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# **Resistance Stories**

An experience-centred narrative analysis of the  
political biographies of asylum rights activists  
opposing the post-2015 migration regime in Sweden

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## **Abstract**

The autumn of 2015 constituted a major break with the prior migration regime in Sweden, as the government implemented temporary migration laws in order to curb the large-scale arrival of migrants, which had taken the authorities by surprise at the time. Following this, the question of migration has gradually to a greater extent come to be framed as a threat by government officials and the political parties, suggesting that restrictive policies are imperative to maintain the country's security.

The aim of this thesis is analyse the ways in which the mentioned policy turn have impacted asylum rights activists' conception of the Swedish society, given the presumption that Sweden is a country permeated by a certain brand of 'moral nationalism', emanating from the notion that Sweden is an inherently 'humanitarian nation'. Taking this as a point of departure, the thesis shows, through the experience-centred narrative research method, how five activists, due to the measures undertaken by the government, in different ways have come to question this story, and how they narrativise their decision to get involved in the asylum rights moment after the events of 2015 unfolded.

In doing this, the relationship between the stories a community tells about itself and the self-understandings of the members of the community are explored, as well the common denominators in the narratives of the asylum rights activists in terms of how they become politically involved and which events that have shaped their worldviews. Finally, their accounts of the autumn of 2015 provide us with a complement to the dominant narrative of this time, the latter revolving around the necessity of the government to resort to extraordinary measures to protect the Swedish society from the perceived threat posed by the arrival of the migrants.

*Key words:* migration, securitisation, collective identity, narrative research, social movements

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Setting the stage: Sweden Takes a Break**

In the last thirty years, the number of international migrants have risen extensively worldwide; since the beginning of the 1990s we have seen an increase by sixty-five percent (fifty-three million) in the global north and thirty-four percent (twenty-four million) in the global south, meaning that approximately one out of seven people today are migrants (International Organization for Migration, 2014, p. 2). In parallel with this development—which to a degree explains the increasing numbers—violence resulting from civil wars and conflicts has intensified in several countries over this period; and in 2015, the number of refugees in the world had soared to 65.3 million, of which Afghans, Somalians and Syrians represented approximately half of the total number. During the course of the first five months of this year, over 100,000 people fled to Europe to seek asylum (ibid, p. 65) Seven months later, at the beginning of December, more than 911,000 migrants had arrived on the European shores, of which seventy-five percent had fled the conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq; 3,550 people had lost their lives on their way to their destination, the majority drowning in the Mediterranean Sea (UNHCR, 2015).

The events of 2015 is often defined in a broad sense as a ‘refugee crisis’—that is, it is the dominant paradigm in European public discourse to make sense of the large group of migrants making their way to the EU countries during this time (della Porta 2018)—, a designation not only referring to the sheer number of migrants, which took government agencies all over the EU by surprise, and the dire state of the circumstances of these individuals, but also the perceived inability of the institutional structures of the receiving countries to handle the challenges that the arrival of these migrants posed (ibid.). During this time, the member states of the EU dealt with the increasing amount of migrants in different ways. The European Commission initially proposed that 40, 000 migrants should be accepted annually by the EU, which would be divided between the member states according to the size of their populations and their economic power, a proposal that was well-received by countries such as Germany, Italy and Sweden, whereas the proposal was fiercely criticised by for instance the heads of Great Britain and Hungary, the latter going as far as to build a protective fence in order to stop the

migrants from crossing the Serbian border to the country. In the case of Sweden, 163, 000 migrants made their way to Sweden in 2015; 114, 000 of which arrived during the course of four months: September-December; 70, 000 of these were children (SOU 2017:12, p. 26). In an assessment issued by the Swedish government on the work that was carried out by the authorities at this time (ibid., p. 28), it is stated that ‘everyone was caught unawares by the large numbers of refugees who made their way to Sweden’ and that ‘neither the Government Offices, nor any other agency had foreseen the developments that would unfold during autumn 2015’.

As a consequence of the arrival of migrants, the government announced on the 12<sup>th</sup> of November that border controls were to be introduced at the internal border. This measure was thereafter quickly followed by the decision to introduce ID checks at the country’s borders and the implementation of a temporary immigration law, adopting the right to asylum to the minimum requirements under international law, reducing the right to family reunification, and limiting the right to residence permit for migrants (ibid., p. 29). These measures were framed by the government as bestowing a ‘breathing space’ to the Swedish society, allowing the authorities to improve the capacity of the country’s intake system; and almost three years later, in the spring of 2018, the ID checks are still in action at the country’s borders. The European Commission has at several occasions demanded that Sweden should stop the border controls, so as to uphold the freedom of movement in the union (Metro 2017), but the Swedish government is pushing for a prolongation of the ID controls, referring to the threat to the country’s domestic security and the need to control the arrival of migrants, given the acts of terrorism in Europe during the last few years (SR 2018).

It can be said that the decision to implement these measures constituted a major break with the country’s previous asylum right policies, and its public discourse on migration. One month before the ‘breathing space’ was announced, the Social Democratic Prime Minister of Sweden, Stefan Löfven, declared from a stage in Stockholm that: ‘Sweden shall carry its solidarity with a sense of pride’ and that ‘My Europe is a Europe that does not build walls’ (my translation) (SVT 2016), and in the run-up to the parliamentary election of 2014, the Prime Minister of the time, the Conservative Fredrik Reinfeldt, asked his constituents to ‘open your

hearts' for the migrants who were predicted to make their way to Sweden, and he stated that: 'It will cost a lot of money, we will not be able to afford much else, but these are really people that are fleeing for their lives' (my translation) (Aftonbladet 2014).

Against this background, it is interesting to note how Prime Minister Stefan Löfven has described the events that unfolded during the autumn of 2015 in retrospect. For instance, when meeting the US President, Donald Trump, he claimed that the current Swedish government, consisting of the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party, inherited an irresponsible migration policy, suggesting that the violence in the biggest Swedish cities has gone down, that the unemployment rates have decreased and that economic growth has been stimulated as a consequence of the measures implemented to restrict the arrival of migrants to the country (Aftonbladet 2018); and in the run-up to the parliamentary election of 2018, the Prime Minister announced that the Social Democratic party vowed to restrict the country's migration policies even further in the case of winning the election, that it should be made easier to put asylum seekers into custody if they are not granted asylum, so as to maintain domestic security (Aftonbladet 2018). In addition to this, most of parliamentary parties in Sweden, of which only the Left Party and the Sweden Democrats did not rally behind the temporary migration law when it was presented by the government, have denounced the country's old migration regime in the wake of the autumn of 2015, in many cases calling for even harder restrictions (Sveriges Radio 2016).

In the decades leading up to the 'refugee crisis' of 2015, the arrival of migrants have grown steadily, culminating in 1994 when the country accepted a significant number of refugees from former Yugoslavia, and in 2003, at which point large numbers of Iraqis fled the war in their home country (Scuzzarello, 2010, p. 113-114). Before the outbreak of the Second World War, Sweden had primarily been a country of emigration, but after the economic boom that followed upon the war, which was due to the fact that the country had been able to stay out of the conflict, the demand of labour immigration increased, and so Sweden accepted large groups of migrants predominantly from Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey until 1971, when the government closed the doors to labour migrants from non-Nordic

countries. Thereafter, the large bulk of migrants coming to Sweden have arrived as asylum seekers or through the system of family reunification (ibid., 112-113).

As of today, approximately one-fifth of the country's population has an immigrant background, 'defined as those who were either born abroad or born in Sweden to two immigrant parents', and the number of foreign born has risen from 9.2 percent in 1990 to 15.4 percent in 2012 (Migration Policy 2014). As Fredlund-Blomst points out, these numbers do not suggest that Sweden is an international outlier in and out of themselves; rather, it is the fact that the biggest proportion of the country's immigration is 'humanitarian-based' and its commitment to international protection and human rights. For instance, thirteen percent of all the asylum applicants in Europe in 2012 were registered in Sweden; the country has the largest refugee resettlement program in the European Union, and since the mid-2000s, the small city of Södertälje, located thirty kilometres southwest of Stockholm, 'has taken in more Iraqi refugees than the United States and Canada combined (ibid.).

Additionally, when the large group of migrants made it to Sweden in the autumn of 2015, substantive segments of the Swedish population got engaged in one way or another to help the newly arrived, and welcome initiatives were mobilised through social media and online groups, activating a diverse range of civil actors (churches, lawyers, human rights organisations, local politicians, et cetera) including a great deal of individuals who mobilised for the first time in their lives (Kleres, 2018). Furthermore, when the temporary immigration law were passed, some of the informal networks that had been formed as a response to the acuteness of the situation started to transform into proper organisations, seeking to create support for the dismantling of these laws, while at the same time providing the newly arrived migrants with practical assistance.

For many Swedes, the inversion of the country's migration regime was perceived as a 'tragedy', and many of the people that had rallied on the ground to support the migrants reacted with anger. An activist that joined a spontaneous demonstration after the passing of temporary laws expressed that the day marked 'a pitch black day in Sweden's history' and that it was 'impossible to understand that this new inhuman asylum law went through' (Kleres 2018). Further, civic organisers expressed frustration about the perceived impossibility to maintain the



traditional humanitarian approach to refugees in Sweden, while at the same time preventing a ‘system breakdown’ due to the arrival of the migrants; illustratively, Åsa Romson, the minister that announced the ‘breathing space’ together with the Prime Minister, broke down in tears as she conveyed the decision (ibid.).

## **1.2 Why Bother: A Prelude to the Research Question**

In the thesis at hand, my aim is to shed light on the events that unfolded during the course of the autumn of 2015 through the eyes of some of the individuals that in one way or another rallied to support the newly arrived migrants and who have chosen to engage in collective action to oppose the temporary laws that were announced during this time. In my view, these events constitutes an interesting turning point in the modern history of Sweden, as it has marked a break with the country’s post-Second World War migration regime, which in my opinion has served as one of the central components in the Swedish self-narrative of ‘a model society based on universal tenets of social justice and human rationality’, of a country ‘generously opening its doors to the persecuted and oppressed’, as the author Göran Rosenberg expresses it (Huffington Post 2016). I also concur with Kleres that these sentiments have supported a specific brand of ‘moralist nationalism’, combining a ‘dual emphasis on national solidarity (welfare state) and international solidarity (internationalism)—a factor that traditionally has been a source of national pride for the Swedes and following the autumn of 2015, a basis for both consent and opposition towards the new immigration law (Kleres, 2018).

My ambition is to show in the following chapter how human rights activists make sense of their own engagement against the background of the changes in their political environment, and how they relate to the myths of their society, and the way in which they have informed their perceptions of themselves. In doing this, I will analyse how they narrativise their political lives, so as to find out, in Andrews words (2007, p. 8), how they ‘place themselves within the political world’, ‘what kind of stories [they] tell about how the world works’, and which role they bestow themselves and how they relate to the asylum rights movement and the role it is playing in the political struggle.

I would argue that this aim might be of particular interest for three primary reasons. Firstly, it is fair to assert that the events of 2015—due to their political and moral gravity and the effects they have had on the Swedish political landscape—at the time of writing are subject to negotiation, insofar as the government's measures to stop the arrival of migrants during this time have subsequently been narrativised in contrasting ways by opinion-formers (state officials, the media, politicians, NGOs) in the public debate. Some of these groups have framed the measures as a product of the emergence of right-wing populism in Sweden, propelled by the Sweden Democrats, which provided the government with the impetus to change its policies on migration so as to stop potential voters to rally behind the said party; others have framed them as quite logical, given that the leading governmental party, the Social Democrats, never has been overtly liberal in terms of migration policies, regarding the survival of the welfare state as more significant than all other concerns; and yet other have framed it as the fault of a malfunctioning EU, not managing to share the responsibilities of the refugees, et cetera.

