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ABSTRACT

Existing scholarship on the active citizenship of undocumented migrants is inconclusive on its perils and promises. While some scholars see it as symptomatic of the moral economy that makes legal recognition dependent on demonstrating civic deservingness, others argue that it represents a potential site of contestation against illegalisation. In this paper, we argue that we need to focus on the complex processes that drive undocumented migrants' quest for recognition in order to understand the political ambiguities implicated in how they civically engage themselves. We use the case of CollectActif (CA), an undocumented-led anti-food waste collective in Brussels, to argue that methods of participatory action research (PAR) are better placed than ex-post analyses to show how recognition processes unfold and evolve over time. We show that recognition depends on establishing 'equivalence' to prevailing norms and forms of civic organisation. Hence, CA members generated solidarity and created new publics by behaving as active citizens. Yet, despite increased visibility, CA struggled to be recognised by established actors in the field as actors with equal rights to being and speaking. Based on these findings, we argue that tensions between equivalence and equality help to explain the political ambiguities of active citizenship.

On 14 April 2016, CollectActif (henceforth CA), a food collective founded and led by five undocumented activists in Brussels, won the award for 'most hospitable association towards refugees' of the Flemish NGO Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen (Refugee Action). For the undocumented activists involved, the award was a public recognition of their civic contribution by an established civil society organization (CSO). Reflecting on their victory, CA member I3 stressed how important it was that their informal initiative had been deemed 'equivalent' to the standards held high by CSO professionals:

> [T]his price made us visible in front of … many associations. We did a great job, it was well studied by the people who hand out the prizes … *and we were deemed to be qualified for the prize.*

Yet the road towards gaining recognition in civil society was long and full of obstacles. Eight months earlier, at the height of the European 'refugee crisis', thousands of refugees arrived in the Belgian capital to apply for asylum. The failure of the government to respond adequately, caused people to sleep in the Maximiliaan park opposite the Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken (Office of Alien Affairs) premises. As one of the first actors on the scene, CA realised the urgency to address the alimentary needs of the stranded refugees. A field kitchen was erected with a food depot for donations. The volunteer-run 'Cuisine du monde pour tout le monde' ('Kitchen of the world for everyone') prepared more than 1,000 meals each day for over four weeks. Meanwhile, the Belgian state, despite all its resources, only provided night shelter in a vacant office building nearby (*BRUZZ*, September 28, 2015). CA's kitchen became an indispensable part of the 'Citizen Platform' that coordinated the shelter, medical care and educational activities in the Park (see Depraetere and Oosterlynck 2017).[1]

The media attention for the refugee camp generated unprecedented public visibility for the civic engagement of the *sans-papiers*. But the civic contribution of their initiative was not universally recognised. The State Secretary for Asylum and Migration questioned the legitimacy of the situation in the park, claiming that activists were 'exploiting the situation to fulminate against the government and, above all, against me as a person' (Facebook post, 20/9/2015).[2] By the end of September, pressure from policy makers mounted to dismantle the camp. A conflict emerged between the *sans-papiers* and the Citizen Platform over the necessity to stay in the park. The Citizen Platform decided to leave the camp, stating on national public television that they 'support undocumented migrants in their struggle', but that a longer presence in the park would discourage the government from 'taking responsibility' (1 October 2015, http://deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws/regio/brussel/1.2457275). The services provided by the Platform and established CSOs like Doctors Without Borders, Oxfam and the Red Cross were relocated to a different part of town. In a press release, CA pointed out that the Platform's unilateral decision to abandon ship had been made against their will (press release CA 30/9/2015):

> In the meantime, we reaffirm our disagreement with the representatives of the Platform who have been invited, by many actors on the ground […] *not to take decisions without consultations, to ditch their paternalistic vision of refugees, to practice horizontality and respect for internal democracy in the camp, not to be haughty and dictatorial towards the real actors in the field, to mobilise refugees, to integrate them into meetings*, etc. None of this has been done.

