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Published in:
Return Migration and Psychosocial Wellbeing

Citation for published version (APA):

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Between ‘Voluntary’ return programs and soft deportation: Sending vulnerable migrants in Spain back ‘Home’

Chapter · January 2017

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Sending vulnerable migrants in Spain back 'home'

Barak Kalir

Introduction

On the prelim to the informative pamphlet in which the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) specifies the requirements and conditions for applying to its assisted voluntary return programmes there are colour photos of Machu Picchu, Isla de Pascua and a colourful carnival, an eagle's eye view of Rio de Janeiro, and a shot of a person in a traditional calabash gourd against a scenic Patagonian background. The caption above the collage of attractive photos leaves you wanting: 'If you are thinking of returning ...' To prevent you from thinking that you are browsing a brochure of a travel agency for your dream vacation to Latin America, the purpose of the pamphlet is stated in bold letters: 'Voluntary Return Programs'. Upon opening the pamphlet, a beautiful photo of an airplane flying into the orange sky at sunset accompanies detailed information about the different programmes: the benefits that each of them offers, and the requisites for applying to each modality. On the back cover of the pamphlet, an artistic photo of piled-up suitcases adorns a short poetic text about the concept of 'Return ...'

Leaving the land, the home, the family ... is never easy. But often necessary ... When today we consider returning to the country that we left, different sentiments are provoked in us ... The yearning to return to the home that we left, to unite again with families and friends ....

This chapter, although focusing empirically mostly on the case of YMCA in Spain, draws attention to two cunning elements that are characteristic of programmes of assisted voluntary return (AVR) across Europe: first, the very classification of these programmes as being based on the voluntarism of the migrants; second, the implicit formulation with respect to a return of migrants to their 'home' (country). In the first instance, the chapter demonstrates that these two guileful elements are problematic in their claims and manipulative in their formulation. Yet, the greater goal of the chapter is to argue that the couching of migrants' assisted return in the language of voluntarism, patterned on positive notions of 'home', reveals the deeper neoliberal ideological underpinnings of such programmes as part of the 'migration apparatus' (Feldman 2012). Accordingly, I contend that so-called 'voluntary return programmes' are based on the exact same logic that champions state sovereignty in justifying forced removals and violent deportations. I thus coin the term 'soft deportation' as a more appropriate way of referring to such programmes, which are, de facto, an integral part of the overall biopolitical scheme that absolves the territorial removal of illegalised subjects under state sovereignty.

As it appears from the websites and pamphlets of organisations that operate AVR, as well as in my interviews with non-governmental organisation (NGO) workers who interact with migrants, the prime target of these programmes in Spain is vulnerable people with a migratory background. At the frontline of implementing AVR are NGO workers who engage in face-to-face interactions with potential returnees. While all migrants who comply with the basic requisites for AVR are included, particular attention and top priority are given to people who suffer from poverty, economic and social marginalisation, or psychosocial malaise. The system is thus geared towards returning precisely those individuals and families who are most in need of urgent social, economic and psychological assistance. Yet, the assistance that is on offer for these vulnerable people is in the form of returning them 'voluntarily' to their 'home'. AVR programmes, in their function as soft deportation, should therefore be seen as part and parcel of states' immigration regimes, aiming at the incorporation of healthy, fully employed and self-sustaining migrants, while rejecting and repatriating 'failing' migrants. AVR programmes render the psychosocial well-being of migrants a crucial criterion for assessing their 'success' or 'failure' as potential members of the host society.

Let me be clear from the outset that my intention here is not to accuse NGO workers who facilitate AVR of misleading migrants or luring them into the decision to return. On the contrary, most of the NGO workers whom I interviewed and observed in their interaction with migrants demonstrated a high level of professionalism, empathy towards the migrants, and a genuine intention, in my opinion, to help migrants to come to the best decision regarding their future, even when this meant declining the services of AVR.