However, what most of these stories have in common, at least the ones articulated by the majority of politicians from both ends of the left-right spectrum and the majority of leader writers in the Swedish media, is the assumption that Sweden faced a crisis during the autumn of 2015, threatening state institutions, and that the implemented restrictions and legal changes were necessary to preserve the order of the nation and that a return to the old migration regime would bring about a state of chaos in the country. Hence, since the history of these events is in process of being constructed, I find it relevant to illuminate the narratives of the autumn of 2015 articulated by activists who on the one hand carried out practical work to support the newly arrived migrants at this time and who on the other hand are contesting the restrictive migration policies supported by the vast majority of actors within the Swedish political establishment. Their accounts will complement our understanding of the social phenomena that is this important turning point in the country's political history.

Secondly, examining how politically engaged individuals understand the tumultuous political times as they are living through, as Andrews puts it (2007, p. 9), and the way in which they tell the stories about their own political

engagement, may also highlight how the political narratives that permeate a given society can inform the self understanding of these individuals as political subjects, and how the intersection of private experiences and rapid political changes on a macro level can recast these understandings.

Thirdly, I would claim that it is of interest to analyse the narratives of the concerned individuals in order to understand how the efforts to securitise migration—that is, turning it into a security issue (Buzan *et al* 1998, p. 23)—by the Swedish government officials, framing migration as a threat to state institutions and domestic security, are understood by activists, so as to find out how they are seeking to promote counterframes (Snow *et al* 2000, p. 625-626) related to migration, and being a part of a resistance moment means to them, as they act to challenge the Swedish political establishment.

Thus, the overarching research question of this thesis is: *What constitutes the core elements of the narratives that asylum rights activists in Sweden construct about their political lives against the backdrop of the changes regarding their home country's migration regime following the autumn of 2015?*

I will also investigate, in accordance with the question above, the following questions:

- How do they perceive their abilities to change the dominant public discourse in Sweden with regard to asylum seekers and the asylum system?
- How do they relate to the measures undertaken by the Swedish authorities to restrict the arrival of migrants?
- How do they relate to the collective identity of their in-group, and the ways in which they perceive that their identities have changed after having taken political action?

## 2. Theoretical Framework

As I will investigate the life stories of activists working to promote the rights of asylum seekers by opposing the restrictive migration laws that were implemented in the wake of what is often referred to as the ‘refugee crisis’ of the autumn of 2015 in Sweden, I will as my point of departure in this chapter outline how narratives have found their way into the forefront of social sciences, and how it might be used as an analytical tool to understand the motives and self-understandings of individuals deciding to partake in social action; whereupon I will conduct a brief overview of the academic study of social movements and the questions that research within this field tend to address.

Following these sections, I will present three additional core concepts—‘framing’, ‘securitisation’ and ‘collective identities’—which have served as pillars in my interviews with the respondents, insofar as the concepts have informed the structures of the conversations and the questions that I have brought to the table. The concept of framing will be elaborated on, since it is of interest to me how the activists are trying, on a more or less conscious level, to communicate their narratives to the public, in order to ignite support for their cause and to change the dominant discourse, in regard to asylum seekers and the Swedish asylum rights system more generally.

I have chosen to work with the subsequent concept, ‘securitisation’, in order to elucidate the ways in which my respondents understand and narrativise the extraordinary measures undertaken by the Swedish government to stop the arrival of refugees in the autumn of 2015; and the concept ‘collective identities’ will be used in order to shed light on the ways in which the respondents make sense of being a part of a political collective, how they situate themselves in their societal context and the ways in which their engagement in the asylum rights movement have influenced how they regard their identities.

## 2. 1 A Brief History of Narratives & Political Action

During the last decades, there has been an increasing interest in the concept ‘political narratives’, which reflects the proliferation of the study of narrative within the social sciences<sup>1</sup> (Esin *et al* 2014, p. 66). Although there is no consensus concerning what constitutes such narratives, there ‘appears to be agreement that stories, both personal and communal, are pivotal to the way in which politics operates, both in people’s minds [...] and in how politics is practised’; that is, narratives shape the way individuals make sense of politics, and the context within which they act out their political engagement (ibid, p. 67).

According to Barbara Czarniawska, one important reason as to why narrative studies have proliferated within the realms of social science is that ‘enacted narratives’ can be seen as ‘the most typical form of social life, and that, in the words of Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘social life is a narrative’ (Czarniawska 2014, p. 3). Another reason for this, as Kenneth Baynes explains it, is that the focus on narratives, on human beings as ‘self-interpreting animals’, a designation coined by Charles Taylor, is that it has showed the limitations of on the one hand reductionistic ways of regarding the self—for instance the self as an “subject of experience” that exists prior to its self-interpretations’, or a mere neurophysiological process, which can be made subject to objective scientific analysis. On the other hand, it has shown the limitations of overly simplistic models of human motivations, such as the rational choice theory (Baynes 2010, p. 441). Rather, in the view of Taylor, the self is constituted by more or less coherent narratives, consisting of interpretations and judgements of itself, as well as assessments on which things that are important or not-so important to it, what it likes and dislikes, et cetera—a process that is never final. To him, it is also a social process; since it is enacted in a context which Taylor calls a ‘web of interlocution’, meaning an intersection of interpretations by the individual that interprets itself and the individuals that in turn interpret he or she (ibid, p. 442).

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<sup>1</sup> The interest in narrative analysis initially emerged in literary theory. It can be said that the first modern example of such an account was the work of the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp’s analysis of underlying structures in Russian folktales, which was later followed by similar works by other Russian formalists and postformalists in the decades that were to come (Czarniawska 2014, p. 1-2).

In his seminal work, *After Virtue*, MacIntyre proposes a similar thought: that narratives serve the function of making our actions intelligible—but also that the cultures in which we are leading our lives consist of stocks of stories, which—no matter to which degree they correspond with objective facts of reality—are inextricably woven into our understanding of life (MacIntyre 1984, p. 216). In accordance with this, he argues that the narrative of the self is ‘constituted in the person’s historical particularity’, meaning that it is only possible to fully understand an individual’s action if one takes into account the cultural setting in which the individual is imbedded (ibid, p. 211). That is, the common approach of providing Humean casual explanations as a way of analysing action in social sciences is insufficient, as it is necessary, according to MacIntyre, to take people’s intensions—which are only made intelligible by considering their cultural and social settings—into account (Rudd 2012, p. 177).

In *Political Narratives: stories and collective action*, Frederick W. Heyer outlines a theory on the ways in which the worldview, or the ethos, of a community is established by public narratives, drawing on the assumption of MacIntyre that an ‘initial culture stock’ serves as a tool, helping the members of the community to construct new stories – ‘either by directly referencing them or by appealing to the basic understandings of who we are, what we believe, and what we value’ (Heyer 2014, p. 102). According to the theory, these narratives constitute the mythology of the society and are important parts of its inhabitants’ collective memory (ibid. 103). That is, the narratives help answering questions such as ‘how it began, how it arrived where it is today, and where it is going’, through accounts of the past of the collective (ibid. 103). For instance, he recounts the research that has been carried out by James W. Wertsch which shows that American high school students’ accounts of the countries’ past revolves around a ‘quest-for-freedom narrative’, in which historical events like the Revolutionary War, during which the colonisers fought for their independence from the British rule; the World Wars, which they regard as an American struggle against tyranny; and the Cold War, viewed as a struggle between American liberty and Soviet oppression, play a prominent part in their self understanding (ibid. 103). It is worth pointing out, given the focus of this thesis, that researchers in a similar study have gathered data showing that students of the same age in Sweden tend to view the country as

a country that 'has left conflict behind', and in a similar vein as their American counterparts regard the country as a pioneers of modernity, technology and morality. Two concepts that serve as especially important in their narratives of their past is the emergence of the *welfare state* and the country's journey from being a geographical superpower to a modern day *moral superpower* (Olofsson *et al* 2017, 253).

Narratives such as these, as Heyer conceives of it, are by no means restricted to national communities; they are prevalent in all ideological communities, informing the groups conceptions of themselves and conveying basic orientations as to what is preferable and what is not; who are friend or foe; which are the driving forces in society; and which part the group has to play in its particular context (Heyer 2014, 104). What Heyer thus proposes is that public narratives bestow communities with the same tools to understand themselves as private narratives bestow individuals. As such, Heyer argues that shared narratives play a vital part in constituting our societies and communities, as they provide an autobiography consisting of the origin of the group and its 'destiny'.

However, narratives are in a state of constant revision, and as MacIntyre argues, a narrative is not something that an individual merely tells retrospectively; it is something that the individual, one way or another, is acting out as long as he or she are alive (Rudd 2012, p. 178). In that sense, it can be said that narratives are not expressing or representing the authentic identity of the individual performing it; rather the performance of the narrative, notwithstanding whom we are telling it to, functions as way of constituting our identities, a process which constitutes a 'struggle over agency', which takes place within 'the complex and contradictory network of individual and social relations of power surrounding identity and experience' (Squire *et al* 2014, p. 28-29). Naturally, the narratives that are running through the fabric of society are not always compatible with one another, and no communities are so coherent that they are devoid of individuals or groups that are articulating narratives that lie outside the boundaries of the norm within the given society, even if of course influential actors may seek to suppress or block out these perspectives (*ibid*, p. 33-34).

For instance, Molly Andrews cites J.F. Dienstag's words: 'Human beings fight over history because they conceive it as an essential part of who they are' (Andrews 2007, p. 10), and she asserts that different political narratives, from time to time, for strategic reasons, might be crafted in such a way that certain interpretations of important events will not be allowed to flourish—for instance, the narrative put forward by the American government following the 9/11 attacks, which divided the world between the forces of good and the forces of evil, making all American opponents of the Bush administration part of the latter group (*ibid*, p. 10). In a similar way, one could assert that the description of the arrival of migrants during the autumn of 2015 in Sweden as a threat to the domestic stability and the implementation of border controls as necessary measure to prevent terrorism serves to delegitimise the accounts of individuals opposing the restrictive laws, making them appear (in the best case) as unreasonably idealistic or (in the worst case) as enemies of the nation.

According to Jerome Bruner, we learn to participate in the world by employing narratives, as they help us understand what is to be expected in our culture, what is deemed to be the normal state of affairs (Rutten *et al* 2013, p. 330). At the same time, he argues, the narratives bring us the opportunity to come to terms with 'the troubles and the perils' that our cultures might produce (*ibid*, p. 330). This argument is similar to Andrews' assertion that, even though we are influenced by the norms of our community from the day we are born, we eventually develop 'the capacity to evaluate' these communities (Andrews 2007, p. 197), even if it worth stressing that the dominant narratives permeating society, which sometimes are referred to as 'master narratives' often might be hard to spot due to them being so internalised in the culture that they tend to be labelled as 'common sense' (Esin *et al* 2014, p. 32).

Consequently, in particular at times of heightened political change, our national identities and narratives become subjects of negotiation by individuals living in the community (Andrews 2007, p. 196), although the counter-narratives (narratives that to some extent run counter to master narratives of the society) that are articulated by individuals and groups tend to implicitly acknowledge the master narratives, 'and even strategically borrows from some of its components, while rejecting other' (Esin *et al* 2014, p. 33) Additionally, times of drastic



political change might just as well prompt the restructuring of individual identities, which in turn can change our conceptions of our past (Andrews 2007 p. 191-192), an argument close to that of Diani *et al* (2006, p. 97) (an elaboration is to be found in section five of this chapter), which suggests that people who decide to take collective action might restructure their conceptions of the lives that they up to that point have led.