Despite the engagement CA had displayed in the Maximiliaanpark, they were misrecognised as a legitimate actor with an equal right to 'being' and 'speaking'. On 1 October 2015, a handful of sans-papiers tried to prevent the camp's dismantlement. A spokesperson explains: 'For the moment, we are here, because since the very beginning, we have said that … the refugees of today are the *sans-papiers* of tomorrow' (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxGpONnQ6bw). The Brussels Mayor expressed his discontent about the situation by saying that 'there are people who, at a certain moment, are of bad will, we have told them that they have to leave … they want to wage their struggle, I understand, but not here' (idem). That day, two members of CA deposited a symbolic funeral bouquet on their field kitchen before it was destroyed by bulldozers. A little more than a month after undocumented activists spearheaded the grassroots response to refugees' cry for help in Brussels, the last remaining traces of their active citizenship were literally taken out with the trash.

The discrepancy between the scene of the award show and the camp's dismantlement is striking. This empirical vignette throws up the question of how undocumented migrants, who lack the legal recognition that comes with formal citizenship, can nevertheless gain public recognition. This question relates to recent debates on the perils and promises of *active citizenship*, which we conceptualise here as the practices whereby individuals civically engage themselves and take initiatives in the public sphere. The capacity of active citizenship to serve as a vehicle for making claims to civic membership and political belonging has been hotly debated in recent years. Governmentality scholars have criticised active citizenship for being an integral part of a neo-liberal regime that makes civic membership dependent on moral deservingness (Schinkel and Van Houdt 2010; Van Houdt, Suvarierol, and Schinkel 2011). Citizenship scholars on the other hand interpret active citizenship practices of undocumented migrants as expressions of political belonging and challenges to the status quo (Isin 2009; McNevin 2009; Nyers and Rygiel 2012). Yet other studies stress the ambivalences implied in how undocumented migrants claim formal citizenship by stressing their economic contribution, educational achievement and community service (Nicholls 2013; Swerts 2015, 2017a; Nicholls et al. 2016).

In this paper, we argue that the political ambiguities implicated in how undocumented migrants civically engage themselves can only be grasped by focusing on the complex processes that drive their quest for recognition. Building on the work of Fraser (2000) and Lamont (2018) we operationalise *recognition* as a state of mutual understanding between actors who are engaged in meaningful interaction in civil society about the cultural worth of their participation in and the legitimacy of their civic membership of that society. Conversely, misrecognition stands for the situation wherein disparities in cultural worth and civic membership result in status inequalities between actors in civil society. We argue that existing research often fails to fully capture the complexity of recognition processes because it tends to rely on ex-post analyses of active citizenship practices that reduce questions around public recognition to evaluating event outcomes or state responses. Instead, we propose that participatory action research (PAR) is better placed to unravel how recognition processes unfold over time. Furthermore, our research shows that PAR methods are especially well suited to study 'misrecognised' populations like undocumented migrants because they offer opportunities to maximise research participation and renegotiate unequal power differentials.

Based on a 12-month long PAR trajectory with CA, we show that the political ambiguities of undocumented migrants' active citizenship practices can be explained by the inherent tensions that lie at the heart of recognition processes. On the one hand, the civic practices of undocumented migrants need to appeal to performance-based deservingness in order to be perceived and understood as active citizenship. We refer to this as the need for *equivalence*, which relies on the congruity of these practices to the prevailing norms and forms of organisation in civil society. On the other hand, establishing recognition as a legitimate actor in civil society implies *equality*, understood as the equal right to being and speaking within that field, which requires a redistribution of status and power between established and challenging actors. Conceiving of recognition as a process that hinges on both equivalence and equality thus allows us to provide a more nuanced picture of the perils and promise of active citizenship.

