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# Migration, Transit and the Informal: Homeless West-African Migrants in Copenhagen

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➤ **Abstract\_** *In the last couple of years, Copenhagen has been receiving new types of visitors: strong, resourceful men from southern Europe in search of job opportunities. Many are of West African origin, and have lived for many years in Spain and Italy. As a result of the economic recession, they are now moving northwards. Being Schengen residents, their entry is legal, but obtaining a work permit remains almost impossible. Instead, a wide range of geographical areas are being considered as alternative places to make a living. Therefore, these men lapse into the position of modern 'hunter-gatherers' surviving through a mix of private charity, bottle and recycling collection, informal odd jobs, etc, while moving between the Nordic capitals as opportunities for income generation arise. The emergence of such a hyper mobile and flexible proletariat challenges many of our perceptions of migration. Also, our conceptions of integration, citizenship, minimum wages and living standards may need reconsideration, just as the self-image of private charities may need to adjust to a new group of beneficiaries, who are usually transient. This paper investigates the motivations of these new migrants, their survival strategies, and the strategies put forward to avoid the potential downward spiral of surviving as a homeless migrant in Copenhagen.*

➤ **Keywords\_** *Homelessness, West African Migrants, remigration, informality*

## Introduction

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Thomas is hanging out in the People's Park in downtown Copenhagen, right next door to the private homeless shelter run by a religious charity. He is around 45 years old, strong, tall and reasonably well dressed, as are the rest of the group of slightly younger Ghanaian and Nigerian guys. In spite of his neat appearance, Thomas has been on the move for a long time. Since he left Ghana as a young man, he has lived for 13 years in Madrid and five years in Libya, including a short stay in Tunisia. He has professional experience as a construction worker, which took him as far as Malaysia. There, he spent a year constructing an airport as a contract worker for a Ghanaian sub-contractor. It is, however, a long time since he has been able to find a decent job, which is why he has come to Denmark to see if luck will strike while he is here. At the moment, he is looking forward to the Roskilde Festival, a huge annual eight-day music event hosting 130 000 people at a site 30 km from Copenhagen. From his more experienced colleagues, he understands that it is possible to earn a decent daily wage by collecting recyclable cans and bottles at this venue. In the meantime, he joins a larger crew of can-collectors cruising between the many public open-air events and festivals organized throughout spring and summer months, hunting refunds from bottles and cans left by the beer-drinking participants. Thomas isn't quite sure of his plans for the coming period; he might travel to other cities in Scandinavia to try his luck on the job market. In September, he plans to return to Spain to participate in the Festival del Vino in Madrid. Due to his current economic situation, he has sent his wife and two kids back to Ghana, but he usually manages to visit them once a year.

Thomas is part of a new group of visitors to Copenhagen that has increased noticeably during the last couple of years: strong, healthy and resourceful men in search of job opportunities. A good number of these migrants have roots in West African countries; others arrive from the Eastern European EU countries. Many migrants tell stories similar to Thomas': they have been established in Spain and Italy long enough to acquire residence permits, and have worked on a more or less permanent basis in construction, agriculture and/or transportation, but also in the informal sector as street vendors and the like. As a result of the economic crisis, many have lost their sources of income and are now moving northwards in search of job and income opportunities to kick-start their lives anew.

The strategies put forward by these new migrants differ from previous migration patterns by the high degree of mobility and temporality, where a much wider range of geographical areas are being scrutinized for job opportunities and other means of survival (Timera, 2009; Kastianje *et al.*, 2012; Toma and Castagnone,

2015). As Schengen residents, their movement across the EU are legal, as is their stay in Denmark, as long as it does not exceed three months and they are able to cater for themselves.<sup>1</sup>

But obstacles transpire when it becomes clear that obtaining a work permit as non-EU citizens in Denmark is almost impossible. Only vacancies listed on the so-called 'positive list' of highly qualified professions can be opened for a labour contract, and this is only the case when no other EU citizen can fill the vacancy<sup>2</sup>. As very few of these mainly low-skilled migrants have such qualifications, they relapse into a position as modern 'hunter-gatherers' surviving through a mix of private charity, bottle collection and temporary informal odd jobs, moving between the Nordic capitals and Southern Europe as opportunities for income generation wax and wane. Having obtained EU citizenship—as is the situation for a few—does not radically change this picture as language barriers and other restrictions are likely also to keep this group outside of the formal labour market.

