

## Media constructions of the refugee crisis in Sweden: institutions and the challenges of refugee governance

In an article entitled ‘The Death of the Most Generous Nation on Earth’, American journalist James Traub (2016) claims that ‘The vast migration of desperate souls from Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere has posed a moral test the likes of which Europe has not faced since the Nazis forced millions from their homes in search of refuge. Europe has failed that test.’ Sweden stands out as an exception in Traub’s analysis due to the country’s generous refugee reception policies. These policies, however, are bound to fail, and Traub argues that Sweden has to pay ‘for its unshared idealism’.

That Sweden had a generous refugee policy (see also chapter 5) is a component of Swedish identity, both as viewed by most Swedes themselves and as viewed by others, despite the variety of academic arguments challenging that image.<sup>1</sup> To name a few examples: researchers have documented the negative experiences of asylum seekers awaiting a decision (Brekke, 2004); the inhumane conditions at detention centres (Khosravi, 2009); the process of credibility assessment that assumes fraudulence on part of asylum seekers (Noll, 2005); the institutionalised power imbalance between asylum claimants and the authorities that challenge these claims in the legal process (Joormann, 2019; see also chapter 2); and the inhumane views of the Other that shape different levels of the migration bureaucracy (Barker, 2012; Schoultz, 2013; see also chapter 9). It is, therefore, logical to wonder how Sweden’s image as generous, humane and righteous has persisted despite such evidence. Additionally, given the drastic shifts in refugee policies following the summer of 2015 (see chapter 3), and if we accept Traub’s characterisation of ‘unshared idealism’ as the basis for such shifts, tracing the transformation of such an idealism helps our understanding of Swedish cultural and political climate and the position of refugees within it. Importantly, and to use the arguments put forth in this book, if we understand the policy changes as a form of bureaucratic violence, how has this form of violence been formulated, communicated and consolidated in society?

While it is beyond the aims of this chapter to address the cultural construction of refugees in Swedish society at large (see e.g. Eastmond, 2011), the chapter focuses on one significant snapshot. Focusing on 2015 as the year that brought a drastic shift in Swedish asylum policies, this chapter traces media representations of the inflow of large numbers of refugees which was later coined the refugee crisis. The analysis of mainstream newspapers that is provided here tackles the self-understanding of Sweden's image and the cultural justification of restrictive asylum policies. As such, this chapter has two goals: first, it provides an overview of the ways the refugee crisis was constructed in the media and discusses the specific forms of representation associated with it. Second, it focuses on one of several frames discussed – institutional responsibility – which is the most frequent frame in the selection of newspaper articles (on the visual representation of similar frames in Swedish media, see chapter 6). The analysis then proceeds to show that the refugee crisis was mostly discussed in terms of a challenge to the regular functions of bureaucratic institutions and approached in terms of management and containment. By staying away from moralistic arguments, mainstream media and political discourses of a refugee crisis were left largely uncontested and used to justify restrictive asylum policies. Such a strategy can be taken for granted in a society where emphasis on organisational efficiency and pragmatic approaches to problems are held in high regard (Graham, 2003).<sup>2</sup> Representing the inflow of refugees as an institutional crisis, however, led to a drastic shift in asylum policies, which were tacitly accepted on pragmatic grounds.

The chapter starts with a brief discussion of media coverage of immigrants and refugees. This section also brings attention to the Swedish context and presents an overview of research on Swedish media with a specific focus on the representation of immigrants. The second section includes a description of the research methodology. The chapter then presents an overview of newspaper coverage of the inflow of refugees in 2015 and highlights the strong focus on institutional arrangements and crisis. The last section shows that emphasis on an institutional crisis opened space for a previously unthinkable critique of Swedish institutions and for extreme rightist voices. As contending voices do not question the institutional logic of the crisis, the form of bureaucratic violence that proceeded was also left unchallenged.

## Media and refugees

Mass media 'provide the guiding myths which shape our conception of the world' (Cohen and Young, 1973, p. 9). With regards to immigration in particular, research documents media's role in shaping public attitudes. While some authors emphasise that negative media portrayals of migrants

and asylum seekers can foster anti-immigrant attitudes (Crawley, 2005; Innes, 2010; Rasinger, 2010; Balch and Balabanova, 2014), others emphasise that news coverage can create sites of contestation (Chavez, 2001; Clare and Abdelhady, 2016) where multiple articulations can be given space. Yet newspapers, especially those in high circulation, reflect general attitudes and popular ideas in society, and dominant discourses can be discerned in the major dailies and weeklies in a given context (Clare and Abdelhady, 2016). Circulation among large audiences amplifies the power of these discourses in shaping the construction of a given reality (Mautner, 2008). As such, the lens through which a reader receives mainstream news stories 'is not neutral but evinces the power and point of view of the political and economic elites who operate and focus it' (Gamson et al., 1992, p. 374). An analysis of media content, therefore, is important to understand social constructions of a specific phenomenon independent of the audience's engagement and interpretation of media messages.