In this paper, we first discuss recent scholarly insights on active citizenship, deservingness and recognition. Next, we outline the rationale behind the PAR methodology adopted

for this study. The empirical analysis is structured in two parts. First, we argue that CA's intervention during the 'refugee crisis' should be seen as a form of active citizenship that relies on performance-based deservingness to underscore their civic contribution. Next, we unravel the political ambiguities of this strategy by illustrating the challenges CA experienced in moving from recognition based on equivalence to equality. Finally, we conclude this paper by making a plea for the importance of a more empirically informed and process-oriented approach to the investigation of undocumented migrants' active citizenship.

Active citizenship, deservingness and recognition

Talking about the active citizenship of undocumented migrants might seem like a contradiction in terms. Citizenship is traditionally regarded as the exclusive terrain of residents with formal citizenship status. Subjects not recognised as legal residents by the state are barred from the rights and public participation commonly associated with citizenship. Brysk and Shafir (2004, 210) use the term 'citizenship gap' to capture the growing number of noncitizens who are 'out of place' and 'fall between the cracks' due to their lack of legal recognition (210). This legal status comes to function as a 'master status' for undocumented migrants that annuls all forms of merit and societal integration in practice (Gonzales 2015). Yet, despite their unauthorised status, undocumented migrants are de facto contributors to their societies of residence through informal work, personal relationships and community involvement. In this respect, Sassen argues that the 'informal' practices by 'not quite fully recognised' subjects enact 'dimensions of citizenship' like community ties and civic participation (2005, 85). The mismatch between undocumented migrants' active involvement in society and the stigma of illegality that they bear constitutes what Lamont has called a 'recognition gap', referring to 'disparities in worth and cultural membership between groups in a society' (2018, 421–422).

As migration scholars have long noted, states primarily responded to the challenge that migration poses for citizenship by introducing new restrictions to political membership (e.g. see Bosniak 2006). These restrictions have raised the bar for gaining legal recognition of rightful presence by the state. The constant threat to be deported from state territory always looms around the corner for illegalised migrants (De Genova 2002). Formal citizenship is increasingly made subject to the demonstration of good moral character, thereby transforming it from an acquired status into a conditional privilege that needs to be continuously earned in practice (Van Houdt, Suvarierol, and Schinkel 2011). To complicate things further, the emergence of humanitarianism causes clearly defined pathways to formal citizenship based on family, work or refugee rights to lose ground (Fassin 2012). For example, one of the only remaining pathways to regularisation in Belgium is 'urgent medical aid' (so-called procedure 9ter), whereby legal status is granted on the grounds of a serious medical condition that cannot be treated in the country of origin.

In response, undocumented migrants develop strategies to 'become less illegal' (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas 2012, 2014). The emerging moral economy of deservingness 'encourages irregular migrants to accumulate official and semiofficial proofs of presence, certificates of reliable economic and legal conduct, and other formal emblems of good citizenship, especially – but not only – with a view to future legalisation' (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas 2012, 243). But also less formal, performance- based

ways of demonstrating deservingness (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas 2014, 427) feature prominently in undocumented migrants' quest to bridge the 'recognition gap'. For subjects who are deemed 'unworthy' of citizenship, civic engagement and national identification become possible ways of demonstrating deservingness (Nicholls 2013; Gast and Okamoto 2016). The successful campaign to health the pending deportation of Cameroonian scout leader Scott Mayo is a case in point, since it stressed his participation in local community life and promise as a student (20 August 2016, https://www.hln.be/nieuws/binnenland/scott-manyo-mag-blijven~a162b1c9/). Active citizenship thus emerges as a crucial site for the performance of social contribution for undocumented migrants.