The development of such a hyper mobile and extremely flexible proletariat challenges many of our perceptions of migration. First of all, the emergence of a layer of informal, flexible and 'willing' workers defy the Danish labour system, which has so far been firmly regulated by contracts and collective agreements. Second, the practices and self-image of private charities have to adjust as international migrants—who at least in some aspects are more resourceful—replace the usual Danish clientele of alcoholics and drug users. Third, the numerical concentration, and the nature of the survival strategies of these new migrants in areas where urban regeneration initiatives proliferate, may provide a serious test of the social viability of yard redevelopment and urban gardening projects. New practices of scavenging may also conflict with residential initiatives to improve waste management and recycling in the inner city. Finally, the emergence of a new social group of scavengers living from the leftovers of the consumer society may develop a new type of social segregation—an upstairs/downstairs scenario—that conflicts with the core values of the Scandinavian welfare model. In this paper, I will try to investigate the motivations of these new migrants, the survival strategies employed and the strategies put forward to avoid the potential

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<sup>1</sup> Schengen residents may stay in Denmark for a period of 90 days. They must provide for the necessary means to pay for their stay and return trip. According to New-to-Denmark, the official portal for foreigners "What will be considered as necessary funds depends on the length of your stay and whether you will stay at a hotel or in a privately owned home with family or friends. As a general rule, you must have at your disposal approx. DKK 350 per day. A smaller amount may be accepted if you are staying in a privately owned home and your host will cover all the costs" New-to-Denmark 2017.

<sup>2</sup> The so-called 'positive list' includes highly specialized jobs, such as doctors, professional football players etc.

downward spiral of surviving as a homeless migrant in Copenhagen. I will also look at what potential conflicts between migrants and the local population of the inner city are likely to arise if no due attention is given to the problem.

## Methodology

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The article builds on ongoing re-research on West African homeless migrants in Copenhagen, where interviews and participant observation have been carried out in conjunction with voluntary work in different types of homeless services since 2010. It includes multi-sited fieldwork in Spain, Senegal and Berlin. As research has had to be carried out alongside other types of academic work, fieldwork has been disparate and flimsy, reflecting the situation described by Hannerz (2003, p.213) where ethnographic fieldwork increasingly becomes 'the art of the possible', consisting of short interventions spread over long periods of time. During this period, I have acted as a volunteer on a weekly basis, either as a counsellor or as a 'practical volunteer' in two different shelters hosting mainly homeless migrants. Over time, I have conducted in-depth interviews with 15 male migrants, aged between 25 and 60 years, with roots in West Africa. Some were re-interviewed at subsequent stages. Interviews were conducted in French, Spanish or English and were held outside of the shelter's grounds. In 2014, I conducted fieldwork at Roskilde Festival where I interviewed can-collectors and festival participants and acted as a volunteer in one of the refund stalls.

A large number of shorter interviews and conversations also contributed to increase my understanding of the precarious situation of these migrants, just as regular phone calls provided additional information concerning the trajectories and whereabouts of some of my interviewees. On the 'authority side' I have conducted formal interviews with the manager of the shelter and staff from the municipal area's renovation unit, and more informal interviews with the caretaker of the largest refurbished inner courtyard in the area as well as persons in charge of the municipal waste and scrap collection. Finally, I have had access to a number of excellent student reports that have provided additional life stories and insights into the everyday lives of this relatively invisible group.

Obviously, working with vulnerable people confronting homelessness requires heightened attention to certain ethical aspects and relations of power. Often the researcher is placed in a difficult situation where the interviewed express their hopes and wish that the interviewer can help ameliorate their dire situation in some way. This might have affected the accounts either by emphasizing problematic aspects connected to homelessness or by exaggerating resilience. Long term volunteering has enabled me to gain a broader perspective, just as it has enabled the establish-

ment of trust with users that have hitherto been wary of talking to outsiders. Users of the shelter, including the staff, have been informed of my research interests, but this has obviously not always been possible to communicate to all users during observation, due to the prolonged period of volunteering. I have made sure, however, that no confidential information is passed on without the consent of the migrant, and that their privacy is protected through confidentiality and anonymization of all non-official interviewees. I have not looked into whether my respondents have been implicated in illegal activities, such as informal work or drug related activities. In cases where respondents have revealed illicit activities, this has served only as background knowledge. In general, it is not likely that those migrants who are active in lucrative spheres such as drug trading would endure the dire living conditions encountered on the street and in the shelter. It is therefore not my impression that they are included among my respondents. Finally, recruitment of respondents among regular users of the shelter inevitably involves another bias, as it omits those bottle-pickers that operate independently of this form of assistance.

### **West African migration – From Collective Strategies to Individualized Adventurers**

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Although the group of itinerant job seekers in Copenhagen is vast, this paper focuses mainly on the West African migrants, which is the group I know best and also the group that has been researched the most (see for example Kastanje *et al.* 2012; Arce Bayona *et al.* 2014; Hoff, 2014; Hoff, 2016; Juul, 2016). This is probably due to their easier accessibility in terms of language, education and openness. The group is quite heterogeneous, the most visible being the Eastern Europeans, notably Poles and Lithuanians<sup>3</sup> (see Schmidt, 2012). To this, add the Chinese (almost invisible both in the social welfare system and in current research), people from central Europe, notably Bulgaria and Romania (often indiscriminately labeled under the common brand of Roma) and finally the West Africans.