Being a part of such a negotiation is a way of casting oneself as an actor in a 'social drama', in Heyer's words; and accordingly, to get engaged in collective action is a way of connecting one's personal biography with history (2014, p. 126). The result of this intertwining of individual and public narratives is that participation in a social movement becomes 'an act of personal meaning and of our identity' (ibid, p. 126-127). Thus, political activists tend to employ dramatic narratives to foster a sense of urgency and to define the meaning of the given moment, in the hope of activating the community in question. This argument resembles the presumption of Czarniawska, who, inspired by MacIntyre's conception of 'narrative quest', argues that all individuals are engaged in a quest for the meaning of their lives, making the act of political struggle the goal in itself, alongside the desired outcome of the enterprise (Czarniawska 2014, p. 13).

The way in which we tend to narrativize political engagement, according to Czarniawska, are dependent on a plot, that is, a temporal structure of events, beginning with an imagined stable situation, which, due to a force of some kind, switches to a state of disequilibrium, after which the state of equilibrium eventually is re-instated (even though the narratives tend to be far more complex than this minimal plot) (ibid 2014, p. 19). For instance, as can be seen in my analysis of my interviewees' political biographies, some of the people who chose to become engaged as activists after the autumn of 2015 in Sweden refer to the decision of the government to implement border controls as a switch to a disequilibrium that they are seeking to amend; however, the way they narrativise their political engagement involve several crucial factors, for instance childhood experiences of injustice, which taken together serve to complicate the minimal plot.

In my forthcoming analysis, I will analyse these plots, and, in the words of Molly Andrews, ‘the relationship between the stories people tell about their lives, and the political frameworks which form the context for those stories’ (Andrews 2007, p. 2). In my attempt to single out the commonalities in my respondents’ political narratives, it is, as already stated, my intension to shed light on their conceptions of the current political situation in Sweden, with regard to asylum seekers, and the events leading up to it; their view on the Swedish nation and what it means for them to be a part of this particular community; which events that have prompted them to engage in activism and largely influenced their relations to politics; and how they make sense of the parts they play in their particular political context.

## **2.2 Politics of Resistance: Studying Social Movements**

Social movements are highly prevalent in contemporary societies, and evidence of the activities of these groups—which range from fascist and nationalistic movements, labour and union movements, pro- and anti-abortion movements, feministic movements, to asylum rights movements, and so forth—are to be found just about everywhere. However, singling out what these movements, promoting as diverse goals as the groups above, have in common, in terms of constituting social movements, might appear a challenge; and just as the ambitions of these groups differ, the definitions of a social movement varies in the literature.

According to Crossely, social movements have by different theorists for instance been characterised as ‘collective enterprises’ which are seeking to establish new life orders and that derives its motivational power from dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs (2002, p. 3); as ‘temporary public spaces’, which provide societies with ideas, identities and ideals (ibid, p. 4); and the process of individuals, backed by dense social networks and action-oriented symbols, confronting the elite (ibid, p. 4-5). Despite these differences, Touraine claims that most theorists are agreeing that social movements ought to be conceived as ‘a special type of social conflict’—as opposed to collective behaviour that is not to be considered conflicts; for instance panics, crazes, currents of opinion, and so on—given that a prerequisite of a conflict is that it is possible to identify opponents of competing actors that are fighting for or negotiating to take control

of certain societal resources, in terms of representations of truth, production and morality (2008, p. 212-213).

It can be argued that the study of social movements has been dominated by three strands of theories during the last decades: collective behaviour theory, resource mobilisation theory, the political process approach and new social movement theories (Ruggiero *et al* 2006, p. 4). The first of these has attracted a fair amount of criticism from researchers adhering to the remaining three—of which resource mobilisation theorists focus on the importance of resources, tools, alliances and organisational abilities deployed by social movements; the political process approach on the effect of political structures on collective action; and the new social movements theories on social movements that are said to be concerned with questions related to post-materialistic values and self-fulfilment—for, as they understand it, describing social movements as ‘irrational, retrograde and destructive forces’ (*ibid*, p. 4-5). However, I agree with Crossley that collective behaviour theory, which is concerned with the dynamics guiding mobilisation, provides us with valuable frameworks for understanding the emergence of collective action, of which I will focus on some of the insights provided by Smelser.

According to Smelser, collective movements should be defined as ‘collective efforts to modify norms and values, which frequently (but not always) develop over longer periods’ (2006, p. 80), and he makes a distinction between norm-oriented movements, which are mobilising in an attempt to promote specific norms (economic, legal, religious, moral, *et cetera*)—that is, they are seeking to change the norm structures of the society in which it arises; and value oriented movements, which are attempting to recast or maintain the values that are permeating the whole of society (for instance, messianic movements, nationalistic movements, revolutionary movements, and so forth) (*ibid*, 81-83). In Crossley’s words<sup>2</sup>, Smelser understands collective behaviour as responses to ‘strains’ within social systems (schools, factories, the whole of society), which are characterised as events that, in the eyes of agents and groups within the system, are departing

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<sup>2</sup> In my presentation of Smelser’s framework, I have chosen to base it on Crossley’s account of its main characteristics as it comes across in a clearer fashion than then do in the outline provided by the latter in his work *Theory of Collective Behaviour* (1963), in which his thoughts on the subject are put forward.

from their subjective and intersubjective expectations (2002, p. 41-42). Accordingly, the grievances need not be prompted by ‘objective’ strains in these systems (which are manifested in different ways depending on the social system; in an organisation, the strain can be caused by a mismatch between achievements and expected rewards, and in the wider society, the strain can be brought about by social change or contact between different societies and groups); insofar as hardships are deemed natural—that is, if they are ‘expected’—they tend to be tolerated; whereas if these hardships depart from the ‘shared definitions of just hardships’, then they are not. This sensation of ‘moral shock’—the ‘effect generated by an experience which deeply held taken-for-granted assumptions of the world—might then prompt individuals to engage in collective action (ibid, p. 42, 45).

However, subjective strain is not enough for collective action to occur; the agents experiencing strain must at the same time be able to ‘diagnose’ the perceived problem at hand and propose a remedy (a suggestion closely linked to the concept of ‘collective action frames’, which will be elaborated on in the third section of this chapter) and the strain needs to be connected to a so-called ‘trigger event’, that is a situation which serves to highlight or accentuate the grievances, providing a backdrop against which the actors can mobilise. In addition to this, it is argued that the strain must prompt the emergence of coordinated networks, whose behaviour to some extent is determined by the responses of ‘social control agencies’ such as the police and media (a rather obvious point one could claim) (ibid, p. 43-44).

Lastly, for the purposes of the forthcoming analysis, it worth pointing out that Smelser argues that the strain, even if it is caused by substantial social changes in the given society, tends to initially manifest in the actors everyday encounters and interactions; that is to say that most actors experience the effects of the strain in a direct way in their own lives before deciding to take action (ibid, p. 45). In the analysis chapter, I will draw on these insights on the significance of strain as a way of understanding the emergence of social movements in my analysis of my interviewee’s accounts of their political engagement, so as to show the extent to which the events that unfolded during the autumn of 2015 can be said to have served as a catalyst for their social movement activities.

### **2.3 Manufacturing Truth: Frame Alignment Processes**

In the early 1980s, the predominant theoretical perspective in social movement studies, resource mobilisation theory, came to attract a great deal of criticism due to the fact that it, according to its critics, put too much emphasis on ‘the importance of selective incentives and rational calculus in its explanation of protest participation’ (della Porta *et al* 2014, p. 196). To understand movement participation, it was argued, it was necessary to take into account the significance of grievances and ideologies as components stimulating political engagement, just as it was of importance to study why certain political topics or demands are highlighted during political protests, whereas certain issues are neglected (*ibid*, p. 196).

As a response to this, theorists such as William Gamson, David A. Snow and Robert B. Benford claimed that it is crucial to investigate how individuals interpret their grievances in order to find out why they decide to partake in collective action (Polletta *et al* 2006, p. 190). In their work, they used Goffman’s conception of framing, arguing that ‘frames are jointly and continuously constructed and reconstructed by movement actors and their audiences’ (*ibid*, p. 190). Goffman defined a frame as a “mental script”<sup>3</sup>, which organises and identifies experience and directs our perception and action toward a certain locus, and that it, at the same time, blocks out particular ways of understanding a particular situation, depending on the frame which our perception of it is filtered through (della Porta *et al* 2014, p. 201).

If we are to relate this to the narrative section, there are some similarities between the outlined conceptions of master narratives and Goffman’s definition of frames. For instance, he asserts that particular frames tend to be in charge of a given situation, and that authorities are seeking to control which frames that ought to be deemed legitimate, thereby controlling the expectations and the actions of the population, given that frames are often, more or less, regarded as the natural order (Gamson 1985, p. 616). Although, this does not mean that they are not vulnerable, as Goffman views it, since events can occur that might ‘break the hegemony of

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<sup>3</sup> Important to note is that these mental scripts are modes of interpretation that are socially/culturally constructed, rendering it reductionistic, as D. Benford points out, to analyse it purely cognitive terms, which have sometimes been the case; a feminist or a nationalistic frame is not something ‘with which a person is born’ (1997, p. 420).

the legitimate frame'. However, if a social movement is to succeed in doing away with the contested frame, the organisation need to offer a frame of its own, a mobilising frame, so as to provide a new context for what is happening (ibid, p. 616).

The ways in which the interpretative frameworks of individuals and social movement organisations (SMO) are linked to each other are described by Snow *et al* as 'frame alignment processes', and in their view, these processes are a necessary condition for movement participation (Ruggiero *et al* 2008, p. 256). The central assumption underlying their work on frame alignment processes is that SMOs are producers of ideas and meanings, through which they are actively trying to shape and influence their various audiences' conceptions and interpretations of reality, as it appears to entrepreneurs of social action that the construction of meaning paves the way for individuals to take action (Benford 1997, p. 410). That is, frames serve as linking mechanisms enabling individuals to give new meaning to the problems that they encounter in their everyday life, elevating their grievances so that they may decide to act upon them through political action, a process often denoted as 'cognitive liberation' by social movement theorists (Gahan *et al* 2013, p. 761).

In constructing frames within social movements that their constituents can rally behind—"collective action frames" as Snow and Benford call them—the movement activists on the one hand seek to come to a shared understanding of a situation or a condition that the group deem contestable, involving the articulation of whom or what it is that ought to be regarded a villain, and in which ways the situation/condition should be salvaged (Snow *et al* 2000, p. 615). The core framing tasks, according to the theorists, consist of three parts, of which the first is "diagnostic framing" (identifying the problem); the second is "prognostic framing" (singling out how the problem needs to be tackled); and the third is "motivational framing" (providing a rationale for taking action, and a vocabulary, serving to highlight the motives of the activists and the severity of the situation at hand) (ibid, p. 615-617).

Thus, in frame alignment processes, the collective action frame of a social movement are linked to the interpretative frameworks of individuals outside the

organisation in question, and the most successful of these frames are the ones that at the same time exhibit ‘cultural resonance’ (that they come off as appealing to the constituents) and ‘instrumental credibility’ (that they appear to hold the capacity to achieve goals) (Coley 2015, p. 59). However, activists that are trying to shape the conceptions of reality in the eyes of their audience will in many cases face staunch opposition among individuals not sharing their agenda. If so, these actors may push for alternative frames, or “counterframes”, challenging the legitimacy of the frame of the activists, prompting a so-called “framing contest” between the competing groups embroiled in the politics of significance (Snow *et al* 2000, p. 625-626).