Some observers even suggest that undocumented migrants' civic engagement should be understood as expressions of an 'activist' citizenship that challenges the status quo (Isin 2009). The citizenship practices of the sans-papiers, for example, are said to 'claim a right of membership which exists prior to the formal allocation of citizenship and upon which basis they now insist on legal recognition' (McNevin 2009, 144). Similarly, Sassen argues that the 'informal' citizenship of undocumented migrants might set in motion 'a corresponding set of changes in the institution [of formal citizenship] itself' (2005, 81). Yet, McNevin also nuances this transformative nature by arguing that the sans-papiers' call for legalisation simultaneously 'reinforce[s] conventional forms of citizenship as authoritative measures of belonging and not belonging' (2009, 137). More broadly, political strategies aimed at demonstrating deservingness are criticised for their risk of excluding more vulnerable and less desirable migrants (Yukich 2013), stratifying immigrants according to desirable moral and cultural traits (Nicholls, Maussen and Caldas de Mesquita 2016) and, ultimately, driving intergroup divisions (Gast and Okamoto 2016). In this respect McNevin introduced the term 'ambivalence' to provide 'a useful starting point for coming to terms with the transformative potential of claims that both resist and reinscribe the power relations associated with contemporary hierarchies of mobility' (2013, 183).

In this paper, we argue that the debate on the perils and promise of active citizenship lacks nuance because insufficient attention has been paid to the underlying complexity of recognition processes. Since the bulk of this literature is based on analysing the outcomes of active citizenship practices after the facts or critically 'reading' into existing citizenship policies, it fails to appreciate the manifold, intricate ways in which misrecognised actors have to continuously position and reposition themselves within pre-structured social fields in their quest for recognition. Immigrants' quest for recognition featured prominently in scholarly debates around multiculturalism in the early nineties (see e.g. Taylor 1992), but it tended to be reduced to questions of valuing difference and identity. Building on the work of Fraser (2000) and Lamont (2018), however, we adopt a different take on recognition that takes existing power differentials between groups (rather than cultural differences) as its starting point. As Lamont argues, the proliferation of 'recognition gaps' under neoliberalism constitutes an important source of inequality for groups like the undocumented who are deemed 'unworthy' of formal citizenship (2018, 426). Nancy Fraser (2000) addresses such inequalities by reconceptualizing the politics of recognition as a redistributive process whereby misrecognised subjects are established 'as full partners in social interaction' (2000, 113). Misrecognition is not only institutionalised formally through the law, but also informally 'in associational patterns, longstanding customs or sedimented social practices of civil society' (idem: 113). Overcoming

undocumented migrants' 'recognition gap' thus requires the establishment of what we call 'recognition of equality', referring to the redistribution of social status between actors with diverging levels of cultural worth and membership in the field of civil society.

However, recognition gaps are not captured in their entirety by the need to install equality alone. For undocumented migrants, gaining recognition also depends on their ability to act in ways that appeal to ideals of civic worthiness in their society of residence. Civil society constitutes a distinct social field (see Bourdieu 1990) in which certain standards of conduct and valorised modes of action are in place. Bourdieu emphasises that these rules and standards structure who gets perceived as having authority to speak and act. Scholarship on immigrant rights movements has previously indicated how the relationships between CSOs and undocumented migrants tend to be brittle and rife with struggles over representation (Nicholls 2013; Lambert and Swerts 2019). The formal and informal rules that govern the field of civil society are important to explain these often conflictual relationships. For undocumented activists to have any impact in civil society, they need to be recognisable. Being perceived as a legitimate actor in the public sphere therefore requires what we call 'recognition of equivalence', referring to the establishment of conformity to existing rules in the field of civil society.

In what follows, we outline the action research methodology that we adopted in order to explore undocumented activists' quest for recognition in civil society.