Getting an accurate picture of the number of homeless migrants in Copenhagen is notoriously difficult. Private humanitarian organizations have made estimates that on any given day it is a matter of a few hundred (Kompasset, 2017). The Danish National Centre for Social Research (SFI), responsible for the official bi-annual count of homeless, registered the number of people without regular residence in Denmark to be 125 in 2015 (as compared to 73 in 2013 and 107 in 2011). These people were almost exclusively located in Copenhagen (Benjaminsen *et al.* 2011; 2013; 2015). While February is a good choice for counting national users, this month

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<sup>3</sup> In many cases the Polish and Lithuanian homeless have come to Denmark through subcontracting construction firms, but have failed to get further employment

is among the most difficult and unprofitable for bottle pickers, reason for which many have returned to their dwelling hubs in southern Europe or elsewhere. Although still relatively restricted, the number of homeless migrants is obviously larger but also highly variable across seasons. The exact distribution of people of African origin remains particularly difficult to discern due to the continuous moves of these migrants between the country of residence and one, or several EU countries, and their country of residence in Africa.

Reasons for coming to Denmark, as well as survival strategies put in place, obviously differ between groups. While part of the Polish homeless are motivated by push factors such as difficult divorces, pending prison sentences, etc., (see Schmidt, 2012), often adding alcohol abuse to their problematic situation as homeless migrants, this is seldom the case for West African migrants who generally appear to maintain strong family ties in their country of residence and/or of origin. Rather, their motivation for taking up an itinerant lifestyle is closely related to the collapse of the Southern European economies in 2008 and the ensuing crisis thereafter, which hit African migrants settled in these locations particularly hard (Torres and Gadea, 2015; Toma and Castagnone, 2015; Juul, 2017). For them, migration primarily relates to a wish to earn money and thus contribute to the survival of the family in a society with few other opportunities to achieve what is culturally expected i.e. being self-supporting, sustaining a family and gaining social status by working. How this works out will be scrutinized in the following paragraphs.

A distinctive feature of the new hyper-mobility that differentiates it from older migration patterns is that it appears far less collective in scope (Timera, 2009). As shown in Thomas' account, most of the West African migrants carry with them lengthy migration stories, characterized by a number of more or less voluntary stopovers. A surprisingly large number include a stay in Libya in their itinerary, a destination that was abandoned as civil unrest and emerging persecution of black Africans in particular pushed them north to Italy. Once there, the tightening of the economic crisis prolonged the journey further north towards Germany and Scandinavia.

The sojourns generally seem to be of shorter duration and many indicate that they carry out more or less regular circuits, which can include Malmø, Oslo, Berlin as well as other European capitals. Such movements have been characterized by the anthropologist Henrik Vigh as navigation, a term which aptly illustrates the way in which migrants can be viewed as ships at sea, sailing through open waters through waves and troughs, having to bend and yield to avoid being smashed to smithereens (Vigh, 2009). Under such circumstances, success is dependent on the ability to avoid confrontation and size up the situation, and to the best of their capability to accommodate circumstances and make the best of any given situation. The ability to

navigate may be identified in the ability to read the pulse of the city, for example knowing the whens and wheres of festivals or sports events where a large number of revellers are likely to produce an attractive number of recyclable bottles and cans.

Although the number of 'new migrants' is increasing, the foundational narrative remains: their migration was not particularly directed towards Denmark and their presence here is almost by mistake (see also Toma and Castagnione, 2015, p.79). In fact, they are confronted with a relatively regulated job market, a difficult language and an ever more restrictive immigration policy. It is therefore ironic that many indicate to have chosen Denmark as a destination because of our position through a number of years as the happiest country in the world. Other reasons may be as substantial. As explained by a Ghanaian respondent: "We did not opt for Denmark. It was the economy that brought us here". For the large majority, Denmark is not an end goal and they do not plan to stay for a longer period (Jakobsen, 2012; Juul, 2017). On the contrary, their presence is generally transient, something that does not lend to the development of a strong sense of community, which could otherwise help the individual in defending against exploitation or abuse.

These highly individualized migration experiences differ from previous migration patterns known in West Africa, where decisions to migrate were taken collectively by kin and kith who actively participated in financing the trip abroad and patiently waited for their investments to pay off. In such cases, the itinerary was well-known, with fixed destinations where kin or connections abroad would assist the youngster in starting his migration career in a receptive environment. In certain favored destinations, such as France, a formalized structure of reception based on home town associations, the so-called *foyers*, would serve as a place of refuge for the new recruits (Timera, 2009).

For the new travellers, migration is no longer collective. Particularly for the younger migrants, exploration of new destinations becomes an individualized test of manhood. Oftentimes, not even their mothers are informed before all ties are severed and a new life as an 'adventurer' begins. The individualized youngsters become what Timera (2009) has termed "orphans and adventurers". As orphans, they do not form part of any strong and well-defined network, and in its place, being adventurous becomes a measure of success.

Obviously, many of the migrants encountered in Copenhagen were beyond the rank of 'orphans' as the initial migration from Africa to Europe was carried out many years ago. Nevertheless, the decision to opt for onward migration was highly individual and interviewees quite unanimously declared to have come alone without having former knowledge or connections in Copenhagen. The (weak) ties established during their stay were only knit once they had been directed to the People's Park and the shelter by people they had asked for help upon arrival to the city

(Schmidt, 2012; Jakobsen, 2012; Kastanje *et al.*, 2012). This individualization of experiences, and the loosening of social control, obviously broadens the range of opportunities and income-generating activities that are considered acceptable. Although migrants tend to team up with people from their own country of origin, these relations are not long-lasting and trust-based, but rather temporary relations of shared interest. This makes it easier to transgress previous ideas of what are acceptable ways of gaining a living.