To link these theoretical assumptions to the thesis’ analysis, I will as one part of my interviews ask my respondents to reflect on their organisations efforts to employ their political narratives strategically—that is how they present their motivations and bestow meaning to their cause—and to which extent they deem it possible to align their frames with regard to Swedish migration regime to the frames of their audiences. Additionally, I will ask them to discuss how they are dealing with the counterframes of their political opponents, in order to legitimise their own interpretations of reality and delegitimise their adversaries’. In the following section, I will discuss one of the frames that my interviewees are seeking to contest, namely the construction of migrants as a ‘security problem’, a process often denoted as ‘securitisation’.

#### **2.4 In Defence of the Extraordinary: The Securitisation of Migration**

The concept of securitisation is mainly associated with the so-called ‘Copenhagen School’, a group of scholars of which Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver are the most prominent (Ibek 2015, p. 174). Of importance to the conceptualisation of securitisation is the observation that all public issues can be located on a spectrum, on which end certain matters are deemed apolitical and of no interest to the security service of the state, meaning that they are only subject to decisions of ‘purely organizational nature’; whereas the issues that are to be found on the other end of the spectrum are highly politicised, being considered as threats to the existence of the society, prompting action from the authorities to curb the

perceived menace (ibid, p. 174-175). Taking this as a point of departure, the theorists argue that an issue can be moved from one end of the spectrum the other—from being nonpoliticised to politicised (when the question is not regarded a matter of security, although it forms a part of public policy and is covered by government decisions) to securitised (Buzan *et al* 1998, p. 23).

Accordingly, if an issue makes the journey from the first end of the spectrum to the latter, it has come to be conceived of as an existential threat to what is referred to as ‘a referent object’. The object that are framed as in need of protection can essentially be anything—for instance, the national identity of the community, the sovereignty of the state, or the environment (Romaniuk *et al* 2015, p. 225; Peoples *et al* 2015, p. 93). In sum, it is an entity ‘that to which [one] can point and say, “It has to survive, therefore it is necessary to...”’ (Buzan *et al* 1998, p. 36). Thus, if an issue is regarded as an existential threat, it generates certain effects: urgency, in that it is prioritised over other policy areas; and extraordinary measures, due to that it justifies decisions from the authorities that do not fall within the limits of normal political action; for instance, curtailing the rights of the country’s citizens or breaking the law (Peoples *et al* 2015, p. 93).

According to Buzan *et al*, the securitisation process is initiated by a ‘speech act’ (an utterance which in itself is an act, given that something is being done when the words have been uttered), that is when the actors who are trying to turn an issue into a security concern (the authorities, media actors, political parties, and so on) first address it as such (1998, p. 25-26). However, this is merely regarded as a ‘securitising move’; if an issue are to be successfully lifted above the normal sphere of politics, the existential threat must be deemed credible by significant portions of society, and the actors carrying out the securitising move must be in possession of the necessary means to convince the public of the legitimacy of the alleged threat (Canveren *et al* 2017, p. 860; Ibryamova 2002, p. 5).

Relating this to migration, migrants can for instance be framed as threats to the societal identity, since increased ethnic heterogeneity might bring about insecurity of identity among the majority population, whereas minority groups living in the society may suffer anxieties regarding their group identities if the state discourse favours the majority group (Innes 2015, p. 31). According to Innes (2015, p. 31),



drawing on the work of Huysmans, the reason why migration has come to be seen as a particular problem with regard to security is that one of the primary functions of the state is to protect its citizens and its territory from dangers (internal as well as external), prompting that the cross-border movement of migrants can trigger questions related to the foreign subjects political loyalty, and whether the different capacities of the state are able to control the country's borders. As a consequence (ibid, p. 32), the mere presence of foreign aliens may be considered a threat against the state, which is why governments have developed technologies of governance—for instance, visas and biometrics—intended to control the migrants, thereby limiting 'the potential of migrants to threaten the state as a category'.

According to Huysmans (2006, p. 68), from the 1980s and onwards, there are three themes that have been prevalent in the accentuating securitisation of migration in the public debate within the EU. Firstly, migrants have been framed as a challenge to the public order and domestic stability; secondly, they have been posed as a problem for the welfare regimes of the member states; and thirdly, multiculturalism has been perceived as a threat to the cultural unity of the nations. Further, Huysmans states that the framing of certain groups as being incompatible with the political unit in question can serve to consolidate the identity of the in-group, and the fear extracted from the perceived threat can function as a political currency legitimising extraordinary measures, as the closing of borders or expulsions of migrants provide segments of the in-group with a sense of trust (ibid, p. 52). Ultimately, according to Huysmans, politics of insecurity related to migration are a struggle over which knowledge and which perspectives that should inform migration policies, and in trying to establish an answer to the questions outlined above—are migrants people that we should regard as worthy of protection, or are posing dangers to our societies?—different actors are trying to establish their perspectives as truths (ibid, p. 52-53).

## **2.5 Team Building: Identity and Collective Action**

In this final theory section, I will offer an overview of the significance of identity in general and collective identities in particular in social action, which will serve as an elaboration on some of the theoretical points that have been made in the

previous sections. To recapitulate some of core assumptions presented in these, it can be argued that narratives structure our understanding of identities and the societies in which we live, making our actions and the events that we experience intelligible. Additionally, closely connected to this notion, all individuals are in possession of certain ‘mental scripts’, or frames, that are guiding our perception of the world, blocking out certain perspectives that run counter to these.

Furthermore, one of the core tasks of a social movement is to construct shared frames in order to formulate the meaning of the group’s activities; which goals the members are targeting and measures they need to undertake reach these; and who and/or what the group is opposing. In addition to the notion that constructions of frames are a crucial part of what constitutes social action, it can also be argued that the production of collective identities, which is related to this, is an significant component of collective social action; that is, the way in which actors in an interplay with other individuals or groups, ‘attribute a specific meaning to their traits, their life occurrences, and the systems of social relations in which they are embedded’ (Diani *et al*, 2006, p. 92).

According to Diani *et al*, the identities of social actors are not be conceived as fixed entities; rather they are constructed when the actors in question are able to define themselves in relation to other actors (for instance, when encountering politically engaged individuals; individuals that appear to be subject to unjust treatment; or individuals that are subjecting the actor in question to unjust treatment) and as the actors are coming to terms with the meaning of these relationships, after which the actors might take action. Further, if the actors decide to do so, then the undertaken action will either foster feelings of belonging to the group with which the actors have acted, or the feelings will be weakened (*ibid*, p. 92).

As Benford *et al* points out, two important sentiments from which the decision to take action or maintaining ones engagement might emerge are ‘solidarity’ and ‘commitment’ (Snow *et al*, 2003). Solidarity, to begin with, is conceptualised as feelings of ‘devotion and enthusiasm for a group’, and requires that an actor is able to relate and identify with a collective entity, be it a group that the actor belongs to in terms of ethnicity, religion, class and so forth (internal solidarity), or

a group which the actor does not belong to in such terms (external solidarity) (ibid.). In turn, commitment in this context can be described as an individual's decision to partake in collective action since the individual regards the engagement as an expression of his or her basic nature, implying that 'an individual's identification with a [collective leads] to instrumental, affective, and moral attachments that lead to investment in movement lines of activity'.

According to Melucci, feelings of investment in a group or a cause are essential components of collective identities, which he defines as processes in which 'action systems' are produced, meaning that a group of individuals in concert construct, negotiate and define their orientations of action and 'the field of opportunities and constraints in which the action takes place' (Johnston *et al*, 1995, p. 44). With regard to the matter of emotional investment, he states that it this is required so as to make individuals feel like a part of a common unit, a process which also includes singling out boundary markers, in an effort to distinguish the group from the 'dominant group' that they are challenging, that is the out-group (ibid. p. 45; Snow *et al*, 2003). In other words, by marking the attributed differences between social movement participants and 'the web of others in a contested social world', the group and its members are able to define themselves by virtue of who they believe they are just as what they are not (ibid.).

Regarding the negotiation of collective identities, Benford *et al* argues that these identities are cultural representations and sets of shared meanings that are produced and adjusted in the interaction of actors 'embedded in a particular sociocultural contexts', and should not be not seen as an individual attributes in a strict sense (ibid.). Against this background it is important to note that the way in which the members of any given group relate to their collective identity will presumably differ from one individual to another, as being able to identify with a group does not require that one share 'a coherent and systematic vision of the world', just as well as the reasons why actors decide in collective action, and the feelings underlying these decisions, are often highly diversified, a simple fact may complicate the negotiation of the collective identity within the group (Diani *et al*, 2006, 98; Johnston *et al*, 1995, p. 45).

Connecting the issue of participation in social movements to the theory section on narratives, Diani *et al* asserts that it is often reflected in the life stories and biographies of individuals taking political action that they ‘attribute coherence and meaning to the various phases of their own public and private history’, which serves an important part of the construction of their identities (2006, p. 96). For many people, engaging in collective action for the first time results in a personal transformation, sometimes resulting in an re-elaboration of the individual’s past, meaning that the biography of the person are adjusted so as to better harmonise with the individual’s conception of his or her new way of life (ibid. p. 97).

To engage in collective action might also entail that one comes to regard oneself as a constituent of the grand narrative of the collective, which ‘connects and assigns some common meaning to experiences of collective action dislocated over space and time’ (ibid. p. 95). Diani *et al* claims that one essential aspect of whether a social movement in the long run survives or not is the degree to which the organisation is able to maintain this feeling of connection over space and time among its members (by reproducing ‘certain representations and models of solidarity over time’), given the circumstance that social movements seldom can keep a period of intense action and mobilisation for a longer period of time (ibid, p. 95-96).

In the analysis, I will discuss the way in which my interviewees relate themselves to the movement that they are a part of—how their political engagement have influenced the way they perceive themselves and their past; how talk about their solidarity with the movement, and their commitment to their political cause; and the explanations they offer as to why they decided to get involved in collective action to begin with.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Reading the Story: Notes on Narrative Research

As suggested in the previous chapter, many theorists have devoted a great deal of energy in trying to define the exact relationship between narratives and identity, as well as just what constitutes a ‘narrative’, arriving sometimes at vastly different conclusions. Not surprisingly, the ways in which people have chosen to carry out narrative research—which have come to be increasingly popular in the last decades—have differed greatly (Andrews *et al* 2008, p. 2-6).

In current narrative research, there are for example analysts who pay attention to the textual aspects of the narrative, for instance the temporal ordering of its plot, whereas others are focusing on the themes that run through the narratives, or perhaps its interactional dimensions (*ibid*, p. 64). According to Lieblich *et al*, there are two independent main dimensions in narrative research (which are possible to combine), allowing different ways of ‘reading, interpreting, and analyzing life stories and other narrative materials’, which they denote ‘holistic versus categorical approaches’ (meaning that one can chose to analyse the entire life story of an individual or perhaps only certain themes or episodes that emerge in the story), and ‘content versus form’ (that is either the meaning of specific utterances or the textual character of the narrative) (1998, p. 11).

Before outlining the specific narrative research model which I am using in this thesis, I will mention a few singularities that most narrative analyses have in common, as described by Lieblich *et al*. Firstly, most narrative studies are based on interviews with a relatively small group of individuals, which nevertheless tend to result in a large quantity of data, given the length of the interviews; often, one single interview can go on for several hours, sometimes resulting in hundreds of pages of transcription (*ibid*, p. 9). Further, another characteristic of narrative research is the fact that the analyst usually approaches his or her material without a priory hypothesis (although the investigator in most cases has a research question and a theoretical framework, informing which procedures he or she adopts so as to obtain the narrative).

Instead, the insights tend to be generated from the narrative material, after the interviews have been carried out, and since the narrative research is

interpretative—and Lieblich *et al* assert that ‘an interpretation is always personal, partial, and dynamic’—the conclusions derived from the material can often be changed or adjusted after further readings (*ibid*, p. 9). Finally, the theorists argue that most narrative research does not need (for practical reasons) to produce replicable result in order to be evaluated, which is why it is of importance, naturally, that the analyst are able to justify his or her interpretation of the narrative material (*ibid*, p. 10).