It is, nevertheless, precisely because NGO workers are clearly not behind any ill-intended or anti-migration policy that I argue that the ideological groundworks that legitimise AVR have been perfected. A critical interrogation of AVR reveals how hegemonic ideas about free choice, state sovereignty and territoriality, which are invested in notions of 'voluntarism' and 'home', eloquently succeed in concealing the violence that is implied in using them for promoting AVR, instead of looking for solutions that do not involve the territorial removal of people with a migration background who are found in dire situations. AVR programmes are embedded in and plastered with a dominant morality that not only justifies the repatriation of psychosocially affected people by the sovereign state, but also renders it a benevolent act of caring for those who failed to manage their life in the destination country. As the number of people who return each year via AVR is limited (mostly by budget allocation), it can be
argued that the instrumentality of these programmes is to be found not only in the repatriation of vulnerable people, but also in the fashioning of a morality that legitimises states' immigration regimes, which include coercive practices of forced removal and violent deportations.

The chapter concludes with a short note on the European scheme for AVR and the manner in which I methodologically examined it in Spain. It is then followed by two sections, which critically dissect the major notions that frame AVR, namely 'voluntarism' and 'home'. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the ways in which NGO workers are swayed to become part of the migration/deportation nexus. I dwell on the dilemmas and rationalisations of NGO workers as they expose the construction of a morality that legitimises soft deportation and reinforces states' immigration regimes that exclude vulnerable people, instead of attending to their psychosocial wellbeing in Spain.

Voluntary return programmes in Spain

Spain, like many other countries across Europe, has been facilitating in recent years AVR for migrants, either with or without a legal status, who are in a vulnerable situation, suffering severely from economic and/or social exclusion (Koch 2014; Ruben et al. 2009; Webber 2011). In the period from 2008 to 2013, the European Return Fund allocated, as part of its programme 'Solidarity and Management of Migration Flows', a sum of €676 million towards AVR to be operated in different EU member states. In Spain, it is the Interior Ministry that was tasked to manage this fund, issuing a tender for organisations to present their bid for receiving a slice of the overall budget. Among those organisations in Spain that have been receiving funding to operate AVR are an intergovernmental organisation (IOM) and a number of NGOs: some international (Red Cross, YMCA) and some local (ACCEM, CEPAIM). The European Return Fund provides up to 75 per cent of the budget for each approved voluntary return programme. In Spain, the Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality is the main body that provides the other 25 per cent of the budget for the organisations that operate these programmes.

AVR is basically offered to all migrants and asylum-seekers, with legal or illegised status, who 1) do not hold Spanish nationality; 2) do have any legal prohibition on leaving the country; and 3) are ready to sign a contract that impedes them from coming back to Spain for any work-related activity for a minimum period of three years. While different organisations offer different variants of AVR, most offer some sort of pre-return assistance (legal, psychological, medical, as well as the practical arrangements of flight tickets, transport to the airport and so on), and monetary assistance in the form of a one-time bonus (usually €300 to €1,300 per person; in the case of a family, the total sum can thus be up to a few thousand euros). In addition, certain organisations also offer returnees some sort of capacity-building: training in the setting up of a small business or in acquiring a certified qualification, such as a kindergarten teacher or a chef. Certain organisations go even further and work together with returns on a plan for reintegration, which may include assistance in their country of origin with setting up the business or seeking employment and/or education.

This chapter is based on 18 months of non-consecutive and ongoing fieldwork in Spain, which I have been conducting since April 2014. The study of the implementation of AVR is part of a larger research project that aims to explore the social life of states' deportation regimes. I conducted 12 interviews with managers and workers in different NGOs that facilitate AVR programmes in Catalonia and Madrid. In the immigration department of Catalonia as well as at the municipal level in Barcelona, I met with high-ranked civil servants who are involved in implementing voluntary and forced removals. At the YMCA facility in Barcelona, I was allowed to attend four meetings with individuals and families who sought AVR. I also held numerous informal conversations with workers in the YMCA and made on-site observations. In addition, I have talked to 14 people who have been subjected to policies of territorial removal in Spain.

Voluntarism

During my first interview in the municipality of Barcelona with the head of the 'Service of Attention to Immigrants, Foreigners and Refugees' (SAIER), the civil servant who is in charge of AVR, the latter began her introduction of SAIER's work by resolutely stating: 'One important thing before we start, here at SAIER when we discuss voluntary return, we do not make any link with the theme of deportation. Here the people who are interested in having information are coming only and whenever they want to come'. The words 'only' and 'whenever' were particularly stressed by her. At a later moment in the interview, she pointed to the entrance door that automatically opens to a busy street next to Plaza España: 'If they walk through this door we welcome them. If you come here, we listen to you and we serve you. For us it does not matter whether you are a regular or an irregular migrant'. Those working at SAIER emphatically stress the voluntarism of people who seek their services. Disregarding on purpose the il/legal status of people underscores, in the eyes of SAIER staff, their moral stance and humanitarian approach in helping those in need.