### **Public Fear and Hospitality**

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As migrant homelessness has become increasingly visible in central Copenhagen, uneasiness has risen among local residents and neighbourhood associations. At present, restrictive policies imply that private charities and shelters find themselves as the sole caretakers of the growing number of homeless job-seeking foreigners. As few alternatives are available, migrants' daily existence hinges on private social services and the benevolence of individual citizens. As a result, complicated relations of conditional hospitality are forged in the neighbourhoods and authorities 'hosting the new guests'.

Tensions vis à vis neighbouring communities can be understood as struggles over public space (Mitchell, 2003) or as varying contours of tolerance (Johnson *et al.*, 2005) deriving from increased presence of fear and security in the public space (Pain, 2008) but also from the ways in which the migrants are being portrayed as a potential risk for society.

The notion of conditional hospitality has been introduced by Derrida (2005) to understand the relationship between stranger and host in a context of migration, integration and cosmopolitanism. Conditional hospitality is inherently political as it shapes particular identities and rights (who has the right to be welcomed?) and highlights the unequal relationship between migrants and a host society (Brun, 2010). Where unconditional hospitality demands an openness to the other, which in its extreme dissolves the relation between guest and host, hospitality in its conditional (and certainly more frequent) form, imposes duties on the guest and implies a certain degree of violence, obliging the guest to remain just so. In the text below, various experiences of conditional hospitality produced through particular interfaces between migrants, authorities and 'the Danes' are examined in order to identify processes of inclusion and exclusion as well as exploring the limits and conditionality under which these are practiced.



## **The Rise of a New International and Hyper Mobile Precariat?**

As ‘orphans’ and ‘adventurers’ the new visitors form part of a steadily growing group of hyper mobile and flexible migrants, a special branch of what economist Guy Standing has called ‘*the precariat*’. According to Standing, the precariat “consists of a multitude of insecure people, living bits-and-pieces lives, in and out of short-term jobs, without a narrative of occupational development.” (Standing, 2011: 1)

By using the term precariat (which in his terminology includes a very broad group from disappointed students to underpaid women to international migrants), Standing wishes to divert attention to the rapidly growing group of people living around the world, under very insecure and extremely flexible conditions, i.e., without any form of social security and welfare standards in terms of minimum wage: for this group, previous regulation of work hours, health insurance or pensions, or other elements of the social security network that workers and unions in the northern European welfare states have fought for in the course of the 20th century, are no longer an issue. In this sense, they have become denizens who have a more restricted range of social, cultural, political and economic rights than the citizens around them.

This development is the result of recent privatizations, outsourcing and the generalized use of sub-contractors, which forces many workers to live under circumstances that resemble the day-to-day employment of former times. This implies they never experience even temporary job security, but have to accept part-time jobs, often for wages that are far below minimum standards. For a growing number of people, such restructurations have implied a move from the formal labour market into the informal, or some grey zone, in between (Standing, 2012).

Also, in Denmark, a development towards a loosening of the previous strong regulation of the Danish labour market may be identified as the previous strong collaborations between employers, unions and state, is losing ground, and as it is no longer possible to exclude non-unionized workers from Danish worksites<sup>4</sup>. Notably in construction and cleaning, the lower level of labour-organization and the growth of subcontracting firms have led to an increase in grey-area or outright illegal working conditions. For obvious reasons, it is difficult to assess accurately the extent of this development, but indications may be found by looking at the cases where employers have been charged for employing illegal labour. Here the increase is noticeable. According to the registrations of the Danish police, the number of charges was relatively stable at less than 400 per year until 2010. 378 cases were reported in 2010, it

<sup>4</sup> In 2006, the European Human Rights Court of Justice decided that the practice where employers according to Danish labour agreements could only employ manpower which was organized in the central unions was illegal according to article 11 of the Human Rights Convention.

increased to 595 cases in 2012 and 610 cases in 2015 (Rigspolitiet, 2016.) Obviously, more cases exist, and the Danish Trade Unions generally estimate the number to be between four to five times higher (Pedersen and Andersen, 2007). Not surprisingly, those sectors employing unregistered labour were mainly in care, cleaning, hotels and restaurants, bakeries, kiosks, agricultural activities and brothels.

Before assessing the extent of such an emergent parallel job market, it may be useful to scrutinize what different forms of illegality can be encountered in the field. On the one hand, one finds EU-citizens who may have both legal entry and work permits but who have been forced by circumstances to take work at a salary that is below normal rates; on the other, there are citizens from so-called 'third country' (non-EU) nations, who have residential permit in Schengen, whose sojourn in Denmark as a jobseeker is legal but obstructed by the fact that chances for obtaining a work permit are close to nil. In between these two, one finds an intermediate group, with people that either have exceeded their legal stay or are moving between the spheres of legality and illegality.

