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LECTIO PRÆCURSORIA

Carving out Possibilities: Refugee Background Young Men and Mundane Political Agency

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ABSTRACT

A lectio præcursoria is a short presentation read out loud by a doctoral candidate at the start of a public thesis examination in Finland. It introduces the key points or central argument of the thesis in a way that should make the ensuing discussion between the examinee and the examiner apprehensible to the audience, many of whom may be unfamiliar with the candidate's research or even anthropological research in general.

Honoured Custos, honoured Opponent,
esteemed audience members,

At quite an early stage of the fieldwork period for my PhD research, I was visiting a multicultural youth space in order to present my research to young people. I tried to tell them that I am interested in issues that they find important, and that I would like to research such issues together. But it seems I failed. This was indicated by a comment from one young man in the audience, who suggested that I study how they—namely, young men called immigrants—deviate from the Finnish majority population [*valtaväestö*].¹

I was struck dumb by that situation. I did not know how to answer, as, on the one hand, I did not want to embarrass the young man by saying 'well, certainly not'; but, on the other hand, I did not know how to formulate my research topic so as to give a better definition of my study. I went home from this event feeling tormented: Do I actually research the way

young immigrant men deviate from the majority population? I did not think so. But, why, then, was this group the target of my study? As it is, the concept of 'immigrant' is obscure, as Mona Eid (2021) brilliantly expresses: superficially neutral, but often racialising and implying strong assumptions about a person's background.

Now, I could give a better answer to this young man—who, though, has already come of age: Is the topic of my research the way young immigrant-background men deviate from the Finnish majority population? The answer is 'no'. Instead, I research the underlying process arising from the understanding of them as a deviating group, the consequences this understanding has, and, first and foremost, the ways in which youth (re)act to it. In other words: What kinds of everyday practices of social interaction constitute different categories of immigrants and position refugee-background young men in them? How do the young men themselves react to this categorisation and the way it affects their possibilities for agency and

how they are seen and heard? My research is about how they try to affect their lives and possibilities in Finland; about the small and big deeds they do in order to carve out space for themselves and their objectives. This is what I conceptualise as *mundane political agency*. The credit for developing this concept does not belong to me, though, but to Jouni Häkli and Kirsi Pauliina Kallio (2014, 2018), who have researched political agency and subjectivities on a long-term basis.

Young people might not themselves call the acts they carry out in their everyday surroundings political. As it is, they have been told many times that they participate worryingly little in society, especially in the realm that is considered political. They vote relatively rarely, and this causes recurring worry—for instance, most recently, this was captured in a media discussion around the small voter turnout among people with an immigrant background, especially young men, right after the municipal elections held last summer. Such youth are even less involved in party politics nor do civic organisations attract them much. Following the media discourse, it often feels like they are portrayed as far too often present on the streets or other public spaces, usually causing different kinds of disturbances, such as ganging up, organising mass brawls or committing robberies. Especially during last autumn and winter, there had been recurrent news coverage on whether there are street gangs formed by immigrant-background youth in the Finnish capital region or not, and is Finland in this respect already on the ‘Swedish path’.

But, is it truly so that immigrant-background young men are either not active enough societally or are active but in a wrong and excessive way? The impetus of my PhD research was frustration at the contradiction between this image, drawn in the public

discourse, regarding immigrant-background youth and my own understanding formed when working in the field of special youth work, which was much more mundane, but also multifarious. My rule-of-thumb estimate was that the youth do try to affect their lives in many ways, but are left quite alone in their struggles with structures and practices that restrict their possibilities. Also, in the field of the social sciences, the efforts and modes of the youth agency are insufficiently understood, and their agency is often scrutinised from the outside—that is, from the perspective of Finnish society—which produces blind spots. In my PhD research, I wanted to turn this set-up around and research the position and agency of the youth from their everyday life perspective. This is why I told the audience in the youth space I mentioned at the beginning that I am interested in the issues young people find important and would like to research these issues with them together.

