, her asylum application and the appeal had been refused and she was now staying irregularly. She told me how scared she was to go outside. She was worried that she would get lost, because in that case, she would never dare to ask anyone about the way home. However, when I asked her what she thought was the most important thing that people need to know about the situation for people in her circumstances, she answered that:

> The most important thing is that people need to understand that the individual who is hiding still *exists*. Because it seems like people think that you disappear when you get refused and abscond. As if you cease to exist (Mira).

Despite the fact that Mira in her everyday life wanted to keep herself invisible to the extent that she would not consider even asking a stranger for direction, she describes the experience of feeling invisible, being rendered non-existent, as the most pervasive and deeply rooted fear in her irregular situation.

In the interviews that were conducted from the summer of 2013 – that is, shortly after the period in which the REVA project seemed at its most active and the media coverage was at its most intense – until autumn 2015, many interviewees expressed the strong fear for their own and their friends' safety. Akram, an Afghani young man who had newly arrived in Sweden when the street controls started to increase, says: 'I was scared of walking to activities and parties and I felt like I needed to stay indoors after 5 pm every day'. Dehqan, who told us at the beginning of this article about how his friends did not dare to go to school, expresses how he felt when 'REVA started': 'I was still irregular at the beginning. I was not so scared, but I got upset about seeing so many friends being taken in. Seven friends were taken in and deported during 2012 and 2013'.

The form of fear that Mira and Floriana with their families experienced – a fear that in some situations literally forced them to try to remain invisible – probably surfaces for every person who is forced into irregularity and becomes threatened with deportation. This form of fear came to grow and intensify even more for those who lived (and live) irregularly 'during REVA'. However, the painful form of invisibility – as a human being – that Mira talks about seems to have undergone a certain transformation during the same time period – at least locally in those places where the presence of irregular migrants has been most noticeable.

While the visibility of irregular migrants as a group of inhabitants in Sweden had already grown during the last decade, REVA became a catalyst for further attention. Irregular migrants' own initiation and participation in the mobilisations against REVA and for migrants' rights further promoted their visibility. Together with the testimonies about fear and worry concerning REVA, several of the interviewees I talked to in the period 2013–2015 are active in networks and organisations struggling for asylum seekers' and irregular migrants'

rights and – in the face of a shortage of such rights – organise activities and social spaces for people to meet. So here we are back at those recent changes that to some extent could be described as a 'success' – migrants are to a greater extent themselves part of a political conversation that earlier had been mostly *about* migrants and irregular migrants. In a conversation with Behrooz, who received a residence permit through his first application and never had to be irregular in Sweden, he underscores several times that the organisation he is working with, which organises activities and campaigns for unaccompanied minors, has a clearly expressed goal to increase the visibility of the group:

> One of our goals is to tell our stories to as many people as possible as a way to fight racism. If we explain to them clearly that 'we have escaped from chaotic areas. We have escaped to save our lives, our very existence. We come here to build a better life, to work with you, and to struggle side by side with you. We are all human beings and have the same value. There is no big difference between you and me' (Behrooz).

Behrooz is one of many young migrants who are active in different organisations and projects, especially in Malmö but also across the country. They could be described as both actors and 'target group' in the accelerating attention around the conditions of irregularity that I have sketched in former sections. The quote by Behrooz indirectly brings yet another kind of voice from the interview material to the fore: the concern that visibility and representation have indeed increased but seems to be mainly about visibility in relation to social rights and social policy concerns. Issues such as irregular migrants' rights to healthcare (see also Bendixsen 2018 for Norway), schooling and other welfare services are central to the narrative on irregularity that has gained a presence in the public sphere. These issues have been and are, of course, crucial for many people and are obviously very important political issues. However, just like Behrooz, several interviewees highlight their continuous invisibility in relation to other thematic and political frames within which migration policy, asylum rights and irregularity could be read. Akram also expresses his concern with the limited understanding of the contexts of migration when he shares his thoughts on Swedish arms trade:

> Sweden is the eighth biggest country for weapon production in the world. They do not use the weapons in Sweden, so they have to sell it. Where can they sell it? To countries like Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, USA, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan – who send it to the Talibans! And then they chase me and I have to escape and come here – and once here I have to nearly kill myself to explain why I had to escape (Akram).

Many of the interviewees argue for the need to understand their position and the way in which irregularity comes about within a global political context: the wars and conflicts that force people to flee, colonial histories, the role of Sweden and Europe as a whole in these wars as parties and in arms export, the unequal global distribution of resources that forces people to move irregularly and precariously and the interpretations and the questioning of people's credibility that permeate the asylum process. These are aspects of irregularity that several interviewees experience as continuously invisible, arguing that the visibilities of these other contexts of irregularity would produce more politicised subjectivities than the one that has come into the light now: the irregular migrant as a subject of social policy.