The migrants from West Africa may fall into any of these three categories. Many have legal residence in the Schengen zone, but are constrained when it comes to obtaining a work permit. Others have gained Spanish or Italian citizenship, but are constrained on the labour market due to a lack of Danish language skills, certified vocational skills, homelessness, etc., and finally a good number may have extended their stay in Denmark beyond the six months allowed for EU citizens. Finally, it is fruitful to distinguish between employers who make use of unregistered labour in order to depress wages and avoid taxation and illegal migrants who take on another person's identity in order to get a job in a 'white' work-site.

Even for those who have obtained EU citizenship, getting a legal job presents a huge problem. As strong and resourceful people, these migrants often arrive with a great deal of optimism (Hegnsvad & Nordentoft, 2011; Schmidt, 2011; Kastanje *et al.*, 2012; Jakobsen, 2013). That the economic crisis has also had repercussions on the Danish society in terms of rising unemployment rates, comes as somewhat of a surprise. Many of the jobseekers are positively surprised during counseling in the private organization, Kompasset, when internet sites for jobseekers announce the availability of more than 13000 jobs. Current unemployment rates are low (6.3% in 2017 (Eurostat)) and migrants do not consider language problems as a major obstacle. They are, they state, willing to take any job, and equally willing to work much harder than a Dane. "I'm a lucky man. I will get a job. God will help me," is not an unusual point of departure for job seeking. Although it is not said openly, this may, nevertheless, easily transmute into willingness also to work for lower wages and without a formal contract.

The eagerness or desperation for getting a job also opens new avenues for other people to earn money; in her study of the Danish cleaning sector, anthropologist Trine Mygind Korsby (2011) shows how the use of so-called facilitators has become a frequent method to gain access to the difficult Danish labour market. In her study, six of 14 informants acknowledged to have paid someone to help them get access to a job. The amounts for such informal services ranged from 1 900 kr. (255 euro) to 36 000 kr. and 72 000 kr. (4 600 and 9 650 euro). The smallest amounts were one-off affairs, while the two largest were the summing-up over two years of a monthly fee (Korsby, 2011, p.37) for having secured access to a job or for “renting” someone’s social security card and his bank account, enabling a migrant without a work permit to work in a registered job.

For those employed in the non-formalized sector, Korsby reported frequent cases of abuse, as workers were forced to work extra hours without supplementary pay (in three cases 16 hours per day, seven days a week (Korsby, 2011, p.47)) or on lower wages than indicated in the contract. Also, other sources (Jakobsen, 2012) show how it is not unusual to do cleaning for 50 kr. an hour, and that some are even being paid in bread and cigarettes<sup>5</sup>.

Experience from Sweden, presented in Anna Gavanas report ‘*Who Cleans The Welfare State*’ from 2010, confirms this depressing picture. Her study shows how shifts from public to private employment in the care and cleaning sector have blurred what belongs to the white sector and what belongs to the shadow economy. In fact, many firms turn out to be involved in both informal and formal transactions. A cleaning job may be offered as white but the person employed is forced or offered to do additional work on an informal basis.

In spite of the harsh conditions, the number of workers who are willing to undertake such jobs seems to be on the rise. Among my interviewees, several have reported to have taken on informal jobs doing hard manual labour at 50 Danish kroner an hour (around six euros), helping to empty containers, cleaning, or house painting. Within the low paid sectors, it may therefore become increasingly difficult to defend reasonable work and wage conditions as employers and employees may have shared interests in keeping employment away from the sight of the tax authorities. Contrary to the situation during the first wave of mass migration in the 1960s and 1970s, it is no longer possible to force workers to be members of a trade union, and it therefore becomes hard to control that contracts are respected. Many of the younger migrants have no experience of being part of a shared and obliging working

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<sup>5</sup> The newspaper of the union of unskilled worker, Fagbladet 3F has reported many cases of worker being paid 3000- to 6000kr monthly for full time work in the cleaning sector, (see for example Fagbladet nr. 3, April 2013, or Fagbladet 3F, nr.11, November 2012), where standard salary according to 3F is between 21 000 and 23 000 before taxation (Fagbladet 3F, nr. 11, Nov. 2012)

community. Having to fight for each job on provisional contracts, they develop what Standing (2012, p.590) has framed a “morality of opportunism”, where the individual is fighting to gain a living, even when it is at the expense of others.