Action research: towards a shared problematic

Empirical research on active citizenship tends to be limited to ex-post analyses that interpret claims-making practices long after events have unfolded. This prevents researchers from truly grasping the messy, lived realities of citizenship practices. To gain a more intimate understanding, researchers need to get 'closer' – in epistemological terms – to misrecognised people's struggles. Participative action research (PAR) methods can be 'of particular relevance for those communities whose voices have been silenced, excluded, obscured or otherwise censored' (Brun 2009, 204). They allow researchers to establish relationships of trust with the research subjects and discuss in-depth and over longer periods of time the meaning of their citizenship practices and of the responses to it from CSOs in particular and society in general. There also is an ethical imperative to maximise community participation in the research process considering the relative vulnerability of undocumented research participants (Cahill 2007). Since our unit of analysis is the organisation CA, the main respondents in this study consist of its six founding members. In terms of their background characteristics, they represent six men in their thirties and forties who have lived undocumented in Brussels between 7 and 15 years, have North-African origins and were previously involved in the sans-papiers movement (see analysis below). They thus represent a highly vulnerable community that lacks real opportunities to participate in any meaningful way in research projects. For the foregoing reasons, we adopted a PAR methodology.

We started our search towards a shared research agenda by attending a public meeting convened by CA and the volunteers of the Maximiliaanpark to get a sense of the issues they were struggling with after the dismantling of the field kitchen. The meeting was led by founding member I1[3] and attended by about 50 people with and without a migration background. The discussions during the meeting mainly revolved around the

question how the dynamic of the 'Cuisine monde pour tout le monde' could be preserved. Next, Researcher 1 and a member of the broader research team organised three meetings with respondents I1, I5 and I2 to determine our research question. The importance we attributed to this process is inspired by the insight that 'the understanding that people – especially those who have experienced historic oppression – hold deep knowledge about their lives and experiences, and should help shape the questions, [and] frame the interpretations of research' (Torre and Fine 2006, 458). During these initial discussions, the CA members put forward the following priorities for the research:

> *Statement 1*: "We want to document the trajectory that we have gone on as a group, as a self-organization, and make it public."

> *Statement 2*: "We are searching for a form of recognition, political recognition for what we do. We want to spread the message that what we do is valuable, 'non-citizens who act', that we get political recognition for our positive actions."

Previous research on the role of CA in the Maximiliaanpark demonstrated how they brought forth unprecedented levels of solidarity at the height of the refugee crisis (Depraetere and Oosterlynck 2017). At the same time, it revealed the difficulties that an informal undocumented-led collective encountered to get public recognition for their civic interventions in civil society. From an academic perspective, the proposed themes thus spoke towards the more general question of how active citizenship features in their quest for recognition. Together with our research participants, we subsequently co-designed and implemented two interventions that aimed to increase outreach and recognition from CSOs.

A first intervention consisted of producing '*a pedagogical instrument*' (henceforth PI), a small booklet containing personal testimonies of CA members and volunteers about their trajectory as well texts and illustrations about their vision and impact. After brainstorming about the goal of this intervention, we aimed to produce a booklet that could be an aid for 'sans-papiers who want to know how to organise themselves, how to make a project specific and for organisations who want to support the sans-papiers' (Meeting minutes 24/11/2015). We subsequently organised two focus groups with undocumented members and citizen volunteers to map the origins and expansion of CA until the summer of 2015 and look more closely at the experience and repercussions of the Maximiliaanpark experience. For the first focus group (FG1), the two researchers and the founding members were present. For the second focus group (FG2), we invited four key volunteers in addition to the founding members to reflect on their experience. For both focus groups, we worked with open-ended questionnaires that focused on key moments in the development of the initiative, the unfolding of events and their aftermath.

These oral histories provided the raw material that fed the collaborative writing process of the PI. The quotations from the focus group interviews were placed next to a main text written by I6, I1, a sans-papiers activist and the researchers that discusses the trajectory, day-to-day operations and strategies for self-organisation of CA. I6, who was in charge of CA's external communication, made an inventory of their recipes and collected quantitative data on the ecological and social impact of their operations. When the draft main text was ready, we sat down with all founding members and two graphic designers to determine the visual style of the brochure. The cover of the PI, which depicts a giant made

up of people stacked on one another that distributes soup with a big spoon, symbolises the collective agency that CA and their volunteers bring forth. The researchers and three volunteers performed editing and translation work. The PI contains 28 pages and was distributed in a circulation of 1,000 copies in French and Dutch. We co-presented the PI for an audience of CSO professionals and academics on four separate occasions. Researcher 1 also helped secure an additional grant from a Brusselian municipality to finance its reprint.