According to those who design and implement AVR, the voluntarism of these programmes is based on the alleged free choice of migrants to seek out these programmes and to return to their home country of their own free will. One need not evoke the old debates around agency vs structure, idealism vs determinism, or existentialism vs structuralism in order to point out the incongruous usage of ‘voluntarism’ in this context. The head of SAIER passionately explained to me the reason behind the decision to launch in 2014 a new service for migrants who seek to return 'home':
We did a lot of thinking before we proposed this change in SAIER [to offer comprehensive information about and support to AVR]. We realised that there were many migrants who ended up, because of the crisis or because of psychological issues, in a horrible situation, with no job, no income, sometimes even living in the street. So if these people decide that they want to return to their country of origin, then it is our task to help them.

Similarly, the manager of YMCA in Barcelona told me about their internal deliberations before deciding to facilitate AVR:

When we started thinking about it we didn’t feel comfortable. Return programmes are not part of our work at YMCA. We work on the integration of children, youth and families in difficult conditions of vulnerability. So when we considered incorporating voluntary return programmes, we felt a bit difficult with it. But then we said that we would pay close attention to the manner in which we accompany these people, to whom will we offer this help, and in what situations are the people who decide to leave. And what we saw was that people are in a very difficult situation. The truth is that it is not so voluntary. But at the end people return happily. Well, not happily, but there is not a complete breakdown (because of the return) as we were afraid there might be.

It is clear that the idea of those who are involved in facilitating AVR is that the motor behind these schemes is people’s desperation, lack of hope, and the harsh situation in which they find themselves. The part of the story usually omitted is that these people are not offered any institutional assistance in Spain to haul them out of their predicament. The ‘return preparedness’ (Cassarino 2014) of many who seek AVR is thus reduced to negative motivations, stemming from their vulnerability, and not from aspiring ideas and/or enabling resources that may render return an attractive life strategy. In this case, when the most vulnerable people are selected to become AVR ‘clients’, there are few prospects for them to enjoy an improved life upon return, let alone to contribute to the development of their country of origin.

With the economic crisis in Spain, many families with a migration background are now fully dependent on soup kitchens and on basic assistance that they receive each month from charity organisations and NGOs. Under the hegemonic neoliberal ideology, ‘failing’ migrants should not become dependent on the welfare state. They should, instead, either be sustained by the ‘humanitarian sector’ or be removed from the territory of developed nation-states. As many people who decide to seek AVR suffer from severe psychosocial and/or mental health conditions, and are left to their own devices by the state, to what extent can anyone genuinely frame such decisions as voluntary? The notion of voluntarism under such circumstances is a double euphemism, standing de facto for an exclusionary state structure that benevolently ‘offers’ certain people to ‘take a decision’ when no other options are available.

One is reminded here of the classic scene in Elia Kazan’s film (1954) *On the Waterfront*, where the poor dockworkers have to gather each morning at the port and fight to get hired as day labourers for what would be a 16-hour hard working day for a miserable wage. Of course, they all come to the port each morning out of choice, and if they are lucky to get hired, they work of their own free will. Clearly, one can only talk here about the voluntarism of the dockworkers, or call their exploitative employment a ‘voluntary subsistence programme’, by powerfully ignoring the structural conditions of non-unionised labourers, the powerful capitalist company, the non-interventionist state (or intervening only on behalf of the employers’ interest), and the overall despair of people living in extreme poverty, in bad health and with no certainty about their future income. Can anyone seriously refer to the decision of dockworkers to get hired in this constellation of circumstances a case of voluntarism? Indeed, although the film celebrates the agency of the oppressed dockworkers, it nevertheless grimly shows that attempts to reject exploitative employment, or to stand up against the structural injustices of the system, result in violent destitution.