## **Bottle Picking and Recycling**

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Disappointed by the difficulties of getting a job, some decide to move to other countries, such as Sweden, where the labour market is less restrictive. Others decide to stay on and make the best of the existing situation, as explained below:

Most people are here only temporarily. They are here to get a job. But the law is so restrictive. Those who have only European residency are not allowed to work. It is a closed society for immigrants. There is no room (...) Nobody is happy doing this thing [can collecting], but we have no alternative. We are already here. The only alternative is to engage in crime, stealing and robbing people. The government says it is not a job. That is why we cannot be penalized for doing this. That is why we are doing it. (Nigerian male, Dec. 2015)

Denmark has a long tradition for recycling of bottles and cans, based on a principle of economic compensation. The aim is both to limit litter in the streets and to improve resource management. If cans and bottles are bought back to the recycling systems in supermarkets and shops, a compensation, “pant”, is released. Compared to many other places, the compensation for recyclables in Denmark is relatively high: 15 cents for a small can or bottle, 20 cents for medium size, and 40 cents for the largest recyclable bottles. Bottle collection has always served as a means for homeless or destitute people to gain a quick buck for a drink or a cigarette. At present, this activity has largely been taken over by the more systematic bottle-picking migrants. Many migrants consider picking cans from trash-bins to be an issue of considerable stigma. As described elsewhere, the West Africans in particular avoid talking about such nightly income generating activities and find it revolting to put their hands into bins where other people might have vomited (Schmidt, 2011; Katanje *et al.*, 2012). Nevertheless, seeing people with two plastic bags full of bottles on the handlebars of their bike late at night has become a frequent sight in the inner city, as are the queues in front of the machines where you exchange the recyclables for cash.

For some, bottle collection has turned out to be a viable solution in their present situation and is increasingly perceived as an alternative labour market to those excluded from the formal one. For those who become ‘pros’, bottle-picking becomes part of a circular migration strategy, where migrants oscillate between Denmark and the country of residence on a regular basis, with frequent returns to renew their documents or look for income opportunities ‘at home’. While incomes

are meagre during winter<sup>6</sup>, providing just enough for cigarettes and telephone cards, results are far better in the summer, where more people spend time on out-door recreations. The attractions of Danish outdoor life are well explained by this Ghanaian man:

The crucial thing is the refund, and, unlike in Sweden, people here leave it all over the place. That is one reason why so many people come here. The refund was the first thing I heard about when I was in Spain. You see, if I am hungry here I do not have to beg. I can walk from street to street. I can pay for a shower and I do not have to commit crime to get by. I can just pick up some cans. (Jobless migrant from Nigeria, acting as special reporter for the internet journal *den fri.dk* at Roskilde Festival ([www.denfri.dk](http://www.denfri.dk)))

During summer music festivals, *bottle picking*, *cherchez les empty* or *collecting the pant* becomes a core activity for many international migrants. Not least, large music festivals such as Roskilde festival, become important hunting grounds for bottles, where active effort may not only make the investment of 1800 Danish kroner (240 euro) for the entry fee worthwhile, but also produce a substantial benefit for the collectors, who are there only to pick bottles<sup>7</sup>. While refund collectors limit the amount of waste on the festival ground, the presence of so many competing can-pickers obviously creates problems. In some instances, the presence of many competing collectors has provoked some of the music consumers to react with unfriendly and even racist reactions. As a benevolent and non-profit organization, Roskilde Festival has tried to find avenues through which can-hunters can interact with festival-goers in a decent manner, where racism and abuse are limited. To live up to the ethos of the festival as being inclusive and tolerant, (the so-called 'orange feeling') much effort has been put into limiting such negative attitudes. The encounter between youthful music consumers and poor migrants nevertheless remains challenging, both because recycling and can hunting—which has previously been collected for charitable purposes—is now the object of individual appropriation and because the festival is now divided between festival goers and those cleaning up, a division between an upstairs and a downstairs which doesn't quite match the original intentions of the festival.

The ticket is expensive – you have to work for three days before it is paid. I came with a friend—but when it comes to collecting, everyone works for himself. There is big competition. You have to be strong. You have to work like a machine that never tires. The only reason I agreed to talk to you is that is that I'm in a good mood today. Things have gone well today. I work systematically along the tents.

<sup>6</sup> 3-4 euro on weekdays to 40-50 euros during weekends, according to my informants

<sup>7</sup> According to rumors, the wages gained may be considerable. Sums between 10000, 30000 kr and 50000 kr (€4000) for a week's work have been mentioned.

I get around 300 kr pr. sack. [...] Yeah, Sodom and Gomorra—that's a good way to characterize it. They only drink, dance and make love. I realize that many of them are only between 17 to 20 years old. They are all very rude when you approach them; they say: Nej, nej, Nej. They treat us like a piece of shit. One guy called the security guard when I approached him. I hate the harassment and the embarrassment. (Nigerian man living in Sweden, 2014)

Many efforts are made by the various organisations dealing with the new migrants to ease tensions during street festivals. The Blue Cross, for example, engaged the organizers of the annual Distortion Street festival of Copenhagen—which attracts around 100 000 people during five days of partying at different venues around central Copenhagen—to distribute a waistcoat with the label “Refund-collector” on the back. According to the collectors, this increased friendliness and engages partygoers in helping them to access the cans. Nevertheless, it has not completely eradicated the often denigrating and racist behavior.

Also, outside of the festival, interests may clash between those trying to survive on the leftovers of the welfare society and the interests of activists and municipalities to improve the physical environment of the city. As competition in can-hunting increases, some groups—mainly people from central Europe who have a long experience of living at the margins of society—have taken up scavenging on a more comprehensive level. Of particular interest to this group is electronic waste, where valuable metals such as copper wire can be extracted by burning off the plastic coating. Other types of valuable metal from electronic scrap are exchangeable for cash. Add to this clothing and other forms of recyclables. As was the case with the benevolent can-picking-for-charity purposes, such private recycling initiatives tend to clash with the interests of neighborhood associations and municipalities.