Concluding reflections

In the analysis, I have sketched an image of irregularity as a lived experience shaped between systematic invisibility and violent forms of visibility. The development of the in/visibility of irregularity that I have described in these sections (and the parallel in/visibility in relation to racism and processes of racialisation) is in many ways paradoxical. Especially, everyday experiences of irregularity, as indicated by the accounts of the interviewees, carry several paradoxes. However, these shifts in two distinctly opposite directions – on the one hand, visibility as connected to autonomy, as success, increased social rights and a political strategy, and on the other hand, visibility as a threat, control and repression – might look contradictory but actually they are not particularly so.

With the perspective on irregularity as a dynamic field in which the conflict between mobility and control is negotiated (Squire 2011), the seemingly paradoxical changes in Sweden can be understood as the ongoing conflict around the relationship between rights and representation (Papadopoulos & Tsianos 2013). The analysis of these changes over time described how the conditions for different forms of visibility and invisibility have changed: while the wish (need) to stay out of sight has been more or less constant, it became further articulated when the border police initiated a concrete and threatening mechanism in the form of REVA. The interviewees in the material from the mid-2000s described a feeling of fear and anxiety connected to the feeling of one's very existence being invisible. In later interviews, this kind of perspective on in/visibility hardly was expressed. The interview material is not comprehensive enough to draw on for a more generalised comparison over time. However, despite the limited number of interviews, the developments they describe tend to go in line with the shift outlined in the analysis of media and public debate. This is a shift of the positions of irregularity from invisibility towards not only increased visibility but also increased repression and stigmatisation.

This article has shown how the dynamic and tension between forms of visibility and invisibility are in constant change. The visibility and invisibility of irregularity come to the fore in the interview material, social policies and the debate on migration policy on several levels. In/visibility of irregularity manifests itself in social policy through representation in the debate and above all through the presence of irregular migrants as a category in legislation and practices of welfare authorities. In/visibility also becomes central in the everyday experience in terms of actually being visible – walking in the street, showing one's face, relating to people and social contexts – or not being visible – staying hidden indoors or feeling forgotten and invisible in relation to other people. Finally, it is manifested in terms of *how* and *if* irregular migrants act politically, take part in the debate on migration policies or become included in narratives on Sweden.

The changes described in this article have been about a movement towards increased social rights for irregular migrants and the establishment of irregular migrants as a social category and as political actors in their own right. At the same time, I have discussed the increased repression against this 'new' category. I have reflected on these seemingly contradictory developments and argued that they can be understood as connected in many ways. The interlinkages are visible in political negotiations, in the border spectacle and in the issue of how representation works in conflicts about rights.

Beyond direct repression, the establishment of the category of irregular migrants has turned the category itself into a space for conflict around representation, first, in terms of the ways in which the category mainly is represented as related to social policies, rather

than located in a context of global dynamics of capitalism, wars and inequalities. Second, the political responses to the so-called 'refugee crisis' have included not only increased stigmatisation and legitimising of persecution of the category but also the counter voices that are struggling for the representation of irregular migrants as entitled to rights and as already being Swedish inhabitants.

Notes

1. REVA first became known to the general public because of the sharp increase in internal border controls in public spaces in Stockholm. Owing to the attention, the controls in public transport became less frequent, and thereafter, the descriptions of REVA have been divided: while the authorities involved generally claim that it is a project focusing on smoother cooperation between the three organisations, other observers maintain that it still entails higher degrees of controls in the street and public spaces. Regardless, REVA has become the overarching name for the shared experiences of increased police presence in the streets of Sweden's larger cities to which irregular migrants and their allies have borne witness.

2. The same week as the last revisions of this article were finalised, in May 2018, the governing Social Democratic party announced a harsh migration agenda as part of their campaign for the national elections in September 2018. The suggested measures included withdrawal of some of the social rights for irregular migrants outlined in this paper.

3. Obviously, these categories are not mutually exclusive. Several interviewees are both activists and irregular/previously irregular migrants.

4. The earlier study is my PhD study *Everyday Clandestinity: Experiences on the Margins of Citizenship and Migration Policies* (Sager 2011) and the later one is the project *Negotiating Boundaries*, funded by the International Postdoc Fellowship Programme Cofas (grant number Cofas 2011-1660). Owing to the possible vulnerability of the interviewees, I have attended to issues of ethics and safety rigorously throughout both these research projects. The settings for the interviews have been discussed carefully with the interviewees; the material has been stored and de-identified according to the recommendations from the Regional Ethical Review Board, and I have discussed the issues of de-identification at depth with the interviewees. All names are pseudonyms.

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