Recent academic literature on AVR has made a compelling argument about the misleading element of voluntarism that is implied in return programmes. In a polemical manner, Frances Webber (2011) has questioned ‘How voluntary are voluntary returns?’ By systematically matching the explicit goals of these programmes with the results they achieve, and by pointing to the practices of international, national and local agencies that are involved in the implementation of such programmes, Webber unequivocally concluded that ‘virtually none of the schemes currently operating as “voluntary return programmes” from Europe meet the criteria for voluntariness’. Webber then continues to make the charge that ‘Voluntary return is instead offered as a less painful alternative to continued destitution followed by (inevitable) compulsory return’ (2011: 103). Scrutinising AVR in Britain as applied to migrants and asylum-seekers from Afghanistan, Blitz et al. (2005: 182) conclude that ‘Afghans are being urged to return by means of financial inducements, and sometimes under the threat of repatriation. In this context, we can discern a new category of “non-voluntary” returns where individual choice has little real meaning’.

In Spain, I talked to a few migrants whose return has been assisted by YMCA. Most of them were very content with the support they received and were grateful to the workers at YMCA for their attention and careful handling of the entire process. Some migrants mentioned that they were happy to leave Spain, but mostly because their life there had become impossible. Others appeared to be worried and defeated. At any rate, the point I am pressing here is that our critical and ethical analysis of the manner in which AVR operates within the larger nexus of migration/deportation management by states should not be confused with the experiences and judgement of ‘voluntarily’ returned people. These emic judgements are already shaped by, and should be seen as the outcome of, a state-led migration apparatus that (im)poses the option of voluntary return solely against the option of an illegalised life and/or a marginal
existence and painful exclusion from social benefits. As an experienced worker at YMCA explained to me,

We have two main profiles of people who ask for voluntary return programmes. One kind is of those who realise that their life in Spain is not going to be so good as it was and they prefer to leave, or those who came here to complete a certain goal – have enough money for buying a house, or sending their children to university, or putting up a business – and once their goal is completed they go back home happily. The other kind is people in really bad situations, extreme poverty, living in the street, mental pathologies. These people have a horrible life here; for them it is ... well, it is voluntary return in quotation marks. It is just that they have no other option.

Almost all the people I talked to were unequivocal about considering or accepting AVR as a last resort. It was the severe psychosocial issues that led them to an engagement with AVR. Importantly, in Spain, migrants who have gained residency and have been settled for many years in the country can lose their legal status and become deportable when they fall into a period of unemployment. As explained by García-Mascareñas (2013: 12),

Immigrants [who are] unable to demonstrate their integration as workers during the first five years of residence run the risk of losing their legal status and, in most cases, fall back into illegality. This loss of legality has been far from infrequent due to the extremely high numbers of temporary immigrant workers and the instability that characterises the Spanish job market.

This is a clear case whereby the state eclipses its citizenship regime under the market logic. On the one hand, healthy, employed and self-sustaining migrants, preferably highly skilled, are welcome to stay and can achieve a legal status; on the other hand, ill, vulnerable, dependent migrants, suffering from psychosocial issues, are rejected by the Spanish state and designated for ‘rehabilitation’ back in their home country. The Spanish state, in a deep and perverse sense, induces the flexibilisation of certain people’s sense of belonging to a country where they have been settled for years, and where they have invested their productive (labour) and reproductive (raising families) energies (cf. Kalir 2010).

Some migrants in dire situations, who approached YMCA for a first interview, explained that they still had some hope of getting a new employment contract that might secure them some income and the possibility of maintaining their status as residents or for legalising their undocumented status. It was only if that contract did not materialise, they explained, that they would continue with the AVR because they were otherwise afraid for their (family’s) sustainability, health and, as some mentioned, their sanity.

This is why I am interested here in understanding the logic that sways NGO workers in Spain to go along with and facilitate AVR, while understanding that these are state-led impositions that, in the lack of any alternative, should be regarded, at best, as pseudo-voluntary return and, at worst, as a form of ‘soft deportation’. One clue for answering this intriguing question may be found in the ostentatious deployment of the notion of ‘home’ in the formulation and implementation of AVR.

Home

‘Thinking of return? Thinking of home?’ – this slogan adorns the IOM page where information can be downloaded and a telephone number is publicised for bringing interested migrants up to speed with information on AVR. ‘Thinking of home? Voluntary return brings you back home’ is the banner on posters that have been recently used in Belgium for promoting a campaign for AVR administered by the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil). In Spain, ‘Back Home! Voluntary return programmes’ is the catchphrase chosen by Rumihabibi, a voluntary association established in 1997 dedicated to defending the rights of migrants, facilitating their integration and improving their quality of life in Spain.