During the last decade, recycling policies in the inner city of Copenhagen have become far more wide-ranging. Through voluntary waste selection by private households who sort their solid waste into a variety of different containers, the municipality is able to accumulate considerable returns from recycling of valuable waste. Conflicts are therefore likely to arise when scavengers' own selection implies that invaluable litter is spread outside the containers, or alternatively dumped in containers designated for other types of waste, rendering the value of the container worthless. Likewise, scavengers may manage to seize the most valuable scrap before the municipal refuse collectors are able to collect it. This brings the scavengers into direct conflict with both refuse collectors and caretakers in charge of keeping such areas clean. It also undermines the structure of compensation upon which the recycling system is based.

## Hibernation

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Can picking and bottle collecting is usually combined with what we have termed 'hibernation' (Kastanje *et al.*, 2012) which enables the 'visitor' to keep living expenses to a minimum, safeguarding savings and thereby avoiding overstressing social networks in the country of residence. While can-collection and others types of scavenging may provide the new visitors with a small but crucial income, their survival, not least in wintertime, hinges on access to private charities and shelters where it is possible to benefit from services such as shelter, free or cheap food, showers and laundry facilities. This way of moving away from one's kin and kith in order not to strain family budgets, which we have called 'hibernation', is a well-known survival strategy in West Africa, where 'visiting a (richer) relative' and helping out in exchange for food and shelter has long served as a means in times of crisis (see Juul, 2005). As described elsewhere, many migrants develop certain routines while in Denmark, where various social 'places', i.e. breakfast places and soup kitchens, are visited on a daily basis; also, libraries and other places where the internet is available are popular as on-line job seeking can be carried out along with Facebook updates and other types of contacts with friends and family in their homeland.

Since 2007, subsequent Danish governments have expressed anxiety that "Denmark would develop into a 'crowd-puller for Europe's poverty migrants". To lessen the attraction of the Danish welfare system, the former liberal/conservative government disallowed state-funded shelters and soup kitchens to cater for visitors who did not hold a Danish social security card to avoid Denmark becoming "the warm shelter for the homeless of Europe"<sup>8</sup>. The policy has been continued under subsequent governments irrespective of political ideology and was summarized neatly by Inger Støjberg, MP for the liberal party "Venstre" and currently Minister of Integration:

These people should not be here at all. There is no chance that they will go home once they find out that they can get a bed, clothes and food and that they are doing really well here. Why should they leave? Crime levels are already high and this will attract even more. If I were poor in Romania, I'd also rush to Denmark, if I knew how well I would be treated. At home, they have nothing. (Inger Støjberg in TV2, Nov. 2013)

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<sup>8</sup> The idea of shelters as crowd pullers for Europe's poor was first introduced by Minister of Social Affairs Karen Jespersen (from the Liberal party, Venstre) in 2007. The argument was later repeated by several MPs, including Ministers, Benedikte Kiær (Conservative) (Politiken 5 dec. 2010) and Inger Støjberg (Venstre) (TV2 2013).

Although the Socialdemocratic Burgo-Master of Copenhagen recognizes the need to avoid leaving migrants to sleep outside during winter, his approach rests on a perception that migrants have been misinformed about their possibilities on the Danish labour market and therefore should be repatriated (Frank Jensen in TV2, Nov. 2013).

At present, foreign migrants cannot get any help from the Danish social system except in case of life-threatening illness. The few shelters that are open for homeless migrants have therefore experienced a huge increase in the number of users and an almost complete change of their clientele. Financed primarily by private means, and small and irregular donations from the state and municipality, these voluntary organizations have found themselves as the sole caretakers in charge of the growing number of homeless job-seeking migrants.

The arrival of an entirely new group of users, with needs very different from those of the traditional Danish users, represents a considerable challenge for the organizations and their volunteers. As shown in a study carried out by Hegnsvad and Nordentoft in 2011, the new users are in many ways more resourceful than the homeless Danes, as they seldom have problems of alcohol or drug abuse or psychiatric problems. Hence the demand for care or a chat with the volunteers is easily turned into a situation where the volunteers become service providers—of tea, coffee, food, clothes—but no longer form a close relationship with the service users, who are only there temporarily. The huge demand also serves to squeeze out certain users. As access to shelter is limited, one has to queue in order to get a dish in the soup kitchen and participate in a lottery to get access to a bed. This has led many of the Danish users, who have other options, to abandon the private social services, much to the regret of staff and volunteers. The professionals and volunteers, on the other hand, acknowledge the lack of alternatives available for this group and have found new strategies that accommodate the needs of the new user groups. Nevertheless, Hegnsvad and Nordentoft (2011) describe a certain dissatisfaction and despondency among volunteers who feel they are the only ones taking care of a huge problem that no-one else seems to care about and which they themselves are not able to solve in a satisfactory manner.