### **3.2 Goodbye Labov: Studying Narratives of Experience**

According to Ann Phoenix, recent years have witnessed a shift from narrative research analysing stories as text to the study of narrative-in-context (Phoenix 2011, p. 64). The first approach is often referred to as the ‘Labovian model’, and regards narrative as a text serving to recapitulating past occurrences in the form as a story ‘by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred’ (Labov 1997, p. 359 quoted in Andrews *et al*, p. 22). In that sense, the mentioned model, which does not give primacy to contextualisations of the analysed stories, is event-centred due to the fact that its definition of narrative is that it is a representation of events (Patterson 2011, p. 22). Another trait of the Labovian model, for which it has been criticised by more social constructivist minded theorists, is that the representations of reality offered by the narratives should be seen as ‘what actually happened’.

According to the critics, the models attempt to draw a line between referential and evaluative clauses which is hard to maintain, and given the subjective nature of narratives, it is nonsensical to treat them as objective representations of reality (*ibid*, p. 30). Additionally, the critics argue that the event-centred perspective fails to take into account the circumstance of the narratives the researchers use as their material, obtained through interviews, and how these are affected by the presence of the interviewer, who co-construct the narrative in his or her interaction with the interviewee, in the same way as narratives are performed differently depending on the narrator’s context (Squire 2011, p. 41). In response to this, the increasingly popular experience-centred approach focuses on the themes that are discernible in the interviewees’ personal narratives, which are then interpreted in a

hermeneutical fashion, in order to analyse how the themes progress, their transformation and resolutions, in the interviews (ibid, p. 50).

One of the benefits with the experience-centred perspective, which is primarily concerned with the connection between narratives and identity, is that it allows the researcher to focus on the interviewees' accounts of so-called event stories (for instance on how they perceived the arrival of migrants during the fall of 2015 and the events that followed upon that) as well as the stories that they tell in passing and how they accomplish certain tasks (for instance, constructing personality traits for themselves) (Phoenix 2011, p. 64-65). In other words, through the usage of this approach it is possible to analyse the biography of the interviewee at the same time as one can analyse the individual's context; that is to investigate the way in which he or she relates to the master narratives of the given society (ibid, p. 65), which given that the aim of this thesis, seems appropriate, as political narratives refers 'to the dynamic movement between individuals and wider social contexts', and as it refers to the relationship between 'biography and history' (Esin *et al* 2014, p. 69).

In going about this form of narrative analysis, one of the central elements of the research is to single out themes that organise the way in which the story is told, and as Phoenix points out, 'these themes cluster around recurrent content in stories'. For instance, the interviewees may in response to a wide array of questions respond in similar ways in order to 'construct themselves as having particular philosophies and habitual ways of dealing with the world that constitute a projection of identity or that signal their preoccupations' (2011, p. 67). These occurring themes, which are often termed 'key narratives', are often developed by individuals as a consequence of events that stand out in their lives, functioning as symbolic and personal marks, which they use to explain or justify their actions and decisions; and by focusing on these key narratives in the interviewees' accounts of a given event, the researcher is able to analyse the interplay of the event and the emotions and worldviews of the interviewees (ibid, p. 67).

In analysing narratives with the experience-centred approach, it is also of importance to take into consideration the cultural character of the narratives, how they relate to the 'initial culture stock' of the society, which includes the canonical

stances that permeates the culture, the available story lines and plots that limit the ways in which we can tell our stories (ibid, 66). There is no consensus with regard to how many plots there are to be found in these canonical narratives (according to some researchers, the stories of ‘progress’ or ‘salvation’ are frequently used by individuals when relating their life stories), and it is common among narrative researchers to draw on literary works on genres to make sense of social narrative repertoires (Esin *et al* 2014, p. 87); for instance, the categories of ‘tragedy, irony, comedy and romance’ can be used as a tool-kit, as well as cultural archetypes such as heroes, villains, protagonists, antagonists, et cetera.

### **3.3 Whose Narratives? The Analysed Data**

In this study, I will use the experience-centred method in order to analyse the life stories of five individuals working to promote the rights of asylum seekers, which I have sampled theoretically, the most common way of finding respondents when conducting research of this kind (Squire 2011, p. 47). This has also allowed highlighting the commonalities and differences in the narratives of a group of people sharing certain characteristics.

That is to say, my interviewees have all chosen to promote the rights of migrants outside the political infrastructure provided by the Swedish political parties; they share the characteristic that they either hold a leadership position in their grassroots organisation; and they are living in Skåne, a circumstance which I deem to be of interest due to the fact that the region in general and the city of Malmö in particular during the last years has represented a focal point in terms of migration, migration policies and debate on migration, in which the work of organisations promoting asylum rights have been evident during these years. In the process of finding the interviewees for this essay, of which I was acquainted with no more than one before the interviews took place, I (with the exception of the aforementioned respondent) got in touch with the organisations Refugees Welcome Sweden, *Asylrättsstudenterna Malmö/Lund*, *Ensamkommandes förbund* and *Migrationskollegiet i Malmö*.

A life story interview can take into account the full biography of the respondent as well as certain parts of the interviewee’s life (Squire 2011, p. 46). In the light



of the focus of this thesis, I have asked my respondents to tell the story of their political life; that is, the narratives take as their point of departure the respondents' memories of how their political interest were awakened, and their way into the realms of political engagement and activism, encompassing the most important events that have occurred during their political lives, including their conceptions of how their engagement will act out in the future.

In doing this, I have conducted semi-structured interviews, during which I have engaged in active narrative interviewing, an approach Squire describes as an 'interaction that stretches to something like conversation, or co-research' (2011, p. 49). This is in accordance with the prevalent assumption in the experience-centred approach that the interviewer always influences the way in which the interviewee narrates his or her story. The interviews have been conducted in public settings in Malmö and Lund in close proximity to my respondents' workplaces or university faculties and have lasted between two to three hours, resulting in 114 pages of interview transcripts. All the interviews have been conducted in Swedish, and all the excerpts from my data presented in the following chapter have been translated into English by myself; all of them have been checked by a Swedish translator specialised in translation from Swedish to English and vice versa, so as to prevent any potential linguistic confusion.

After the interviews, I have offered to anonymise the identities of my interviewees, but they have all agreed to appear in the thesis with their actual names and identities. My respondents are: Jenny Diệu Thúy Nguyễn, twenty-two years old, the founder of *Asylrättsstudenterna Lund/Malmö*, an organisation consisting primarily of law students studying at Lund University, established in the spring of 2016, providing newly arrived asylum seekers with legal assistance and seeking popular support to change the temporary Swedish migration laws that were implemented after the autumn of 2015; Amelie Kraft, twenty-one year old, the current head of *Asylrättsstudenterna Lund/Malmö*; Mira Björkegren, twenty-six years old, a project manager at *Ensamkommandes förbund* (an organisation promoting the rights of unaccompanied minors in Sweden), and a member of RFSL<sup>4</sup>, in which she is engaged with the project Newcomers, a network

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<sup>4</sup> *Riksförbundet för homosexuellas, bisexuellas, transpersoners och queeras rättigheter* (The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Rights).

supporting unaccompanied HBTQ minors; Tobias Lohse, forty-seven years old, the founder and current chairman of Refugees Welcome Sverige, an organisation that promotes the right of asylum seekers living in Sweden and that works to alter the country's temporary migration laws; and Sait Umdi, thirty-seven years old, a lawyer specialised in human rights and immigration law working at the company *Cityadvokaterna* in Malmö, and one of the founders and the current head of *Migrationskollegiet* i Malmö, an organisation serving as a platform for lawyers specialised in immigration law and that seeks to change the current migration law regime in Sweden.

It is worth pointing out that Sait Umdi unlike my other interviewees since a couple years back is no longer active as an activist—rather, he is striving to achieve similar goals in his professional life—but given his background as an activist and the fact that he has dedicated his professional life to provide legal assistance to asylum rights seekers and migrants and his work to change the temporary asylum rights laws, I have deemed that his accounts of his political life story serves as a valuable complement to the accounts of the remaining respondents.

### **3.4 How to Make Sense of It: The Process of Coding**

According to Squire, most experience-centred narrative studies resemble thematic content analyses, in that the researcher tend to start off the analysis by describing the interviews thematically, whereupon one moves ‘back and forth between the interviews themselves and generalizations about them in a classic “hermeneutic circle”, using a combination of top-down and bottom-up interpretative procedures’ (Squire, p. 50). For this purpose, I have employed a combination of an inductive and deductive coding approach, which is to say that I have started off with a broad research question, and a general idea of what themes that I might encounter in the narratives (Seale *et al* 2011, p. 371). Following this, I have used an inductive approach so as to find less evident themes in my research data (*ibid*, p. 368).

According to Seale *et al*, the coding process and analysis of themes consists of three parts: open coding, category development and theme formation (*ibid*, p.

386). Open coding refers to a process in which the codes are built up with progressively larger chunk of data, and 'open codes' are a designation for the labels the researcher uses in order to illustrate the 'literal essence' of the data (ibid, p. 370-371). Further, the category development process involves the bringing together of different open codes into analytic categories, which are then operationalised, in order to make somewhat abstract concepts concrete and intelligible. Worth noting is that this work demands that the researcher is constantly comparing the categories with the data that emerge from the interviews, so that the categories and their operationalisations might be changed if need be (ibid, p. 376). Finally, these categories are evolved into broader and more abstract themes, which often consist of two or three more literal categories, which are presented in the thesis as trajectories, typologies and lists (ibid, p. 377, 380). I have chosen to present my data in lists, meaning that I will describe my themes in turn, which will be supported by extracts from the interviews, which in turn will be analysed against the background of my theoretical framework.

## 4. The Narratives Assessed

### 4.1 The Bildungsroman

In the first part of the analysis, I will, drawing on the theories outlined in the first section of the theory chapter, present the way in which my interviewees structure their narratives in terms of form and content. In doing that, I will, in accordance with the Russian formalists' distinction between the three different aspects that characterise a story, distinguish between *fabula*, *sjuzet*, and *forma*—which roughly means theme, discourse, and genre (Bruner 2004, p. 696). The first two of these, *fabula* and *sjuzet*, refer in this context to the timeless and sequenced aspects of a story, and in Bruner's words: 'The timeless fabula is the mythic, the transcendent plight that a story is about: human jealousy, authority and obedience, thwarted ambition, and those other plight that lay claim to human universality'; whereas the *sjuzet* refers to the language that makes the story possible (ibid, p. 696). The third aspect of the narrative, *forma*, refers to its form, the set of grammars that generates 'different kinds of story plots' (ibid, p. 697).

As stated in the methods chapter, a narrative researcher can use different literary forms to understand the stories constructed by his or her interviewees, and I would initially suggest, taking the question of *forma* as the point of departure, that the political life stories told by my respondents all conform to the literary form known as the *Bildungsroman*. This particular literary genre, which rose to prominence during the Victorian era and which has become the most influential of novelistic forms according to some researchers, is dealing with the issue of the educational and/or spiritual progress of a young man or woman (Eagleton 2014, 161), who, during the hero's journey to (an often successful) maturity finds some sort of moral or social truth after a change of fortune, which ultimately awards the hero with an insight regarding his or her right place in society, which the individual in question by that stage regards in a new light (Ehenn 2017, p. 154).