A second intervention consisted of applying to three open award competitions. We relied on all available materials, including the data gathered in the context of the first intervention, to complete the applications. We requested specific information necessary to fill in the application during subsequent meetings. Field notes were taken during the redaction meetings. Since all three prizes were issued by Dutch-speaking organisations, researchers translated the materials while making sure everyone agreed on the strategy. We subsequently gathered data during participant observation at the award shows of two prizes. Additional data were gathered by doing content analysis of the events' coverage. This intervention led to the winning of a cash prize in the Hospitable Municipality campaign (see above) and a place as a laureate for the Poverty Exclusion Price 2016. More than six months later, a follow-up focus group (FG3) was held with I1, I2, I3 and I6 to assess the impact of the second intervention.

As the outline of our collaborative research process shows, we tried to remain conscious of the differences in power and status between researchers and research subjects every step of the way (see Swerts 2020). Accordingly, we invested heavily in terms of time, exchanges and resources in involving the research participants in all parts of the research process. Over the course of a 12-month period, we had more than 40 formal meetings with CA founding members. Most meetings took place between Researcher 1, a member of the research team and I1 and I6 and were either held at cafes or other locations of the respondents' choosing. Additional meetings with I2, I3 and I4 focused on organising moments of exchange with CSO professionals. Furthermore, informal contacts with respondents took place through phone calls, a facebook group containing more than 200 posts and a whatsapp group.

Participation did not remain limited to data collection, but also involved cooperation in data interpretation. The data gathered consisted of the three focus group interviews held with CA (time of 1–2 hours), ethnographic field notes, informal interviews with the graphic designers and two 30-minute focus groups held with CSO professionals (FG 4 and 5). All interviews involving CA members were done in French, except for the Dutch interviews with the graphic designers and CSO professionals. The researchers translated all interview quotes from French and Dutch to English. We fully transcribed, coded and analysed these data with Nvivo. Following Charmaz (2006), we identified emerging themes (e.g. 'food precarity', 'table d'hôtes', 'tensions', etc.) and focused on getting a first impression of the data in the initial coding phase. During the subsequent selective coding phase, we highlighted the most common themes (e.g. 'active citizenship', 'horizontal solidarity', 'recognition', etc.), dropped earlier codes and generated new codes by recombing initial codes. The coding process was informed by the ongoing conversations we had with respondents about the quotes for the PI.

Besides participation in data collection, interpretation and writing, we also involved CA in the research dissemination. The official launch of the PI was supported by members of the research team. Researcher 1 also presented the results from the action research

together with I1 at several occasions for diverging audiences. We hence made an effort to be reflexive about our privileged positionality as researchers. Throughout, we tried to set up what Brun calls 'responsible research' that invokes 'research and theories that are meaningful for the research subjects and co-constructed with them' (2009, 201). This meant that we exchanged thoughts at regular intervals, made material resources available to them and created opportunities for encounter and exposure. The PAR generated lessons for us as scholars and for the activists themselves. The learning process that CA went through is outlined in more detail elsewhere (Researcher 1). In what follows, we elaborate the key findings of the PAR.