Even though my fieldwork did not, perhaps, start out perfectly, I did get to work together with a couple of young men. They were all about 20 years old when we started cooperating, and they all had a refugee background. Specifically, they had come to Finland either as quota refugees with some of their family members, alone as so-called unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, or they had first fled their home country and then arrived in Finland via a family reunification process. Therefore, and because of the obscurity of the concept of ‘immigrant’, in my research I solely use the concept of ‘refugee background’. In addition to having a refugee background, what was common to the young men who participated in my research was that they had come to Finland as teenagers, and religion had a considerable role in all of their lives—although some of them were Christian and some Muslims. In addition to these few unifying factors, the backgrounds of the youth

were diverse. For one young man, his family had been quite well-off before coming to Finland and he had attended a school of good quality. Another had started working at the age of 5 and the family had never been able to afford schooling. One had almost his whole family in Finland and strong support from home, while another was completely alone and did not know anything about the situation of his family members, not even whether they were alive or not. One had not even been born in the country he called his homeland, as his parents had fled before his birth and the family lived as refugees elsewhere before he set out for Finland. Some had gone through very traumatic experiences, while others' lives had been relatively safe—at least the part of their lives that they could remember themselves. Originally, they came from different parts of the Middle East and Africa.

Some of these young men I met regularly during a period of a couple of months, but I worked with three of them over a period of one to two years, one of whom I worked with even longer than that. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork using two methods. First, I accompanied the youth in their everyday life surroundings, such as in school, to their workplace or during hobbies. And, second, I spent a lot of time with them in private, having thorough discussions on a multitude of subjects. Working together intensively on a long-term basis was important, not only in the sense of gathering nuanced data, but also because it enabled the forming of a close relationship between us: friendship and a rather equal cooperation. We have together gone through the data I gathered, read analytical texts I have written, and had profound discussions on them. Yet, emphasis is placed on the word *rather* equal cooperation: the participation of these youth in the analysis and the comments they have

given on my texts has had a significant effect on the final shape of the monograph, but the power—and responsibility—to make the final resolutions has, ultimately, been in my hands. Our long-term cooperation has been extremely important so that I—a white woman, a Finn by nationality and ethnicity, who acts in the academic world and has reached middle-age—could achieve an in-depth understanding of the life situations of refugee-background young men in Finland. It has sensitised me to the different subject positions that we are offered in Finnish society.

When analysing the data yielded by the fieldwork, I concentrated on encounters, as I was interested, on the one hand, in the way other Finnish residents—both state officials and co-dwellers—are disposed towards refugee-background young men and what kinds of subject positions are available to them in these mundane encounters, and, on the other hand, on how these youth react to these positionings and, perhaps, try to change them. On the basis of my analysis, I claim, firstly, that in their everyday encounters young refugee-background men are positioned as different—as others—in recurrent and various ways. This has often, although not always, to do with racialising practices. The subject positions offered to these youth are quite often categorising—as, for example, the category of the 'immigrant who deviates from the majority population', referenced by the young man I met in the youth space. One of the youth who participated in my research said that his classmates, who consider him an immigrant, do not see *him*: they do not see his personality, his abilities and his individuality. Such categories also restrict, for example, by categorising refugee-background youth as vulnerable. As well meaning as this might be, it led in the case of another research participant to equating him with youth with mental

disabilities in a special youth work project. As for the third young person, he got a job—but not despite his correspondence with the obscure, racialising understanding of immigrants, but exactly because of that understanding, as some sort of embodiment of immigrant-ness as a representative of this group understood as difficult to reach.

These youth did not, however, settle in the subject positions offered to them without friction. On the basis of my analysis, I claim, secondly, that if the agency of refugee-background young men is studied from their vantage point, they turn out to be highly active. They are constantly alert in their encounters with Finnish society and its other members, and they struggle to affect othering and its implications. The youth wage this struggle on two levels: in everyday life situations on the level of embodied, immediate strategies (a concept coined by Samu Pehkonen, see Väyrynen et al. 2017, 91), and on the level of future-oriented long-term projects understood in light of Sherry Ortner's (2006, 139–147) concept of the 'agency of projects'.

By immediate strategies, I refer to different strategies that these youth use on-the-spot in order to stretch, transform or reject the subject position available to them. These youth can, for example, transform awkward situations into jokes in a way that displays to others that they are perfectly aware of the situation and both so self-confident and socially skilled that they can change its dynamics. Or these youth might simply refuse to act the way they are supposed to, and instead act in a different way. For example, instead of accommodating the subject position of a vulnerable refugee youth in the special youth work project I mentioned earlier, that specific young man carved out a completely different role—that of an active, skilled and courageous professional of arts and assistant leader. The third strategy that I identified in my

analysis could be named after Sara Ahmed's (2017) concept of 'smiling work': a young person used smiling, eye contact and other methods of creating rapport in order to pass into a white institution, to become accepted as a professional among others—and not only as a representative of the category of immigrant.