One striking aspect of the stories that my interviewees tell about their political engagement is how they all describe their trajectories leading up to the point at which they decide to take action to promote the rights of migrants seeking asylum in Sweden as an educational journey, during which they slowly but steadily are developing an understanding of the political world, acquiring the analytical tools

to analyse the sense of unease that starts to grow within them in their childhood after having confronted some sort of ‘injustice’ in their immediate surroundings, whereupon an event—the government’s handling of the arrival of migrants during the autumn of 2015—makes them question their previous assumptions of their society, prompting them, despite their feeling of hopelessness, to take action, thereby finding meaning and realising their true potential.

#### **4.1.1 Key Narratives: ‘Something isn’t right’ and ‘The Outsider’**

Drawing on the assumption that people develop key narratives which constitute projection of their identities and signal their preoccupations (Phoenix 2009, p. 67), I would argue that my interviewees reoccurring references to their ‘awareness of injustice’ serve as the most conspicuous of these themes. However, the narratives that the five of them are relating concerning how they as kids came to understand that an imbalance of some sort appeared to permeate their world differ greatly in terms of which events that brought this sensation on, although these narratives are achieving the same thing in terms of explaining their future actions. For instance, Mira explains the way in which she came to face the injustice that runs through the fabric of society with the following event-story:

In my school class all the pupils were white and my dad is black, and we had like a secret number when I was little because we were threatened by Nazis... that is my mum, who’s white, so I’m thinking that one understood at a pretty early stage that some people in society aren’t welcome and that some people are threatened just because they happen to look a certain way.

As a way of contrast, Jenny’s account of how she first got a sense of the world’s injustice is concerned with the shame she experienced when realising her privileges in relation to her less well-off relatives in Vietnam (Jenny’s parents migrated to Sweden in the beginning of the 1990s, a few years before she was born).

Already when I was ten, it was like I... most people my age had these really childish dreams about becoming celebrities, they were

going to become football players, they were going to become this and that, and no one had told us that this would never happen in all likelihood, so I went about dreaming that I'd become this and that and it was like these dreams in a way were encouraged, whereas my peers in Vietnam had a completely different outlook on life and dreamt about different things—they could perhaps dream about buying a house. But like, I couldn't get it, it felt as though our playing fields were completely different, that there were no limits to mine while they were shackled to just a tiny spot, and they were so incredibly aware of it.

Additionally, the remaining three accounts of how the interviewees first came to be aware of the said phenomena touch upon how Sait was forced to speak Turkish during his school years in the Kurdish part of Turkey and how he and his family had to keep their interest in Kurdish culture hidden and how they were not allowed to participate in Kurdish celebrations by the state authorities; how Amelie felt objectified when attending a male dominated school; and how Tobias learnt about the hardships that migrants from Chile and Uruguay had faced in their home countries due to their political engagement before they fled to Sweden, as he accompanied his politically engaged mother to meetings with *Latinamerikagrupperna* (Solidarity Sweden-Latin America)<sup>5</sup>.

Later, throughout the interviews, the respondents frequently return to how manifestations of injustices upset them, providing them with a rationale for taking action, as well as the key narratives are indicating that they deem it an imperative to stand up against injustices and that they are the sort of people who would do just that. For instance, Mia states that she cannot stand to see the way in which the Swedish state is prepared to treat non-white people 'in order to cover up a problem' and that it is 'totally necessary to oppose' such injustices; Sait asserts that he regards it his duty to show his discontent with 'a system that does not respect individuals, that doesn't respect their human rights, that doesn't respect their equal value'; and Jenny claims that the reason why people in general do not

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<sup>5</sup> A Swedish organisation that works together with popular movements in Latin America and that describes its aim as established fair and sustainable societal conditions in the said group of countries.

take the issue of injustices serious enough is that ‘they aren’t unbearable for a sufficient amount of people’ and that her aversion towards it has shaped the way she understands the world.

As we can see, the key narratives of ‘being aware of injustice’ has, as Phoenix puts it, been developed ‘as a result of important events and processes in their histories’ (2009, p. 67), which is also true in the case of a second key narrative that the respondents share, namely their stories of themselves as ‘outsiders’—or rather, as having lived through a period during which they have experienced themselves as such. For instance, Tobias singles out two instances of that kind which he asserts have had a profound impact on him; firstly, him being bullied in school after having moved to Sweden from Denmark; and secondly, the years he spent in Chile after Pinochet’s defeat in the country’s parliamentary election in 1988.

You know, I felt very exposed... yes, it was hard. I met up with friends down there who I’m friends with now but who hated me to begin with and everything I represented and they have subsequently told why, and it was just that—because I symbolised everything they opposed. So I think that was an incredibly important lesson for me, to live in a society where I felt uncomfortable due to the social aspects and the class divisions and so forth, at the same time as I was exposed to racism... or sorry, offensive treatment, it is not racism, because I was subjected to offensive treatment because I was an European, a white European.

In turn, Amelie refers to her feminist awakening in high school as a period during which she felt at odds with her peers, making her a strange character in her social context.

When there’s no one in your social circles who encourages you, then you feel really lonely. And you feel a bit ashamed. And it really feels like the last year has been sort of a comeback for me and a couple of old friends have even got in touch with me again, maybe because their parents have got divorced and they have discovered certain structures in their parent’s marriage, that their

mothers had been a bit suppressed and had to take care of the domestic work, which... like ‘why do you wanna talk to me now when we haven’t heard from each other in years’.

The five interviewees all cite these periods as significant seeing as they have bestowed them with certain sensitivity, making it easier for them to empathise with and relate to marginalised individuals. With regard to the people in Malmö who became involved during the autumn of 2015 so as to provide the newly arrived migrants with support, Jenny recounts that plenty of the individuals who devoted the largest amount of time doing that had either migrated to Sweden themselves, or had—as in Jenny’s case—learnt about the challenges and obstacles facing newly arrived through the stories told by their parents who had migrated to Sweden; and Mira states that having been a lonely as a child, as she points out she was, made her inclined to promote the rights of newly arrived children.

I talked to my boss about it; he says that: ‘you’ve been such a lonely child, so it’s not a coincidence that you’re working for *Ensamkommandes förbund*’, and yes, maybe? It’s not that I want to compare it, but I know how it feels to lack a social context and to be newcomer, to feel like a newcomer all the time.

In addition to this, Sait says that his experiences of living between different cultural spheres—as a young born living in Turkey, he was torn between the Kurdish and the Turkish culture; and after having migrated to Sweden, he has been standing with one foot in the Kurdish community and the other in the Swedish mainstream equivalent—has made it easier for him to understand the experiences of newly arrived migrants than for people in general.

And of course, this contributes to my ability to understand the people I work with, people who turn to us, people who are fleeing. Because I’m carrying these experiences with me it makes easier to... maybe not see myself in their situation, but to have some understanding of the things they tell me.

However, as noted above, these experiences of being in an outsider position are confined to the past according to narratives of the interviewees. Following the



structure of the *Bildungsroman*, as they grow older they find themselves in new social contexts in which they are accepted for who they are and for what they believe in, and even though they might be regarded as ‘different’ in the eyes of some people due to their backgrounds, or as inferior due to their sex, they are now, due to their educational or work-related achievements or their social networks (and the political insights acquired along the way), able to turn their previous disadvantages into instruments helping them to understand the consequences of injustices and the people that are suffering from them.

#### **4.1.2 Strain and Moral Shocks**

If we return to Smelser’s theory of collective behaviour (as outlined in the second section of the theory chapter), which regards the emergence of social movements as a response to strains within different social systems (Crossley 2002, p. 41-42), one could assert that the key narrative ‘awareness of injustices’ functions as a subjective strain for the interviewees in the social system: ‘the wider society’ (as injustices, as they see it, are not confined to a limited social sphere). However, according to Smelser’s theory, social movement engagement tends to be prompted by a trigger event resulting in changes that run counter to the expectations of the activists, since societal hardships tend to be accepted by the people experiencing them as long as they are deemed ‘just’ or ‘natural’ (ibid, p. 42).

With regard to the interviewees’ conception of societal injustices, it would of course be wrong to suggest that they deem their perceived state of affairs as just, as they throughout the interviews express their discontent with injustices in general (which for instance prompts Mira to get active in the Swedish Red Cross Youth, Tobias to take part in antifascist demonstrations, and Sait to get in engaged in pro-Kurdish groups in Sweden, before getting engaged in the asylum rights movement), but in the case of the Swedish asylum rights regime, their narratives suggest that they, before the autumn of 2015, deemed the government’s treatment of newly arrived migrants as, if not perfect, at least acceptable. The following excerpt from Amelie’s account is illustrative:

The issue wasn’t as controversial or debated at that time. It is today but... what can you say. I felt as though people paid attention to the

issue and that people had a reasonable attitude towards it, I thought that people applied a humanitarian perspective, and then you don't reflect upon it.

However, the situation that arose during the autumn of 2015 served as a trigger, imposing the interviewees with a sense of 'moral shock' (Crossely 2002, p. 45), as both the arrival of the migrants in the autumn and the government's reaction to the event departed from their subjective expectations, which provided them with an impetus to take action. As Jenny accounts, the arrival of the migrants had a profound effect on her and her friends as their physical presence in Malmö made the hardships that they faced tangible in a way that it had not been before.

The common EU policies have managed to push the borders so far out that it's rare that one needs to see people fleeing in this way, except when they're displayed on some horrid picture of them travelling across the Mediterranean Sea, but it's really easy to dismiss these pictures as something you're just coming across. But this fall it got really... all my friends, no matter if they showed at the station or not [as volunteers], just to take the train somewhere meant that you'd end up at the Central Station where you could see all these people sitting around waiting for something, you encountered people sitting and waiting with their bags, and that... then it's impossible to ignore.

According to Smelser, the strain caused by social changes and that prompts actors to get engaged in social movements tends to manifest in their everyday life before they make this decision (Crossely 2002, p. 45), an aspect which is reflected in the quote above—that is, before Jenny noticed the hardships of the migrants in her immediate surrounds, the issue did not, at least not to the same extent, affect her emotionally as it would later. Mira's depiction of her encounter with migrants that was given sleeping berths in a convention centre (*Malmömässa*) by the municipality a few weeks before the implementation of the border controls indicates the same thing.

It was the most bizarre thing I've experienced in my life. It was kept open for like three weeks and they put the whole of fucking

Malmö and placed everybody that crossed the border there. [...] That was the point was I realised how we treat people in Sweden. Because then there was just this enormous room where as many as one-thousand people resided at the same time, they weren't offered a sleeping pad or anything, all they got was a pillow and a blanket. [...] You know, I know that we're locking people up in detention centres, but this was really like—this was a warehouse, you know? There were no windows, you couldn't leave the area if you didn't get permission, there were no clocks, there were no power outlets, there were these incandescent lamps that were kindled day and night, people suffered from depressions due to sleep deprivation... it was horrible.

Furthermore, the five interviewees describe the Swedish government's announcement that the borders were to be closed and that the migration laws were to be restricted as a surprise, as something they never would have anticipated, which initially left them close to dumbfounded. In Amelie's recapitulation of the event, she broke down crying when her father told her the news (she was living in Paris by that time); Mira thought of it as 'surrealistic'; and Jenny was overwhelmed by 'a sensation of hopelessness'. In Sait's words, the decision was 'dispiriting', indicating that the Swedish society was beginning to change.

The atmosphere has become harsher, the atmosphere has become colder. In some way, it's like this has penetrated the whole of society, even the authorities. It's hard to put it into words, but my feeling is, unfortunately, that even the authorities have adapted to the cold winds that are blowing.

Tobias, who had been one of leaders organising the support for the newly arrived migrants at central station in Malmö, recounts that the government's decision, though saddening, was the main reason why the founders of Refugees Welcome Sweden (him being one of them), which up until that point had been an informal network created in order to help the migrants with their immediate needs, decided to transform it into a proper activist organisation.