This is a random sample of organisations that emphatically profile AVR as a return to one’s ‘home’. It is characteristic of organisations that facilitate AVR to deliberately deploy the notion of ‘home’ as a signifier for a desired place to which migrants are to be returned. The idea of ‘home’ in this context is clearly meant to index positive notions such as safety, familiarity, comfort and so on. After all, in popular culture, as in traditions across the world, ‘home’ is where everyone wants to be. In their alluring deployment of ‘home’, campaigns for AVR completely ignore other possible meanings that are carried by the concept for the people they target (see King and Christiou 2010). For example, ‘home’ can be an exclusionary space and a potentially violent environment (Price 2002), or the hallmark of patriarchal configurations that place the responsibility for taking care of one’s family on individualised parents, mostly through the depreciated labour of women (Ahmed 1999; Brun and Fábos 2015; Young 1997).

One need only consider the experience of millions of people around the world who suffer from domestic violence. Often they are unable to physically challenge their abusive spouse, and their ‘home’ becomes a hell on earth. Under a hegemonic patriarchal system, attempting to stop the violence, by an appeal to legal means or a close circle of family and friends, often results in adding insult to injury, as a harsh stigma is placed precisely on those who protest against the violence that is enshrined by their ‘home’. For the victims of domestic violence who end up in a hospital or in a shelter, a return ‘home’ often spells out the next horror. It is interesting to note that violence suffered in the private sphere, as in the case of domestic violence, is not recognised by the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees as grounds for seeking asylum in another country. Only state violence, or violence perpetrated on collective grounds, as in racial, ethnic and religious persecution, is included in the 1951 Convention.
Private violence, according to this international convention, is a matter to be resolved in one’s own ‘home’ (country).

Consider here also the experience of millions of people who have suffered from ethnic or religious persecution in their ‘home’ land. Scores of Jews, who managed to escape Nazi Germany during the Second World War, were eventually returned ‘home’ only to face extermination. Those who survived the horror often refused to ever set foot on German ‘home’ ground for the rest of their lives. Writing on more recent experiences of refugees’ repatriation in Europe, Black (2002: 136) contends that the political geography of return to Bosnia and Kosovo ‘involves much more than the ethnic geography of where people used to live, and can now live. It involves a series of interconnections and dynamic political, economic and social changes that call into question our very notion of what “home” is’.

In its territorial dimension, ‘home’ is, in fact, an inherently exclusionary notion. It implies borders and ownership that fervently demarcate the insiders from the outsiders. In the name of homeland security, democratic countries around the world violate their citizens’ most basic human rights (see, for instance, the Patriot Act in the US), launch pre-emptive wars that kill scores of innocent civilians (witness the acts of the ‘Coalition Forces’ against Afghanistan), and invest billions in fortifying borders – from the US-Mexico border to the incarcerated Gaza strip, and from the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in Africa to the Evros region on the border between Greece and Turkey.

It is, therefore, my contention that the positive notion of ‘home’ as deployed by those who propagate AVR is not only highly incomplete, but also one that ideologically reflects the position of the sovereign, patriarchal state. In this sense, deploying the notion of ‘home’ as a protective and desired place should be seen as a cynical discursive exercise that ignores and negates the experience of many subordinated, destitute and mobile subjects. At YMCA, one of those working on AVR told me that she saw the return to one’s home as an integral part of the migratory process: ‘I believe that normally everyone wants to return to their home. I don’t believe that there are many people who stay forever in another country’.

In Spain, many of those who solicit AVR are long-term settled individuals and entire families with a migratory background. These are people who have been living and working in Spain for many years, but more recently lost their jobs, like many other Spaniards, due to the economic crisis. Instead of there being an institutional programme of assistance to all those who are hit by long-term unemployment in this time of crisis, the state of Spain, and the many organisations that work with it on AVR, press those people with migratory background to leave the country and return to their ‘home’. A return ‘home’ is then framed as a solution to their predicament of unemployment, poverty and exclusion. The perverse proposition that a return to one’s ‘home’ is the best way to deal with difficult situations is found in the fact that, almost without exception, all the organisations that facilitate AVR mention that priority is given to those who appear to be in the worst of situations. Here is a typical phrasing of this priority, by the Red Cross in Spain:

This service, at no cost to participants, is aimed at offering social assistance and facilitation of voluntary return to countries of origin to people from extra-communitarian [non-EU] states in an irregular administrative situation, with special priority for those who are at risk of social exclusion, have acute health concerns and/or belong to groups with high degree of vulnerability like female victims of gender-based violence, minors, victims of human trafficking or torture, etc.