In addition to this daily struggle, these youth pursued their own long-term projects with perseverance. None of my most central research participants was satisfied with the subject position that was most easily available to them in Finnish society—for example, working as a practical nurse or making music within the framework of immigrant rap. Instead of these easiest, yet not-easy alternatives, these youth put tremendous effort into stubbornly pursuing higher education, or persistently building an original musical career, or a long-term search—at times, arduous—for one's self and values.

Thus, these youth deployed a wide spectrum of different strategies and pursued various long-term projects. My dissertation brings out several unique examples of such efforts. Here, I would like to draw attention to one especially unifying character that comes up in my data: all of the three young men with whom I worked long-term fostered through their agency—in one way or another—respectful coexistence and transversal solidarity. The agency of one of them took forms that could be called everyday antiracism: he tirelessly weaved social networks and thus built safe spaces for himself and his friends, and also tried to foster a caring and friendly atmosphere in his everyday surroundings, such as in his class or at his summer job. Another wanted to encounter all the people he met as 'whole persons', as he himself put it, and was ready to challenge his own fundamental views in order to be openly disposed towards all people. The third challenged himself by participating in projects in which he got to know and worked together

with very different kinds of people, trying to take forward a message about the irrelevance of differences and the importance of mutual respect.

It was impressive to perceive that youth, who in their everyday lives continuously need to struggle for the space to exist as themselves, were not only able but also willing to cultivate respectful communality. Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies Tarja Väyrynen (2019), under whose research project my dissertation falls, calls this kind of agency ‘mundane micropractices of peace’. What is at stake is, thus, building peace through small acts in the encounters of everyday life. This is not, perhaps, the right kind of political agency or societal participation from the parliamentary point of view. But, to be honest, in my view, it is more fundamental, effective and significant than voting in elections—and this does not mean that I belittle the importance of the right to vote.

It would be nice to end here and leave you, esteemed audience, with a feeling of the strength, stamina and courage of these youth. Certainly, this is a central result of my research. However, there is another result that is equally important. This other result calls for a change in those structures of Finnish society that repeatedly make these young people feel that their efforts are in vain and that they tilt at windmills in their attempts to further their dreams—such as those related to higher education. Although the three young men with whom I most intensively worked were all in some ways well resourced, they all found themselves at dead-ends time and time again. On some occasions, they all seemed quite resilient, as refugee youth are often described in the research literature these days: persistent, flexible and oriented towards the future. But with each I also encountered periods when, as one of them described, they were on the brink of giving up [*haluan heittää hanskat*

tiskiin]. In order to show that this was about something other than the ordinary emotional turbulence of young people, I quote one of my research participants here:

Before I had this feeling that I am young, I want to live, that there are many things for me to see and experience, and that I have some kind of chance in life. I felt like I don't want to die, I am young, I have a lot to live for. Now I feel that everything is boring, everything is always the same. I have to work and try so hard, but every time there is some obstacle in the way. Language skills or if it is not that, then it is something else. Always some obstacle comes up. And there is always something that I need to try to take care of, to organise, to sort out. It is never-ending, and it is always the same. Maybe I am weak, but nowadays I feel that if I was to die now, there would be no reason for me to resist. I might just as well die.

After I submitted my dissertation for pre-examination, two of the refugee-background young men I know had given up. Neither of them was involved in this research, but they very well might have been: these young men were in the same way relatively well resourced as my three most central research participants. One of them had a good education and strong support from his family, a steady job and clear plans for his future, while the other had a difficult past with a lot of losses, but good support networks in Finland and a promising start to his career. But, they, too, time and again bumped into obstacles, and in the end they lost heart—or decided to use other kinds of methods when the ones offered by the official society did not take them anywhere. I cannot share here the details of their solutions and the circumstances

they have ended up in. What I can say is that both have, in their own ways, disappeared—or perhaps ‘been lost’ would be a more accurate expression.

In order to avoid such dead-ends, Finnish society should see and hear the message the agency of these young men carries. Instead of fretting about refugee-background young men’s scant participation in society, Finnish society should itself participate in a project such youth have already started: a project of cultivating respectful communality. The majority population that the young man referred to at the beginning of my lectio should step aside, make space for minorities and ask from their representatives how we could build our society into one in which everybody has space to be themselves and further their dreams. How could our society be truly common, a caring society that treats its different members with respect?

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NOTES

- 1 The term the young man used has no self-evident translation; it implies a power relation [*valta*] between the minority and the majority.

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