Similar to studies of migration and media elsewhere, othering is considered an important theoretical concept for understanding media representations of immigrants in Sweden (see Brune, 2000; Nohrstedt, 2006; Burns et al., 2007; Hultén, 2007; Tigervall, 2007; see also Gale, 2004; Nolan et al., 2011; Arlt et al., 2019 for other contexts). Brune (2000) observes that Swedish media does not discuss the particulars of immigrants' backgrounds or everyday life but makes them exclusively visible in connection to events that she describes as conflict-filled. For example, Brune (2000; 2004) shows that immigrants and refugees are repeatedly represented in stories on deportation, mass migration and crime. This sort of coverage, again as the studies cited above show, is connected to who media rely on as the source of the story and whose perspective gets to be represented. For Brune, the perspective of governmental and official institutions tends to be central in media representation, in terms of who defines the issues and proposes solutions. Consequently, refugees and migrants end up being represented in the form of an invading mass, which triggers anxiety and frustration instead of sympathy and support (Brune, 2000). Specifically, refugees tend to be 'described as objects of various control measures, while representatives of the Swedish government, who are the focus of interest, emerge as a brave-but-tired everyone's salvation army' (Brune, 2000, p. 11; see also Hultén, 2007). Both Brune and Hultén stress the ways media homogenise the refugee/immigrant populations while separating them from the Swedish host. Additionally, faith is put in the Swedish model of cooperation and the welfare state to solve the problems of adaptation and incorporation into Swedish society. I find these strategies to be common in news coverage in 2015, albeit with stronger emphasis on control and management as is shown in the analysis. Additionally, newspapers' constructions of the refugee crisis in 2015 open up space for questioning norms and institutions in ways that may have been previously unthinkable.

## Methodology

In the age of digital media, paid circulation of newspapers does not reflect a newspaper's actual readership but can still be taken as a proxy for the general level of readership the newspapers attract. For the analysis offered here, I chose to include the two largest daily national newspapers, *Dagens Nyheter* (DN) and *Svenska Dagbladet* (SvD), and one tabloid, *Aftonbladet* (AB), as it has the largest circulation of all newspapers in Sweden.<sup>3</sup> Using the Retriever search-engine, three independent searches for each of the newspapers (print version) were conducted, using the search words refugee/immigrant, Middle East and Sweden (respectively, *flyktning\**, *invandrare*, *mellanöstern* and *Sverige*). Search words are limited in their utility for research and, in this case, the results included large numbers of newspaper articles that were later read and coded or discarded based on their content.<sup>4</sup> For example, a large number of articles made no reference to Sweden and were, therefore, discarded, given the interest in relating the construction of the refugee crisis to Sweden's self-image and the rationalisation of Swedish policy changes. A total of 370 articles are included in the analysis from 2015.

The way news media presents, selects, emphasises or downplays certain aspects of social processes, events and issues in news coverage, sometimes at the expense of others, is theoretically understood as framing (Tuchman, 1978; Gitlin, 1980; Benson, 2013). Frames are 'interpretative packages' that give meaning to an issue (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989), and refer to 'the ability of a text – or a media presentation – to define a situation, to define the issues, and to set the terms of a debate' (Tankard, 2001, p. 96). Frames are also considered interpretive frameworks that represent 'windows on the world' through which people have the opportunity to learn about themselves and others (Tuchman, 1978). Research into media frames demonstrates that news coverage relies on a variety of specific frames to communicate the news to audiences, and that different frames can influence readers' or viewers' perceptions of public issues (for reviews see McCombs et al., 1997; Scheufele, 1999; McCombs and Ghanem, 2001). Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) assert that media reports (on diverse topics) tend to fall within five specific frames: conflict, human interest, economic consequences, morality and responsibility. In analysing the articles collected for this chapter, these frames were found to be of great relevance and were distributed according to Table 2. In this distribution, however, morality was merged with human interest or institutional responsibility.<sup>5</sup> The analysis that follows focuses on the selection of articles falling within the institutional responsibility frame. As Table 2 shows, this selection is two-thirds of all the articles found in the study and is taken to be the most significant in understanding the construction of the sense of crisis in Sweden. Referred to as the responsibility frame by some authors, this frame presents the issues

Table 2 Frame distribution of news articles in Swedish newspapers in 2015

	Conflict	Human interest	Economic consequence	Institutional responsibility	Total
<i>Aftonbladet</i>	13	21	4	68	106
<i>Dagens Nyheter</i>	23	25	1	90	139
<i>Svenska Dagbladet</i>	19	21	9	76	125
<i>Total</i>	55	67	14	234	370

‘in such a way that the responsibility for causing or solving a problem lies with the government, an individual or group’ (d’Haenens and de Lange, 2001, p. 850). The significance of this frame can be elucidated after a brief discussion of the other three frames. This discussion draws upon and is further detailed in Abdelhady (2019).