It is unclear on what grounds it is suggested by states and organisations that a return ‘home’ to a place which people tried so hard to leave, or where they have been tortured, would constitute a solution to their predicaments. Not even in the case of those suffering from unemployment and economic marginality is it clear why a return, usually to a much poorer country than Spain, will assist in any form their way out of poverty. It is, therefore, precisely here that the positive deployment of the notion of ‘home’ is meant to perform emotional work – through nostalgia and romantic ideas – in convincing people in despair to leave Spain. At the same time, the positive idea of sending people to their ‘home’ morally persuades those who implement AVR to believe that what they do is not contributing to ‘cleansing’ society of debilitated migrants, but is, instead, benevolent and in the best interests of the people they service.

At YMCA, the workers who facilitate AVR made it clear to me that they evaluate carefully and attend to the request for assisted return of every person who comes to their office, but they first offer AVR to those in situations of extreme poverty or homelessness. In fact, their preferred population comprised those who were referred to the YMCA for voluntary return by social workers. These people were clearly already known to the local and/or national authorities as being in a dire situation and with little hope of getting any meaningful assistance in Spain. Tellingly, an evaluation of the psychosocial wellbeing of returnees is not part of the contract of NGOs that facilitate AVR programmes. Nevertheless, some NGO workers told me that they occasionally stayed in touch with returnees. This was either because returnees contacted NGO workers to express their gratitude (via phone calls, emails and letters) or because NGO workers were worried about the safety and overall wellbeing of returnees, and wanted to hear from them a ‘sign of life’.

The swaying of NGO workers to implement AVR

For many critics of AVR, it is predominantly the IOM that is seen as using notions like humanitarianism and dignity in assisting states to conceal the repressive elements of their migration policies. Ashutosh and Mountz (2011: 34), interrogating the role of the IOM in managing return programmes in Australia, conclude that ‘the IOM functions as a state apparatus in supranational guise ...
the IOM transforms the state through the language of international humanitarianism, giving the appearance of state subjection to global protocols that would otherwise signal the limits of the nation-state'. Webber (2011: 108) also singles out the IOM as a major culprit in permitting states to hide behind the idea of voluntarism, while in fact 'for the IOM, the lack of real choice is seen as a key ingredient to the success of the “voluntary” return programmes they offer. [...] Acceptance of the AVR option rests on there being no other choice'.

In Spain, the number of deportations from 2010 to 2014 stood at 26,291, the highest in Europe in comparison with all other states. In the very same period, AVR has been made extensively available in Spain through the European Return Fund and the Spanish government. This non-coincidental concurrence of state instruments in ‘migration management’ confirms the working idea of the IOM, as well as of state officials and some NGOs. AVR is only effective when the alternative is an expected forced deportation.

While the IOM has historically been the major organisation to facilitate AVR across the world, it is important to note that, more recently, numerous NGOs, on international, national and local levels, have entered this expanding niche. The IOM is explicitly committed to working with states in managing migration flows, and it is for this reason that such involvement with AVR is in line with its mission statement. The situation is different in the case of many NGOs whose prime mission is to support the integration of marginalised migrants into the local society where they reside. It is this missing link that I attempt to highlight and analyse here: what motivates NGOs such as the YMCA to work with states in implementing so-called voluntary return programmes whose aim is almost opposite to theirs, namely, to de-integrate and repatriate marginalised people to their so-called ‘home’?

There is an immediate pragmatic answer to this question: running AVR is a profit-making activity for civil-society organisations that often struggle to secure budgets for their activities. This is, in fact, what the manager of YMCA Cataluña openly admitted, albeit with evident discomfort:

At the time that you are not dependent on your own funds but on a certain funder, then it is ... well, it is complicated. This [AVR] is one such case. You need to understand that as NGOs we are not governmental, we are dependent either on our own financing, like from membership fees, or on donors, including the state. We see the commercial part, the one in which we engage in more business-like activities, as the means through which we can then support the social activities that we offer. It is a sort of survival strategy. To help out a family in a difficult situation can take one or two years, even three. We need to be able to say, ‘we are going to be by your side helping you in the coming three years’. This is our responsibility. We must take care of the financial side of our organisation. There are many marginalised families that if we don’t help them they will disappear [from our reach] and will end up in a very bad situation, precisely at the moment that they need us most. So it is inconvenient to situate ourselves in this way, but if we want to help certain families, we sometimes must take decisions that are not so pleasant [like AVR]. It is our responsibility.