Performing active citizenship: recognition of equivalence

> I think that from the moment *people who are not legally recognised* say to themselves, 'this history of citizenship, we will get to know it', because ultimately, citizenship is not a gift, it is an act done to change one's situation, and this is precisely the message of CollectActif, … we are not waiting to receive a gift, we mark our presence, we are here and we tackle important issues like the question of food precariousness and find solutions. (I1, FG3)

The civic initiatives that CA take in the public sphere mark a shift in the action repertoire of undocumented migrants in Belgium from political mobilisation towards the performance of active citizenship. Dominant public discourses associate *sans-papiers* with illegality, crime and welfare profiteering. Our findings suggest that the active citizenship practices of CA aim to expose the 'recognition gap' between their legal exclusion and their de facto membership in three principal ways. First, we argue that CA is able to reverse dynamics of solidarity building by positioning themselves as active citizens who provide assistance to fellow human beings instead of waiting for 'gifts'. Second, we show that by emphasising the ecological impact of their civic interventions to combat food waste, they are able to reach new publics. Third, we demonstrate that CA make citizenship theirs by demonstrating their performance-based deservingness. Below, we explain how this shift in tactics features in the *sans-papiers'* quest for recognition.

Turning vertical solidarity into horizontal solidarity

Launching CA as a civic initiative allowed undocumented activists who had struggled for years to 'receive' solidarity from the broader public to turn the tables by becoming instigators of solidarity themselves (see Swerts 2017b). Apart from their legal status, all founding members had their former membership of the Collectif Sans-Papiers Belgique (SPB) in common. SPB represented a group of sans-papiers whose application for regularisation through a work permit in 2009 (see above) was rejected (see Swerts 2017a). Between 2011 and 2014, SPB organised protests, marches, sit-ins, occupations and popular assemblies to demand a collective regularisation from the Belgian government and generate solidarity from the citizenry. By the time they started organising the 'Solidarity March With and Without Papers' in 2013, public support for the movement had dwindled, the media had lost its interest and a new regularisation campaign seemed unlikely (idem). Yet, as I7 recalls, it is here, while marching, sleeping and cooking alongside fellow sans-papiers and citizen allies, that the members of CA first encountered one another. I4 explains that they were frustrated about their lack of progress at the time (FG1):

> We were tired of going out into the street and shouting 'we are here, we are undocumented, you have to recognise our presence', but *politically, it felt like talking to a wall*. So with our group, we started to think about ways to just do something about the situation of undocumented migrants. There was an occupation of the Afghan community in a nearby church, we saw that they didn't have a lot to eat so we decided to help them by collecting food leftovers.

Parallel to their activist engagement, three SPB members started the horticultural project 'HumanaTerre' in 2012 in an abandoned orchard. This project responded to their immediate need to organise an activity with tangible returns (HumanaTerre website):

> At the end of 2011, the hope for better living conditions and achieving major changes through political struggle seemed more unlikely than ever. We decided that we either had to stop right there, or come up with an activity that would yield an immediate result. We have chosen the latter option.

In 2014, SPB was dismantled because of the absence of political victories and exhaustion resulting from many years of struggle, thereby indicating the difficulties undocumented migrants encountered in their quest for recognition. When an allied organisation set up a project for shelter for the homeless in the winter of 2013, I1 reached out to various people without papers to volunteer. I5 expressed how this experience made them realise the power of bringing about changes in the daily lives of people living in a precarious situation through working around access to food (Fieldwork):

> We started going the Abattoir (covert market) to collect unsold vegetables, fruits and all that, and we brought it back to make regular meals for sans-papiers and the homeless.

The positioning of people in a precarious position as both initiators and target audience of CA resonates with the vision of 'horizontal solidarity' that they gradually developed. The horizontal relations that CA establishes with others also challenges, as I2 put it, the discourse of 'give to me':

> Solidarity relations don't necessarily have to be vertical. From the beginning, we tried to introduce *a system in which people in need help others in need*. We try to include everyone in the project by taking action, helping them to change their situation and even change the situation of others in similar precarious conditions.

The lack of resources that tends to coincide with undocumented status ensures that people are at the receiving end of solidarity. When the *sans-papiers* take the lead in providing food and shelter for others, existing relationships between the subject and object of solidarity are reversed.