Conflict as a frame speaks the most to the sense of a ‘crisis’, as it emphasises tensions between individuals, groups or institutions while reducing complex social and political problems to simple conflicts (d’Haenens and de Lange, 2001). Research on immigrants in Western media confirms the overwhelming focus on conflict-filled (or hostility-themed) stories (Leudar et al., 2008, p. 188) where immigrants and immigration are presented foremost as a threat (van Dijk, 2000; Benson, 2013). The threat frame portrays immigrants threatening wage systems or taking jobs from domestic workers, bringing diseases, draining the welfare system and depleting national resources (Greenberg and Hier, 2001; Leudar et al., 2008; Benson, 2013). Often it includes some sort of security frame, which relates immigration (and especially refugees) with criminality (Greenberg and Hier, 2001; Leudar et al., 2008; Steimel, 2009; Threadgold, 2009; Bradimore and Bauder, 2011). While my data shows that conflict is not the largest frame used for portraying Syrian refugees in the wake of the declared refugee crisis, many of the narratives within this frame parallel findings of previous research on the portrayal of immigrants and refugees. Given the relative infrequency in which this frame is used, it cannot be taken as an entry into understanding the construction of the refugee crisis.

Neuman et al. (1992) find the human-interest frame to be, next to conflict, the second most common frame across a variety of news content. Valkenburg et al. (1999, p. 551) argue that the human-interest media frame ‘brings an individual’s story or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue or problem’. By doing so, a human-interest frame describes the news in terms that personalise, dramatise and emotionalise the news. D’Haenens and de Lange (2001) find the human-interest frame to be the frame most commonly used in their analysis of refugee coverage in Dutch

newspapers. In Swedish mainstream newspapers, however, the human-interest frame is the second largest used.

In discussing the framing of economic consequences, d’Haenens and de Lange (2001) explain that this frame is often used to clarify the economic consequences of an issue to the public and as a result involve the public more closely with the issue. As Table 2 above demonstrates, this frame is negligible in the Swedish context. Moreover, the discussion within this frame relates to institutional reform, as it often highlights the need for the labour market integration of refugees in order to offset the cost of welfare expenditures, turning the argument to institutional responsibility. This further highlights the importance of the institutional frame in the Swedish context, which is detailed in the following section.

### **Institutional framing of the refugee crisis**

The importance of efficiency in Swedish society has been remarked upon by numerous commentators (e.g. Milner, 1989; Lane, 1991; Graham, 2003). Describing the scene at the Migration Agency in Malmö, Traub (2016) narrates:

When I arrived at the migration office a little past noon, 50-odd people stood on a line that snaked outside the building in order to be interviewed, while another 200–300 asylum-seekers stood or sat inside, waiting to be assigned a bed for the night. Some recent arrivals had to wait a day or two – but no longer – to be processed. Refugees in Germany have rioted at food lines, while conditions at the refugee camp in Calais, France, known as ‘The Jungle’ are notoriously dismal. The atmosphere in Malmö, by contrast, was remarkably calm and quiet. Nobody shouted; I don’t recall hearing a child cry. *The Swedes were efficient and extraordinarily protective of their charges ... The interview line moved smartly. Officials had abandoned an earlier effort to gain background information about applicants; now interviewers simply asked their name, date of birth, and home country, and took a photograph and a set of fingerprints.* (emphasis added)

This narration points to the omnipresence of order and efficiency even when the narrator is not interested in making that point (recall Traub’s interest in making a moral argument). Despite the appearance of order and efficiency to the outside observer, the refugee situation was constructed as a crisis as a result of institutions’ inability to fulfil their mandates efficiently. The specific axes along which the refugee crisis was narrated in Swedish mainstream newspapers are: the lack of preparations; new challenges (transit migrants, see also chapter 4), which meant the inability to work according to established rules; and the need to discipline asylum seekers (and refugees). I discuss each of these themes individually before I turn to the discussion of foreseeable solutions.