In reality, the limited availability of space and shelter contributes to undermine the open-door policies that are central to the largest of the private charity organizations. As space is limited, more resourceful migrants, such as the West Africans, are able to squeeze out the more vulnerable groups such as the Eastern European alcohol abusers and the Roma families, who are less outspoken. This leads to the final challenge that will be discussed in the paper: the issue of unregulated camping and the lack of public toilets.



## Shrinking Commons and Irregular Camping

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As space is limited, homeless people of all types may be forced to sleep outside when there is no room left in the shelter. To combat development of internal hierarchies between migrant groups, where the weakest groups are squeezed out, beds are attributed by means of a lottery. Nevertheless, the number of East and Central European rough sleepers seems to be slightly higher than among Africans. Rough sleeping is most visible during summer and some areas of town are more 'blessed' than others. Notably the area of Inner Nørrebro has experienced a steady increase in the number of people sleeping in parks and private inner courtyards.

The attraction of this area is probably a combination of its closeness to the inner city, where the most attractive hunting grounds for scrap and bottles are located, and its nearness to the private charities. Finally, Nørrebro prides itself of having some of the few places left in Copenhagen where the inner courtyards of apartment houses are not gated but accessible to everyone. The courtyards are often very attractive, with flowers, trees and shrubs, and many corners and bushes to create a feeling of privacy and coziness. Some of the courtyards are part of urban gardening experiments and some even have installed wooden hammocks so that the inhabitants and by-passers can have a rest and look into the greenery from a horizontal perspective.

The bushes turn out to be attractive for homeless migrants in need not only of night refuge, but also of places where belongings of different sorts may be stored or hidden. Although the inhabitants of this area pride themselves for being tolerant and inclusive, a certain fatigue with the number of people camping in what are basically their private gardens may be detected. These tensions also reflect a general up-turn in ownership where flats in the area are increasingly privately owned and inhabited by richer layers of society (Schmidt, 2015). Conflicts have also increased, as it turns out that due to the continuing elimination of the city's public toilet facilities, the bushes are also used as toilets. As a result, the residents have called for the public authorities to take action on the problems and not leave it for the local residents and caretakers to deal with what is considered a problem basically related to globalization and the free movement of labour.

The reaction of some politicians—including some from the Social Democratic Party—has been to call for more police control, where citizens of Romanian origin, for example, are woken up and searched for stolen goods and in other ways pressured and ostracised in order to limit their presumed criminal activities and motivate them to return to their homeland (Trine Bramsen in *Politiken* 2013). Harassment by the police has increased and homeless migrants have, in several cases, been fined for sleeping rough in schoolyards or parks, and even for seeking shelter in the event of inclement weather. In these cases, NGOs have taken the cases to court, which have ruled in favour of the rights of immigrants to occupy public space. Nevertheless, it

has created a general feeling of persecution among the homeless migrants. Lately<sup>9</sup>, the mayor of Copenhagen, Frank Jensen, has called for a reform of the refund system in order to make it less attractive to foreigners visiting Denmark with the intention of engaging in this kind of income generating activities.

Fortunately, others have adopted a more understanding attitude, acknowledging that the issue is part of a larger problem related to poverty and migration.

## Conclusion

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The increasing number of immigrants arriving in Denmark, either as part of a search for permanent job possibilities, or temporarily as part of a hyper-mobile survival strategy, raises a number of challenges for the state and the municipality of Copenhagen. Through 'bottle picking', migrants have been able to create a job-market where there formerly was none, but as non-taxpayers they have little or no rights and little attention is given to their presence except in the few shelters that are open for people without residence permits. Their positions as modern 'hunter gatherers' has forced benevolent organisations such as Roskilde Festival, and Distortion, to adopt new strategies which take the existence of this new and parallel layer of waste pickers into account.

At present the authorities are balancing between a policy of being *laissez-faire* and turning a blind eye to the problem, and an active strategy of ostracising and criminalizing the new migrants. As 'urban commons' in terms of public toilets, etc., are shrinking, and the amount of space in shelters and the like are limited, a competition arises between different groups of migrants where the less resourceful are pushed out and literally end up defecating in people's private gardens.

In order to avoid such issues, it seems crucial to find local solutions that must include a much wider range of services to provide for the new guests, to avoid that the resourceful people who have contributed to make Nørrebro and other parts of Copenhagen attractive through local refurbishment initiatives, are losing faith and are moving from the inner city. The present policies of limiting access to social facilities and open public spaces certainly makes it unattractive for foreign migrants, but it does not limit the number of 'guests'.

At present, different experiments have been started as part of the city's regeneration programs and neighbourhood associations, but knowledge about current practices of conviviality and conditional hospitality remains limited. There is a need to increase understanding of how migrants' survival strategies and of interfaces between neighbourhoods, municipality and migrants, are practiced.

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<sup>9</sup> See Politiken 27th and 30th of November 2016. <https://www.b.dk/nationalt/nyt-pantsystem-skal-holde-romaer-vaek-fra-koebenhavn-de-lever-et-usselt-liv-og-sk>

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