Who the hell had anticipated this development? No... the borders were closed... it was the first of December of January... no, I felt as so many other whom where fucking pissed off about this development, how... how politicians fought for Refugees Welcome and then... that the politicians stood there at the main square in Malmö, that they stood at *Sergels torg* in Stockholm and were so fucking “welcoming”. [...] So yes... when they closed the border we felt as though we were forced to step up our game and that we had organise ourselves in a broad sense to raise public opinion.

As the other interviewees describe it, they were all struck by the same realisation by this stage; they all knew that they ‘had to do something’. Consequently, Jenny—together with a couple other law students at Lund University—did the same thing as the Refugees Welcome Sweden organisers (that is, they changed *Asylrättsstudenterna*, which during the autumn of 2015 had functioned as an informal group consisting of law students providing newly arrived migrants with legal advice, into a formal organisation); Amelie joined *Asylrättsstudenterna* as soon as she moved back to Sweden in the spring of 2016 and started studying at Lund University; Mira decided to drop out of the Red Cross Youth to get engaged in the asylum rights movement (‘I realised that the Red Cross was too soft for my taste’); and Sait found that he needed to use his position as a lawyer specialised in migration law to spread awareness concerning the harm that he finds that the restrictive migration laws are causing. In sum, it is possible to relate these accounts to Smelser’s claim that a given strain must prompt the emergence of coordinated networks if a social movement is to occur (Crossely 2002, p. 43-44), a notion which in this particular case appears to be validated by the interviewees’ narratives.

#### **4.1.3 Challenging the National Myths**

As Amelie recalls it, when she was told about the Swedish government’s decision to close the borders, her first thought was that ‘now we’ve become like the rest of Europe’. In other words, Sweden, a country which she regarded as an essentially humanitarian country, providing migrants with shelter from the storm,

had become like any other EU country, a development that she, as she states, could not understand at the time ('Why is this happening?'). Three years later, looking back at the autumn of 2015, she says that her image of Sweden is somewhat bleaker than it used to be.

I'm getting pretty frustrated thinking about the Swedish belief in... that one has this extreme trust in politicians, because we consider ourselves to this Humanitarian Country, and therefore it's possible for certain opinions to get legitimised all of a sudden, just because a politician says so. So if Stefan Löfven says: "God, we can't handle this"—then everybody believes it.

According to Amelie's narrative, before the government declared that the country's migration laws were to be restricted, it was thus a taken for granted assumption on her behalf that Sweden, unlike other countries, was an inherently humanitarian country, echoing the conception expressed by Olofsson *et al*'s respondents that Sweden is a 'moral superpower' (2017, p. 253). However, as the events unfolded during the autumn of 2015, she began to call into question this image—or this 'master narrative', as Esin *et al* would label it (2014, p. 32)—leading her to the conclusion that she in some sense, just like Swedes in general, has been misled. This can be considered an example of how an individual, as Andrews claims (2007, p. 197), influenced by the master narratives of her community, develops 'the capacity to evaluate' these master narratives; and in a similar fashion, Tobias recounts that he has grown up believing that Sweden was a solidaristic country, but that he, in the light of the aftermath of the autumn of 2015, has come reevaluate some of his previous assumptions.

I've been brought up with this image, and I've been living with this image of... of how my South American friends were welcomed after the emergence of military dictatorships, I have friends who came here in the 90s... we have been welcoming. We have been a country that has realised that we need to help people; that we need to show solidarity. [...] I'm terribly disappointed about how... how things don't work as they should and how things are so easily manipulated by other political forces that cause everything to

malfunction; especially, I'm thinking of the Social Democratic Party, how it is a large party that in many ways has brought Sweden to where it is, in terms of welfare policies, how a party of that kind can change and abandon its core political pillars. [...] I've come to be really critical of the idea of *Folkhemmet* [the Swedish People's Home], because I find that it's idea that's inherently racist. So, one could think that basically, if one considers that the Social Democratic Party are carriers of the idea of *Folkhemmet*, then there's been something racist in their way of thinking historically, albeit in a dormant way.

What Tobias and Amelie outline in the quotes above are, in the words of Heyer, a sort of 'biography' of the Swedish community, of the 'community as an actor in a history' (2014, p. 105), which they have come to question, as they have 'realised' that the perceived humanitarian nation in fact is not so humanitarian after all; and when confronted by this perceived truth, which undermines the validity of the notion of the specific brand of 'moral nationalism' as Kleres (2018) refers to (which puts a dual emphasis on the sense of pride associated with the welfare state and the country's international solidarity), they describe themselves as being 'disillusioned'; and this can in turn be related to the *Bildungsroman* trajectory: due to a sudden setback (the realisation that their home country is not what they thought it was to begin with) they acquire an understanding of the 'true nature' of their community. According to Jenny's account, the autumn of 2015 prompted a lot of people to come to the same conclusion.

Before this sudden departure, I think that the general population would have described the Swedish migration policies as very liberal, very welcoming, 'the top of the game' and all that. And I think I thought of it the same way, because I hadn't really paid close attention to it; I read a little bit about it and thought: "this sounds good". [...] But following 2015, I think that the general image of Swedish migration policies has come to be substantially less naive.

Expressing the same sentiment, Mira explains that she had assumed that Sweden was a welcoming country devoted to welfare, a country in which the equal rights of all individuals were close to sacrosanct, but that she, as an adult, realises that she had been mistaken; that she has been ‘naive’. Although, Sait does not express that his image of the Swedish history has changed. Rather, in his perspective, the story of Sweden as a relatively welcoming and humanitarian country is true, but during the course of the last years, the Swedish society has turned into a colder community, and for the first time since his family migrated to the country in the beginning of the 1990s, he is considering emigrating due to the racism he says that he nowadays encounters in practically all spheres of society.

#### **4.1.4 Framing Contests: Constructing the History of the ‘Refugee Crisis’**

As Andrews points out, in times of ‘heightened political change’, the narratives that permeates our communities become subject to negotiation by the individuals living in it (2007, p. 196), some of which challenge the interpretations of significant events which are crafted by dominant groups in order to shape the public’s understanding of the events in question (Squire *et al* 2014, p. 33-34). It is possible to connect this assumption (that social movements might promote counter narratives so as to change the community’s view of its dominant narratives) to the conception of frames; that social movements seek to shape and influence individuals conceptions of reality, bestowing new meaning to the problems individuals face in their day-to-day life, thereby galvanising political action (Benford 1997, p. 410; Gahan *et al* 2013, p. 761). According to Jenny, one of most significant aspects of the work that her organisation carries out is to challenge the way in which the public understands the events that led up to the government’s decision to restrict the country’s migration laws.

I think that most people nowadays accept the notion that the situation was unsustainable, that we needed to act in some way, that a great deal of institutions in Swedish society were under too much pressure. So I think that this image is set in stone with regard to the public opinion, people do not even bother to discuss other aspects of it. However, whether the ‘breathing space’ measures

really were necessary is something that I don't think is really set in stone yet, because I don't think that people fully realised how restrictive the temporary law was before the effects of it started to show. [...] But what I regard as a threat, the development that makes me believe that the common perception of history will be that this was reasonable, is that the EU as a whole will lower the bar to this level that we have adopted, which will make it appear as though we are just following the norms of the EU.

Tobias expresses a similar notion; he states that it is imperative that the Swedish public reevaluates the image of the migrant arrivals of 2015, and he calls into question the widespread assumption that the authorities were caught off guard by the situation.

We [Refugees Welcome Sweden] had been ready for the situation for weeks. It was almost like we were standing around there, thinking: "When are you coming?" I mean... honestly, I can say this with no shame; we were there at the central station in Malmö when the first train with refugees arrived from Copenhagen, and we were the only ones. It took the Swedish Migration Agency days, if not a week, to show up at the station. [...] We often say, as a response to the politicians' assertion that we couldn't welcome any more, that there was just one night when it was hard for us to find people who could help them arrive at the right place or find a bed—just one night, during the course of this so-called "refugee crisis".

Reading the accounts of the interviewees, it is clear that one aspect that they have in common, is that their attempt to construct a new frame governing the public's image of the autumn of 2015 is serving to direct attention away from the perceived pressure on the Swedish institutions caused by the arrival of the migrants during this period, which they deem as exaggerated. Instead, they are seeking to direct it to the hardships of the migrants and the implications of the new migration laws in terms of the deterioration of the newcomers' psychological health, safety and possible integration within the Swedish society; and the erosion



of the international agreements on human rights that the Swedish state has committed. In that sense, the ‘diagnostic framing’ (Snow *et al* 2000, p. 615-617) of the problem (the new migration law) is expressed in a similar vein by the interviewees; even though the long-term remedies suggested (the prognostic framing) by their account differ from one another. For instance, Mira states that she advocates the ‘deconstruction of the nation state’ whereas Sait proposes some kind of return to the country’s old migration regime. In constructing their counter narratives, or their action frames, they are trying to establish the migrants as ‘referent objects’ worthy of protection (Buzan *et al* 1998, p. 27), as opposed to societal security. As Sait puts it:

This is a matter of life and death. Are you allowed to stay or you are expelled to a country where you... where you’re putting your life at risk. [...] I think one often underestimates the difficulties facing refugees, and... You know, I think it is problematic how the politicians aren’t trying to come up with long-term solutions at the moment; it’s all about short-time solutions, and demonstrative action. They are making laws hastily without thinking it through thoroughly, without assessing the implications in a satisfying manner.

However, none of the interviewees are overly optimistic with regard to the possibility of changing the current migration regime. They are all expressing the same sentiment: Sweden has ended up in a downward spiral in terms of the country’s discourse on migration, and the assumption that ‘the migrant’ poses a threat to the nation (to the institutions, to the welfare policies, to domestic security) has come to be so widely established that the efforts of the asylum rights movement to reframe the issue—for instance by holding lectures about migration law (*Asylrättsstudenterna*); by organising demonstrations and manifestations (Refugees Welcome Sweden and *Ensamkommandes förbund*); and by producing articles and creating opinion on social media (all of the groups in which the interviewees are engaged)—probably will prove to be insufficient in terms of managing to rally enough individuals behind their cause. For instance, Jenny states that she does not have the energy to bother trying to change the minds of her opponents; and Amelie claims that her organisation in fact mostly ‘preaches

for the choir'). According to the interviewees, the force that propels the said development, which ultimately has paved the way for the restrictive migration policies and the widespread conception of migrants as a threat to the society, is the growth of right-wing populist parties, which have in a profound way influenced the mainstream political parties in Sweden. In Mira's view, the Swedish political landscape is not unique in this respect.

The political parties are falling for different winds, like nationalistic, fascist and racist winds. And like this: suddenly the social democrats were really right-wing? Well, okay. Is this the way it works? Are you allowed to act like that? This thing that politicians are like immortal, meaning that they can get elected because they are vowing to do something and then just do the opposite thing... That's completely unreasonable. [...] But this isn't just happening in Sweden, it's happening in the whole of Europe, and in other parts of the world too. But it's a discomfoting development.

In addition to this, Amelie, returning to the topic of the Swedish population's perceived naivety, believes that the public's trust in their officials has made it possible for the political establishment to turn migrants into 'a security issue'; to turn it into, as Buzan *et al* would describe it (1998, p. 23), a 'securitised' policy field; that is, they have managed to convince the public of the necessity to resort to extraordinary measures in order to prevent the harm that the perceived threat, the migrants, may cause society.

Today it's basically controversial to approve of the UN's refugee convention. [...] It's really saddening trying to shed light on these problems while you feel as though everything is going in the opposite direction. But just... yes. But again, I think this is due to us putting too much faith into our politicians, and we have social democrats and conservatives that the majority votes for and that are conceived as moral in some sense... When they turn around, it affects the whole public discourse.