### The need for (and failure of) a Swedish plan

As early as 28 February 2015, the need for a refugee strategy and concrete plan was called for when dealing with the increasing arrivals of individuals seeking asylum in Sweden. An article published in DN focuses mainly on the need for a strategy to help Syria and Iraq but also includes the need for a home strategy for dealing with asylum seekers (Malm, 2015). The latter point is elucidated in an SvD article on 23 May 2015:

We need to take a national approach, possibly adding more resources and taking action. We look at the process to see if we do the right things, if we overhaul certain pieces and if we can make the process easier, says Ljepoja, operations expert at the Operational Management and Coordination Unit at the Swedish Migration Agency. (Delling, 2015)

The plan, according to the author of the article, would bring about faster refugee management. The pressure produced by the continuous increase in the number of people seeking asylum is approached pragmatically. For example, referring to Malmö as the municipality that receives the highest number of new arrivals, the added work pressure is simply discussed as: 'This should be facilitated by the director to plan long term' (Assarsson and Svanberg, 2015). The process of coming up with a plan still reflects dominant Swedish cultural norms such as coordination, cooperation and consensus. For example, one article is simply titled 'Coordinator saves the world' (Gudmundson, 2015a). An article in DN, published on 4 October under the title 'When We Cooperate We Accomplish a Lot', argues that an organised reception plan can proceed as 'the government has invited authorities, organizations, companies, unions and voluntary associations, to a national assembly for the improvement of the establishment of the newcomers' (Eriksson, 2015).

The inadequacy of the Swedish plan was a conclusion that was quickly drawn by the autumn of 2015. As one article describes that conclusion: 'Several authorities, municipalities and NGOs are involved in refugee reception, but as the inflow of refugees has escalated, the lack of coordination has become increasingly evident' (Treijts, 2015). Another article, which focuses on the perspective of county-level administration, claims that 'the counties describe the situation as critical for foundational social functions such as schools and social services if the wave of refugees continues to the same extent as today' (Kärman and Olsson, 2015). A third example discusses the responsibility of labour unions. The article was published in DN on 12 October and does not miss the opportunity to critique the Prime Minister, Stefan Löfven, saying that 'his plan is incomplete and inadequate' (Dagens Nyheter, 2015a, p. 4). Finally, when ID checks were introduced on the border with Denmark, the discussion concluded that it was necessary to regain control and revise the plans. For example, an article in AB published on 12 November uses a quote from a refugee as its title 'We Are Already

Too Many' (Nygren, 2015). The story presented in the article claims that newly arrived refugees welcome the strengthened border controls that were introduced on that day: 'Hanni Abdel Fattah, 21 years old, said: "close the border. We who have come are absolutely too many. *They cannot take care of all of us*"' (emphasis added). The article continues to say that the staff of the Migration Agency are too stressed, that people are sleeping on the floors in the corridors of the building, and that families have to wait for twelve hours before getting a room. Another male asylum seeker is quoted: 'Amer Anaout from Syria, 37 years old, said "I am surprised how it is in Sweden. If they cannot take care of us *in an orderly manner*, so they should not take in so many"' (emphasis added). Having found asylum seekers who are best representatives of the firm attitude needed and later taken by the Swedish government, the journalist turns to softening the story by describing the situation of the children: 'many children have thin clothes and place their hands on bus lamps to stay warm.' Looking back at 2015, an article published in December argues that the failure witnessed in receiving refugees is due to a lack of planning or, as the title of the article describes, 'Sweden's preparedness did not hold when the crisis came' (Dagens Nyheter, 2015e, p. 8).

Thus far, I have highlighted the prominence of institutional arguments within Swedish mainstream press in the construction of a refugee crisis in 2015. The need for an adequate plan, and the ultimate failure to deliver one, are presented as the foundation of Swedish failure to meet the demands of the increased flow of people seeking asylum. The various problems that were posed as challenging to the Swedish government or administrative systems are namely: transit, integration and discipline. These three problems relate to the need for the management and control of individuals showing up at the Swedish border, which further supports my claim that the refugee crisis was constructed around issues of governance rather than morality (see also chapter 3). In the next paragraphs I illustrate the three problems and then move to a discussion of the tensions within these constructions.