The manager went on to say that she could clearly see the problematic ethical issue in having YMCA facilitating AVR. She recounted her hesitation at first over YMCA implementing such programmes. Since it has been decided in favour of implementing AVR, she claims to understand perfectly whenever certain employees at YMCA do not wish to be involved in this activity.

Although the ethical issue of facilitating AVR by the YMCA has been thrown open, and workers can take a personal position on it, it appears that a unanimous idea prevails about the moral good that is underlining the work on these programmes. Here is how one YMCA employee who is in charge of the implementation of AVR saw it:

I maintain that we are helping people. To be honest, I don’t think much more than that. I have a person in front of me who is requesting assistance and I am going to try to help this person. It is true that sometimes I’m thinking, ‘with this kind of budget what would I do? Integration, capacitation ...’ But at the end, there is a person who demands it [AVR] and is suffering, and has a goal [to return] ... so, here I am [to help].

The idea of voluntarism as in ‘voluntary return’ springs from the trope of neoliberalism, which champions rational and free choice as it ideologically forms and bureaucratically treats members in society as autonomous individuals who are able and expected to conduct themselves responsibly (Povinelli 2011; Rose 1999). Voluntarism thus has a double task here in morally justifying the otherwise ethically problematic implementation of AVR by NGOs like YMCA. First, it puts all the responsibility for the decision to return on migrants. Second, it ignores all the structural injustices, discrimination and exclusion that have produced the marginality and vulnerability of migrants who are now pushed to demand a ‘voluntary return’.

Let me repeat here that what I suggest is not that NGO workers are adopting blindly the logic that is promoted by the state in dealing with vulnerable subjects with a migration background. From my interviews and observations of workers at YMCA, there can be little doubt that they are mostly driven by a deep intention to assist to the best of their ability people who are seen to be in need of help. Many of the workers at YMCA are deeply committed to the values of social work and the humanistic treatment of vulnerable individuals and groups. They establish close relationships with those they assist, and they often invest much more time and effort than is formally required by their job in making sure that returnees receive the best treatment that they possibly can. As one worker at YMCA told me, ‘We get to know some of them very closely. We visit them at home and we know their children. It becomes almost like a family. Then when they leave we often hug them and cry with them. It can get very emotional’.
The emotional labour involved in implementing AVR programmes undoubtedly buttresses the conviction of NGO workers regarding the ethics of humanitarianism and benevolent morality that underpin their work. Yet, the manner in which ideology works to sway civil-society actors is a much more sophisticated and indirect one. In the case of development aid, Chipkin (2003: 73) defined the notion of ‘assistance’ as the process whereby the state tries to capture [individuals] into a host of relationships ... to compel them to act according to what it defines as functional/social/ethical behaviour’. While Chipkin points to the way in which the state brings into its ideological circle those individuals who are being helped, I highlight the fact that a similar incorporation into the state logic and its neoliberal ideology is at work with respect to those, like YMCA workers, who are entrusted with facilitating assistance to the subjects of aid/development/voluntary return.

Many neoliberal Western states have been rolling back the welfare state (Wacquant 2010) while simultaneously engineering a space for civil-society and charity organisations to do the work of managing and assisting certain populations (Junge 2012; Navaro-Yashin 2002). In order for this political configuration to function effectively, civil-society organisations have been made financially dependent on the state (and/or other private funders) and ideologically incorporated into the hegemonic neoliberal thinking that lowers the threshold for a moral and ethical questioning of the very logic of managing populations in a particular fashion. I thus fully agree with Chipkin (2003: 73): ‘We can say that such assistance is not simply about helping residents exercise their rights as citizens. It is about producing them as citizens in the first place!’ In this vein, AVR programmes have two interrelated consequences: first, they shape the ethics of NGO workers who assist vulnerable populations with a migratory background; second, these programmes are not simply about helping migrants to go back ‘home’, but rather, about reproducing or even reinventing vulnerable subjects as migrants who arc not in their ‘home’ and should thus seek protection and help for their predicaments elsewhere. Rejecting a solution for these predicaments within the Spanish territory is thus made ethically unproblematic, and helping vulnerable subjects to leave Spain and return ‘home’ becomes a moral act.