To conclude this section, this perceived framing carried out by right-wing populists, which according to the interviewees accounts of the aftermath of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ (a crisis during which the infrastructure of the state and the security of the nation was not at risk as opposed to the lives of the migrants whom turned to Sweden to seek refuge) has resulted in a metamorphosis of the Swedish community, which has come to be a political landscape in which the in-group (the native Swedes) are treated in a different manner than the out-group (the migrants); and in Sait’s perspective—whom, as mentioned earlier, has started questioning whether it will be possible for him to live in Sweden in the future—it is not likely that this situation will improve in a substantial manner in the short run.

I think that we have embarked on a path that will be hard to depart from in an imminent future. That’s how it, societies change of course, and maybe we will have to adjust to these changes. [...] But in any case, I hope that we... that we atmosphere will become kinder, and that we’ll be more tolerant, because to be honest... In my younger days, I don’t think that the thought of me maybe wanting to move away from Sweden ever struck me. But on a deep level, I’d be lying to you if I said that the thought hasn’t crossed my mind. [...] Because... you know, it’s hard to live in a society in which you, so to say, always feel as though you aren’t welcome.

#### **4.1.5 A Light in the Darkness: Finding Meaning in Resistance**

However bleak the current political situation may seem in the eyes of the interviewees, none of them are planning on letting go of their political engagement; on the contrary, they appear to consider their engagement as an inherent part of their personalities, and when asked if they consider it likely that they are still active within the asylum rights movement in ten or twenty years, they all confirm that they cannot see what could happen so as to change their characters in such a profound way that they would withdraw from the movement—‘it’s a part of my DNA’, as Tobias puts it. As elaborated on in the fifth section of the theory chapter, ‘commitment’ is considered one of the most important factors influencing whether an individual maintains his or her engagement; that is, if the individual views the partaking in collective action as an

expression of his or her ‘basic nature’, then it is of course more likely that the political engagement will be maintained over a longer period of time (Snow *et al.*, 2003). Relating this to the interviewees’ key narratives, the explanation they offer with regard to why they will maintain their engagement is their aversion to injustice and the perceived impossibility to remain indifferent to the injustice that migrants face due to the Swedish migration regime and the racist discourse that has come to permeate the country. Returning to Tobias:

I think it’s possible to keep one’s eyes closed to a certain point, but then it’s fucking impossible to ignore it. [...] A Swedish society in which we still have institutionalised racism, you know... How can a developed society as Sweden still have that? Then I feel it’s just... You know, we’re almost there, and thinking about it, we’re ahead of so many countries, and we cannot be conformist and just lay back when we’ve almost reached our goal. No, we need to fight to the end.

According to Jenny, being engaged in the asylum rights movement is what keeps her from despairing in the face of the societal development.

I think I need in order to feel hopeful, so in some way I’m doing this for selfish reasons. I would have been completely devastated if I hadn’t known that these people were out there, doing this work day in and day out and of course I’m doing this for them. [...] To begin with, I think I engaged in this because I liked the idea of myself as someone who’s politically engaged, but as my ideological standpoints have matured, I’ve realised that this is the way you create alternatives, when you show people that it’s possible to take care of one another, that a fair society is possible, that it’s possible to share what you have, that’s how you show people that another world is possible. So it’s become more like that; this is what I love about the collective movement.

In the interviewees’ narratives, the question of ‘solidarity’ is touched upon at several occasions, and the five of them are all asserting that it is crucial to remain active as it is a matter of ‘life and death’, and that they must continue their work

to mitigate the effects of the restrictive migration laws. Alongside ‘commitment’, Benford *et al* single out ‘solidarity’ as another essential sentiment in terms of prompting people to take action and for the continuation of their engagement, and as outlined in the excerpt from Jenny’s narrative above, she expresses solidarity with the migrants affected by the migration regime (‘external solidarity’, as she herself is not a part of the group) as well as with the individuals carrying out the work to help them (‘internal solidarity’, given that she is a part of this particular collective) (Snow *et al*, 2003). In Mira’s words, despite the hopelessness she experiences in terms of the general political development in Sweden, being a part of a collective which is engaged in practical work of solidarity, bestows her with a sense of ‘meaning’, as she can see the concrete results of the group’s work in her everyday life, at the same time as it makes her feel as though she is a part of something that transcends her own life.

The thing is, I see how my friends suffer and feel like shit. And how my friends who arrive here as unaccompanied minors are ashamed because of that, which is so absurd. I mean, you have travelled all over two or three continents and you have fought to bring your family here, you have fought for your sisters, you know? [...] This summer a friend of mine was put into custody, he had been living in Sweden without papers since 2012, I think, and twenty-three hours before he was going to be expelled from the country we managed to get him out. And that meant so much to me. For fuck sake, it’s only one person, there are hundreds of others in the same situation, but he was one of my closest friends and it was so awesome to... That was after all one life that we could change. [...] I want to be a part of this movement, of this collective where we are caring for each other, where we help each other. And where we tell each other off. We fight and we love.’

What these accounts show is that the undertaken action of the interviewees has, as Diani *et al* express it (2006, p. 97), fostered feelings of belonging to the group, which have strengthened their emotional commitment to the cause; that is, if they are neglecting their political engagement, then they are failing the people with whom they have formed alliances through the social movement activities and

whose rights and welfare they are responsible to protect. At the same time, they are attributing their social movement activities a symbolic value, as they are, in Heyer's words (2014, p. 126), perceiving themselves as actors in a 'social drama', a battle between the in-group (the asylum rights movement and the migrants) and the out-group (societal forces such as right-wing populists and the political parties). Jenny puts it like this: 'It's us against the politicians'—concerning the future of human rights and the equal value of all individuals. In so doing, they are connecting their personal biographies with history, as the following excerpt from Tobias account illustrates:

I believe that every generation needs to make a mark, you know? And we can see for ourselves that certain battles are coming back around, and maybe this is one of those damned cycles. Maybe we'll have to do this a couple of times before we're actually taking a step forward, and then a new generation will enter the stage and we'll take another step. Maybe that's what you need to do.

A common denominator in the interviewees' narratives, in terms of the perceived historical importance of the asylum rights movement, is that they are relating the work they are carrying out with to historical struggles such as the American Civil Rights Movement. For instance, Amelie points out that one cannot expect that society will develop in the desired direction unless one is ready to fight for it.

After all, I think it's our responsibility. That's also what's important with activism because... I mean, I don't believe that... Historically, it's the discriminated group that has fought the battle and made a difference. I mean, it isn't men who have fought for women's rights; it's not white people who have initiated the Civil Rights Movement, it sure isn't.

Lastly, as Andrews has stated (2007, p. 191-192), times of drastic political change may bring about a restructuring of individual identities and our conceptions of our past, as the changes make us aware of our positions in a society whose master narratives we might start to question—an assumption similar to the assertion of Diani *et al* that people who decide to take part in social action often adjust their biographies and develop a new understanding of their identities in that they

become politically active (2006, p. 97). With regard to Andrew's claim, the interviewees frequently claim that prior to the autumn of 2015, they were 'naive' (for instance, Jenny, Mira and Amelie say that they were not sufficiently aware of their privileges in relation to asylum seekers; and Tobias says that he was not adequately aware of the currents of nationalism that permeate the foundation of the Swedish society), suggesting that he could have taken action to promote the rights of migrants before the events that unfolded during 2015. Further, in terms of taking action to promote the rights of migrants, their narratives convey that they have come to develop a new understanding of themselves through their engagement. For instance, Mira states that she has realised that her most important motivation in life is to 'become a more including person'; Tobias suggests that he has come to understand what he values in life and to 'stand up for these values'; Said points out that he has learned that it is important to 'listen to other people'; Amelie claims she has understood that we're all 'citizens of the universe'; and Jenny has come to realise that she is an 'uncompromising person', which is why she 'could not get engaged in a political party'.

Connecting this to the *Bildungsroman* structure, the interviewees have, according to their accounts, thus through a series of setbacks (realising that they have misjudged the character of their home country, and discovering that their chances of changing it is minimal) grown as individuals (in terms of coming to terms with who they are and developing a perceived truer understanding of the world) and discovered what is important to them (standing up to injustices and showing solidarity to the collective, which encompasses migrants arriving in Sweden as well as other individuals engaged in the asylum rights movement).

## **4.2 Conclusion**

Looking at the structure and themes of my interviewees' narratives, there are, as we can see, several components that unite them. They explain their political involvement by drawing on childhood memories of experiencing injustices, and in narrativising their lives they suggest that they were determined to end up combating oppression; every step they have taken have served to lead them to the place where they find themselves today. The accounts of the autumn of 2015

show that the events unfolding during these months had a significant impact on their conception of Sweden, as it made them question the master narrative of Sweden as a ‘moral superpower’, prompting them to re-evaluate their community and their place within it. They indicate that they are not hopeful regarding the prospect of ending the image of migrants as a security threat, but that it is their responsibility as actors on the stage of history to oppose the forces that they detest, and to stand beside their friends within the asylum rights movement and the migrants whose rights they are promoting.

In the light of these accounts, it is apparent that the stories that a community tells about itself has a profound influence on how its members perceive themselves and that sudden societal change which runs counter to the logic of these stories may have equally significant effect on the member’s identities. In terms of the Swedish government’s decision to impose the temporary migration law to stop the arrival of migrants in the autumn of 2015, the narratives also show the deep symbolic value of the country’s old migration regime, how closely entwined it was with the so-called ‘moral nationalism’ that has characterised Sweden, and that the departure from this regime has brought about a substantial gulf between its proponents (and the advocates of an even more liberal regime), and the representatives of the mainstream political establishment, who, with a few exceptions, approve of the new migration laws.

As suggested in the introduction, the historiography of the autumn of 2015 is being conducted at this very hour, and although certain aspects of the communal story of this event are still under discussion in the public sphere, most of the dominant voices on this stage are in agreement concerning the necessity to close the Swedish borders and restrict the country’s migration laws in order to curb the threat to society which the migrants constituted. Against that background, it is valuable to listen to the stories of individuals who, despite belonging to well-established civil rights organisations, are seldom allowed to voice their opinions on the subject in the public sphere, and whose accounts of the autumn of 2015, as we can see, differ greatly from the established narrative of this period.

Lastly, the interviewees’ narratives show the importance of taking the notion of ‘meaning’ into consideration in order to understand what brings about political



engagement. In studying the stories of these people, it is clear that they are seeking to turn the long chain of days which constitute their past into a coherent whole, into stories that make sense to themselves and to their audience, just as they attribute to their political engagement a deep symbolic value, as it allows them to live their lives in accordance with their 'inner truth'. Thus, to get to the bottom of why they chose to act politically, we need to shed light on why they deem it important and the essence of the significance they bestow upon it.

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## **Appendix**

### **The Interview Guide**

1. What are your first memories connected to politics/of thinking politically?
2. What were your impressions of the Swedish migration regime before the autumn of 2015?
3. How would you describe the events of 2015, leading up the government's decision to close the borders?
4. How did you react when you learned about the government's decision to close the borders?
5. How did the government's measures influence your political engagement?
6. What did motivate you to get involved in the asylum rights movement?
7. How is your organisation seeking to rally support behind its cause?
8. Are you hopeful regarding the possibility the change the Swedish discourse on migration?
9. According to you, which function does the asylum rights movement serve?
10. How would you describe yourself within this movement?
11. Have the events following the autumn of 2015 changed the way in which you regard the Swedish society?
12. Is it one's duty to oppose an unfair system?
13. How would you define resistance?
14. What have you learned about yourself through your political engagement?
15. Have your political engagement changed you in any way?
16. Do you think you will keep on doing this in ten or twenty years?
17. Could imagine yourself withdrawing from politics?
18. Which factors do you think have brought about the political changes that you're opposing?