### Sweden as a transit country

Swedish reception of asylum seekers is based on the assumption that people are seeking asylum in Sweden. In other words, there are no policies or mechanisms to address the needs of those transiting through Sweden. One article from AB explains:

But at the same time, we are facing a new situation. Many of those who come to Sweden are not at all interested in seeking asylum here. It may be contrary to our self-image as the most perfect and best little country in the world, but a significant part of those who get off the trains at Malmö Central want to move on. They see their future in Finland or Norway. *Our system is not*



*equipped for these so-called transit refugees.* (Karlsson, 2015, p. 6, emphasis added)

Transit migrants were almost exclusively helped by volunteers, playing a significant role in mobilising volunteer efforts to begin with. For example, another article from DN quotes a volunteer with Stockholm's City Mission, Marika Markovits, who explains: 'What we did not expect was that there would be so many who did not want to seek asylum in Sweden. *These are outside the system and have no one to help them*, it is for them that we must mobilise non-profit forces' (Ahlstrand, 2015, p. 33, emphasis added).

### Sustainable integration

As discussed earlier, the lack of a clear plan that rendered Sweden ready to receive refugees was the basis of the media construction of crisis in 2015. The perception of inadequate planning was similarly brought about when discussing the absence of plans to integrate refugees. As early as March and April, there were references to problems related to integration. Two examples from SvD are worth mentioning. First, an article published on 28 March argued that (proposed) policy changes would not result in a decrease in the numbers of Syrians seeking asylum in Sweden. Instead, the article critiqued the policies for their potential to worsen the conditions under which Syrian refugees would be expected to 'integrate' to Sweden (Ruist, 2015). A second article also critiqued the government, but for its inability to plan for the integration of the increasing numbers of low-educated refugees (Jansson, et al., 2015).

Following the long summer of migration, debates on integration continued. One article from DN stressed the importance of societal-level coordination between the different actors, and not only government and immigrants (Dagens Nyheter, 2015b). Equally important, an article from the same newspaper posed the question as to whether welfare policies facilitate integration. The article, published on 3 November under the title 'Politicians Must Create a Sustainable Integration', listed housing problems, school deficits and police lack of resources as obstacles to integration. These problems are all institutional and relate to the governance of the daily activities of refugees and immigrants in general (Frykman, 2015, p. 25).

### Disciplining bodies

The inability of various organisations to maintain order over the inflow of asylum seekers is best understood as the portrayal of a lack of control over refugee bodies. Institutions such as housing, healthcare and education, which all perform important disciplining roles in society as per Foucault's (1979; see also Hewitt, 1983) analysis, were recurrently highlighted as

facing serious challenges following the long summer of migration. Concerns for finding accommodation for asylum seekers featured in almost every description of the institutional crisis facing Sweden. Accommodation was needed for unaccompanied minors:

The situation is pressured. Many municipalities say that they find it difficult to receive more refugees, regardless of age, and that they do not have enough accommodation for more single children. (Lifvendahl, 2015, p. 4)

Recently, heavy overcrowding in municipal housing has occurred. It affects both the children and the staff. ... Today, the Swedish Migration Agency is unable to register the children at the rate they come in, which means that the system is being violated. (Jammeh, 2015, p. 6)

The municipality must fight every day to find sleeping places for the children. Several of them are sick with MRSA, TB and scabies. (Dagens Nyheter, 2015e, p. 8)

Accommodation was also needed for those who found internships and were on their way to settle:

So our concern is to find accommodation for those who have jobs or internships so that they can continue ... says Emilia Ciokota, team leader at the accommodation in Västberga. (By, 2015a, p. 4)

Warning signs that the capacity to accommodate asylum seekers had been reached were repeated in October and the beginning of November. The lack of planning to deal with the situation was derided in one article from AB that explained: 'Stefan Löfven expects that over 150,000 will have applied for asylum if the flow continues at the same pace. There are places to live in the schools, gyms, but when they are filled, tents might be the only last solution' (Holmqvist and Wågenberg, 2015, p. 14). Just a few days before instating ID checks at the border with Denmark, one article in DN declared that 'there is no roof over the head' of asylum seekers (Larsson and Kärrman, 2015). While referring to 50,000 new beds in converted sports halls, which were offered by the Migration Agency, the article quoted the Minister for Migration stating that Sweden had reached its limit and run out of sleeping spaces. The Minister for Migration, Morgan Johansson continues:

Until this week we have managed to give all [those in need] food for the day and a roof over the head. But if this continues for another week or fourteen days, we will end up in a position where we must deliver such a message to asylum seekers that they cannot secure a roof over their heads. (Larsson and Kärrman, 2015, p. 9)

The narrative of running out of space was further strengthened the day after border controls were instated when an article, describing the problems faced by the city of Malmö, referred to camps of tents having become a reality:

‘There is no longer space for everyone that arrives to sleep somewhere, some had to sleep outside the Migration Agency’ (Lindberg, 2015, p. 2).