Epilogue

At the international airport of Barcelona, in May 2015, I meet up with Gaia⁶ from YMCA. She is in charge on that day of seeing off a few of those who leave Spain via AVR. Gaia needs to provide each of the returnees with the promised €400 cheque, and have them sign some final documents before they depart. It is clear that all the returnees are on good terms with Gaia. She knows them each by their personal name, including the children and babies. Some want to have a last photo with Gaia before going through passport control. After he checked in to his flight to Guayaquil, I talk with Vicente, who lived for 15 years in Spain and is now returning to Ecuador. ‘I tried everything I could that this moment would not come’, he tells me laconically. Having accepted his inevitable return, he muses, ‘I had a very good life in Spain. I now return to nothing in Ecuador’. I ask Vicente about the treatment he received at YMCA. ‘They are doing a wonderful work there. I am thankful for everything they did for me’. Vicente still has two hours before his plane will take off. He sits down and stares at the check-in counter. Gaia, who just helped a family of four to check in for their flight to Honduras, comes to ask if I will join her for a coffee at the automatic coffee machine nearby. ‘After the check-in I usually let them be. There is not so much more to say and I also feel exhausted’, she explains as we throw our coins into the coffee machine.

‘What if Vicente or any of them will now decide to go back to Barcelona instead of boarding the flight?’ – this thought occurred to me and I voiced it to Gaia. ‘They can do it if they want. There is nothing I can do. I am not the state’, she replies. ‘So it is not very effective ...’ I began saying, but Gaia quickly cut me off: ‘If you ask me, it is not effective at all. They can also return tomorrow to Spain and work again without documents. They only sign a paper saying they are not able to return for formal work or business related purposes. But many of them worked here anyway without documents, so for them there is no difference. This voluntary return is clearly just to get them out of the country and to check a box’.

In this chapter I have argued that NGO workers choose to overlook the fact that many of the people who seek AVR have been excluded and forced into a condition of vulnerability by a lack of state provisions and by disputed regulations. By not fighting this institutional marginalisation, and by facilitating a humane implementation of AVR, NGOs contribute to the depoliticisation and, indirectly, to the legitimisation of state policies that very often exacerbate the fragile psychosocial condition of vulnerable people (cf. Kalir 2015; Kalir and Wissink 2016).

As I demonstrated, those at YMCA who implement AVR are not doing it blindly. Indeed, on the contrary, most of them evaluate these programmes as ineffective in guaranteeing a sustainable return. Some are also critical about the potential adverse effects for people who suffer from severe psychosocial problems that should be resolved here and now, and not by returning them to their ‘home’ country.

In Spain, as in many other countries that promote AVR, the wide implementation of these programmes by critical managers and workers in civil-society organisations illustrates the triumph of the neoliberal state in creating a financial and ideological configuration under which repressive policies are executed by do-gooders. In such a constellation, hegemonic ideas inform structures and practices that determine the treatment of some of the most vulnerable subjects in our societies, whose migration background can be easily reactivated for setting them apart and for treating them as objects of ‘voluntary’ removal to their ‘home’.
Notes

1 I would like to thank all my informants for kindly and candidly interacting with me during my research in Barcelona and Madrid. I also thank Russell King and Zana Vathi for useful comments while working on this chapter. A special thanks to Kipol, who is still looking for a 'home' out there. This research was supported by the European Research Council, Starting Grant 336319, The Social Life of State Deportation Regimes: A Comparative Study of the Implementation Interface.

2 For an interesting take on the striking similarities between the situation of nineteenth-century dockworkers and immigrant day labourers in the US today, see Skerry (2008).

3 See cadenaser.com/ser/2015/04/03/sociedad/1428012311_939510.htm (accessed 5 May 2015).

4 The commonly used term 'migration management', introduced in 1993 by the Commission of the United Nations to improve the governmental regulation of migration, only further depoliticizes the political project behind the extreme measures taken by states to secure their borders (Geiger and Pécoud 2010).

5 The tendency to attribute ample agency to mobile subjects, while ignoring structural and cultural conditions that shape this tendency, is typical of much of the literature on migration theories (on circumventing this tendency, see Kalir 2005; Kalir and Sur 2012).

6 All names in this chapter are pseudonyms.

References