The strong emphasis on housing and the need to provide accommodation for asylum seekers stems from the general need to organise society in a particular fashion. Asylum seekers must be registered before they can be provided accommodation. Importantly, once within the provided housing, an asylum seeker is monitored and controlled. While asylum seekers narrate their sense of being controlled in these facilities (see e.g. chapter 12), newspaper coverage verbalises the process in much simpler terms. For example, when referring to an asylum seeker who was suspected of being involved in planning a terrorist attack, an article from SvD offered the following to deny the accusations: ‘Living in an asylum centre means that you are being watched and everyone knows your whereabouts, so there is no possibility that the man was involved in planning anything in Stockholm’ (Gummeson, 2015, p. 9).

The importance of the disciplinary power of the state is further exemplified when reading news articles that emphasise the role of schools and health care facilities in maintaining the social order. These institutions do not have the ability to control asylum seekers and their children the same way as housing does, but they play multiple roles of educating asylum seekers and their children, monitoring them, and controlling them to make them fit for integration into Swedish society and culture. For example, schools ‘survey refugee children’ (By, 2015b), and provide ‘the key to life as a Swede’ (Kadhammar, 2015) even if the child sits in a room that is not designated for teaching. Similarly, free health care has the dual role ‘to explain the system, and control the spread of disease’ (Gustafsson, 2015, p. 4), and ‘increases the possibility for work and strengthens parenting’ (Fried and Ekblad, 2015, p. 8).

### **Resolving the crisis: institutions versus morality**

In this section, I analyse news articles that debate specific proposals or approaches to dealing with the constructed refugee crisis in Sweden. While differences between the three newspapers were not significant in understanding the construction of the crisis, discernible differences can be found in the debates over how to deal with it. The most significant differences are between SvD and AB, which are located, at least initially, at opposite ends of the political spectrum.

SvD comes close to what Wodak (2019) terms a post-shame discourse. In the post-shame era, ‘refugees and migrants serve as *the* scapegoat and simplistic explanation for all woes’ (Wodak, 2019, p. 2, emphasis in the original) alongside ‘the normalisation of far-right ideologies in both content and form’ (Wodak, 2019, p. 2). In a post-shame discourse, agreed-upon

norms and values are ignored and what was previously unsayable and unacceptable becomes normalised. In the constructions of a refugee crisis in 2015, SvD provides room for the previously unsayable as the following examples indicate.

Institutional framing of the refugee crisis inevitably included the questioning of the Swedish welfare model, which is considered one of the most sacred institutions in Swedish national culture. The Swedish welfare model depicts a society without any significant class barriers, where everyone, regardless of their background, has a chance at an education and a career. In one example, the authors of an article published on 4 February 2015 declared that ‘opening our hearts is not enough ... the consequences [of refugee migration] are seen as regards to dependency, housing, segregation and child poverty’ (Sonesson and Westerlund, 2015, p. 5). The article proceeded to mention that ‘the Swedish social model is not adapted for extensive refugee migration of low-skilled people’ and urged political actors to ‘assess the capacity and limitations of Swedish society to receive and integrate people fleeing to our country’ (Sonesson and Westerlund, 2015, p. 5). A second example posed the question of ‘Where is the Limit to Welfare?’ In this editorial, the author argued that ‘the conflict between the welfare state and free movement has been known for a long time. Nevertheless, Sweden seems to respond by continuously expanding welfare commitments. In the long run, something has to go, either mobility or welfare, maybe both’ (Gudmundson, 2015b, p. 4). These two articles question Swedish welfare policies, and specifically the principle of ‘The People’s Home’ (*folkhemmet*, see e.g. Lawler, 2003). This vision of universal welfare, coined by Social Democrat leader Per Albin Hansson in 1927, has – at least from the early 1930s until the late 1980s – been considered sacred in Swedish public culture.

Additionally, the post-shame discourse is exemplified in providing space for politicians from the ultranationalist and extreme rightist Sweden Democrats (SD) to present their views on refugee policies and thus normalising the role played by such a party in Swedish political discourse. At the height of the long summer of migration, an article authored by three SD politicians referred to the restrictive policies initiated by Denmark and explained that ‘the efficient policies of our Nordic neighbours are entirely in accordance with the [Geneva] convention and nothing prevents us from following their example’ (Bieler et al., 2015, p. 6).<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that the post-shame discourse takes on a specific Swedish flavour as it continues to emphasise the importance of international institutions and legal frameworks, their capacities and limitations, and even their directives, as demonstrated by the reference to the Geneva Convention by SD politicians.

At the other end of the political spectrum, AB contradicts the post-shame discourse by arguing that ‘immigration is an asset for Sweden, as well as a moral question’ (Pettersson, 2015, p. 2), and that temporary residence

permits are expensive, lead to worse integration (Rehbinder, 2015) and increase the institutional pressures on the Migration Agency, since refugees have to re-apply every three years (Dahlin et al., 2015). The leftist politics that historically marked the debates within AB can still be observed in the coverage of refugee policies and reception. In one example, an editorial poses the question: ‘Which System is Collapsing?’ and goes on to explain that ‘Swedes are getting richer. The OECD predicts positive Swedish growth and a decrease in the unemployment rate. At the same time, Swedes will buy Christmas gifts for sixteen billion crowns this year’ (Aftonbladet, 2015, p. 2). In these examples, despite the occasional reference to asylum being a moral question, the argument does not shift away from the institutional framework: immigration is an economic asset, temporary permits are an institutional hurdle, and Swedish economic institutions are performing positively.

DN is positioned in the middle of the political spectrum, and news articles oscillating between the two ends are observable along its coverage of the refugee crisis. On the conservative side of the debate, a number of articles stress the lack of institutional capacity to welcome more asylum seekers and draw on some of the expressions that were made popular and most associated with the construction of the crisis. In one example, an article interviews the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Margot Wallström, who refers to the much-discussed notion of ‘system collapse’ in Swedish debate and explains that:

most people know that we cannot maintain a system where there maybe 190,000 people arriving every year, in the long run our systems will collapse ... We want it to offer a worthy reception of those who come here ... We believe that a good society to live in is a society that is generous, but it’s also a society that is functional. (Stenberg, 2015, p. 8)

An editorial published on 6 November 2015 explained that ‘to say that the Migration Agency and the municipalities are overworked is no malicious, calculated exaggeration – it is a painful reality’ (Dagens Nyheter, 2015d, p. 4). The next day, an article continued the narrative of this ‘painful reality’ and stated that, ‘it is clear, however, that if Sweden fails with the integration of new arrivals, tension in society can be large. At the moment we do not even have tent places for everyone, and the housing issue is at least a challenge’ (Dagens Nyheter, 2015c, p. 4). In this line of narration, notions of collapse, challenges, tensions and responsibility come together to explain the institutional problems associated with refugees and asylum seekers. Implicitly understood is that these challenges are temporary, and hence the need for temporary recourse to extreme measures. It is noteworthy that, at times, a reference to morality and values is made in order to deny possible misunderstandings that the author supports the closure of the border based on value judgements. Even the SD politicians referred to above would not

engage in a moral argument in mainstream news media, which affirms that a moral argument is not a conceivable avenue to support policy restrictions.

At the other end of the debate, there are a number of articles published by DN that offer a different view on the institutional crisis. While many articles refer to the unequal distribution of asylum seekers within Europe and call for the need to share the burden, one example takes the argument further by emphasizing the collective European responsibility:

The EU crisis has absolutely nothing to do with the inability to receive sixty million refugees – a situation that does not exist at all. It is about the Union as a whole not having a common answer on how to help six hundred thousand asylum seekers – this year perhaps up to one million – in an area with five-hundred million inhabitants.

People do not have to suffocate in trucks on European highways. People do not have to be overrun by high-speed trains on the English Channel. People must not drown in the Mediterranean. That it has become so is our own inability to bring about political solutions at the European level, solutions that safeguard the rights of those in need of help. This is our real crisis. And it's homemade. (Wolodarski, 2015, p. 5)

While not specifically questioning the morality of Swedish society, the author of the article highlights the political failure in resolving the plight of refugees. Another example denounces the changes in asylum policies that were introduced in November 2015 and uses the discourse of risk society (see the Introduction to this volume) in order to mobilise support:

It is also time to distinguish between costs and investments in the economic debate. It is a cost to establish border controls that prevent refugees from claiming their right to asylum, but it is an investment to give asylum-seekers a good reception and rapid integration. We can lend to investments because it will pay our pensions in the future. (Westin, 2015, p. 35)

Again, the author does not question the morality of Swedish society but brings attention to the political failure. While the author points out that politicians failed as they did not act in a moralistic manner and build a better world, the focus is kept on the rationality of offering help to refugees by rendering it productive and profitable (as also discussed in the Introduction above). One final example, on Christmas Eve a number of church leaders expressed their concerns:

We have respect for the courage of our politicians in the difficult decisions made. Municipalities and county councils are faced with major stresses in terms of housing, care and school. At the same time, we are worried about the new decisions on the country's asylum rules ... *Temporary residence permits make life insecure, complicate integration and increase administration for our authorities.* (Dagens Nyheter, 2015f, p. 8, emphasis added)

These last examples are important attempts to redefine the notion of crisis and to draw attention to the failure of political institutions in coming up with morally sound and institutionally effective policies, which would aid the refugees and strengthen the welfare state's ability to fulfil its goals of supporting the people. As the examples provided from DN and AB show, views that challenged the specific ways the refugee crisis was constructed and used to justify policy shifts do not contest the institutional logic that informed the very construction of the crisis.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have traced the construction of a refugee crisis in 2015 in Swedish mainstream newspapers. Focusing on the most dominant frame, institutional responsibility, I demonstrate that a sense of panic emerged when increasing numbers of people were seeking asylum in and through Sweden. This panic transpired when old rules and regulations were found inadequate to promptly address the needs of the asylum seekers. The inability to categorise and order people (transit migrants for example) rendered these people illegible for the welfare state, increasing the sense of heightened risk and the additional needs for management. An ongoing desire to discipline refugees' bodies through mechanisms of control in housing, schooling and healthcare services added to the pressures on the welfare state institutions to act and manage the risks associated with refugees. Institutional failure to manage refugees and asylum seekers gave rise to a sense of crisis. Thus, the emphasis on institutional crises and the failure to manage and mitigate risks associated with refugees and asylum seekers was drawn by mainstream media to signify the refugee crisis. Political institutional failure, rather than the inadequacy of moral ideals, justified extreme policy measures. These were left largely uncontested in mainstream media, given the cultural context of faith in pragmatism, bureaucratic efficiency and widespread support for Swedish institutions. When constructed as an institutional need, policy restrictions can proceed without challenging the dominant Swedish self-image of being generous, ethical and efficient. This strategy opens up space for a post-shame discourse where (previously) unthinkable and unsayable arguments can be presented. A few contending voices remind us of the moral responsibility towards refugees, but they do not challenge the institutional logic predominant in the debates. As a consequence, violent measures are implemented and self-perceptions of a society that is benevolent and efficient are left unchallenged.

## Notes

- 1 It is not my intention to refute Sweden's generosity. An objective argument that is often taken up to support such a view is that, in 2015, Sweden received the

- largest number of refugees per capita compared to other countries in the Global North (UNHCR 2017). The contention here, rather, is the ways that perception of generosity was not challenged by reversing refugee reception policies.
- 2 Anthropologist Mark Graham (2003) argues that in the Scandinavian context in general, and the Swedish case in particular, there is an emotional continuity between bureaucracies and the people they serve, which facilitates service and ensures popular support. This emotional continuity helps reproduce the ideology of the welfare state.
  - 3 A few studies on Swedish media argue that, historically, there has existed a partisan structure of the national dailies that has kept them closely affiliated with political parties in their content, ownership and readership (Hadenius, 1983). *Aftonbladet* has been a left-leaning newspaper and is currently described as an independent socially-democratic newspaper. *Dagens Nyheter* is described as liberal, while *Svenska Dagbladet* is characterised as moderate. Over the last few decades, however, political affiliations have reduced and there has been a change towards more market-driven journalism, which focuses on newsworthiness rather than political affiliation (Asp, 2006; Pettersson et al., 2006; Strömbäck and Nord, 2008). Strömbäck and Nord (2008) refer to this change as part of the mediatisation process, which is characterised by professional journalistic values and the adoption of a media logic (what is news-worthy) as opposed to a political logic in news coverage (see also Nord 2001).
  - 4 I am grateful for the research assistance provided by Sara Lundgren, Gina Fristedt Malmberg, Pernilla Nilsson and Serena Nilsson in compiling and coding the newspaper articles. They also provided an important sounding board for sharing insights about Swedish media analysis. All translations provided here were carried out by the author.
  - 5 d'Haenens and de Lange (2001, p. 850) explain that 'the morality frame adds a religious or moral charge to an event, problem or subject'. The religious charge was seldom observed in the articles referred to in this analysis. The moral charge, whenever strong, was often used in human-interest stories or discussions of institutional responsibility, as is shown in the analysis.
  - 6 It should be mentioned here that Denmark has been criticised for not fulfilling international conventions with regards to family reunifications ([http://denstoredanske.dk/Samfund,\\_jura\\_og\\_politik/Jura/Enkelte\\_navngivne\\_retssager/Tamilsagen](http://denstoredanske.dk/Samfund,_jura_og_politik/Jura/Enkelte_navngivne_retssager/Tamilsagen)) and stateless people ([www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/forstaa-statsloese-sagen-paa-5-minutter](http://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/forstaa-statsloese-sagen-paa-5-minutter)) (Accessed 13 March 2020).

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