Creating a diverse new public

Through the ecological message that CA spreads via their efforts to prevent food waste, they reach more diverse new publics. Connection with members of the public is no longer solely depended on people's solidarity with the sans-papiers' cause, but also on interest in their anti-food waste activities. Launching a concrete 'positive' initiative thus provides a way to gain recognition 'through a positive initiative that aims to deconstruct prejudices' (I1, FG1). As I4 indicated, CA's goals are raising awareness and building support for the cause of the sans-papiers:

People think an undocumented migrant is someone who carries diseases, someone you better not speak to, someone you have to run away from. *We want to change this image* […]. Maybe our public […] that we have created, will later on decide or teach the next generation that there is nothing to be afraid of.

They therefore started distributing food packages at the Abbatoir market and organising weekly 'tables d'hôtes' (host tables). Through word-of-mouth, CA reached a more diverse audience of young people, isolated elderly, single mothers in poverty, refugees, students and other sans- papiers. This project simultaneously created opportunities for undocumented migrants to overcome social isolation and escape the 'closed circle' that characterised his life (I4, FG1):

As a sans-papiers, you live in a closed circle. That is to say that you have fears for all sorts of things and once you starts to communicate with someone about your status, if you are unlucky you might run into trouble. But we have been able to get past this for the moment […]. *It allows you to meet and encounter another public.*

These encounters 'give confidence to the undocumented' and enable them to 'explain what they have as ideas' (I3, FG1). CA's culinary and collection practices allow outsiders to feel personally involved in the issues that these undocumented activists try to make visible. By literally harvesting and preparing the fruits of collective labour, new publics are created from below. Whereas the ecological and solidarity message might initially draw people in, they are typically made aware of the precarious legal status of the initiators at a later stage. I4 described this as follows:

Most of the time they do not know that you are undocumented during the activities […], they think that the activity is interesting … sometimes they come and after a while they discover that we are undocumented … I remember the Maximiliaan park, people thought that I1 worked with the CPAS Brussels (state welfare agency). *These are politically interesting things because people think you have the same skills as the people working at the CPAS in Brussels who did nothing at the Maximiliaanpark.*

A good example of how CA constructs a diverse public was the 'Community Heroes Day' whereby employees of the company Levi's volunteer with local community organisations. In Levi's press release, CA was presented as 'an organisation that collects and recycles food in order to avoid waste, repurpose the food they had collected the previous days to create lunches for local community members'. The legal status of the initiators was not brought to the attention of the employee-volunteers. While we were harvesting potatoes on the field, someone asked one of the researchers what the sign with the inscription 'How to live differently' meant. To her great surprise, she learned that this was an undocumented-led project. There was no further talk about regularisation that day. Such exchanges are typical of how concrete practices help CA to create new publics.

Demonstrating performance-based deservingness

The active citizenship that CA puts into practice aims to reverse the power relations implicated in how the state grants legal recognition via regularisation. Compared to the strategy of the sans-papiers movement to demand regularisation, CA intervenes in public spaces as if formal citizenship already belongs to them. CA members thereby reject their illegalised status and refuses to wait for the state to act (see Swerts 2017b). As I2 indicates, these civic

interventions aim to collectively bridge existing obstacles and exclusions related to their status (FG1):

> An undocumented migrant doesn't feel as if he is a citizen, he feels rather excluded, a sub-citizen, put aside, but *through this project we wanted to re-appropriate citizenship, so we are citizens by act not by paper.* With this project, we therefore try to overcome some obstacles regarding professional formation, getting in touch with politicians and expanding individual contacts, so through this project there are ways to … trump exclusion.

What looks like a morally driven practice to help refugees amounts to a contestation of illegalising migration policies. Unlike the overt political acts of the sans-papiers movement, CA lets the act speak for itself (I1, FG3):

> With regard to the question of citizenship, the question of papers and regularization, [ ] the main goal of the project is precisely to take things in reverse, it is first of all to live one's citizenship, and through the project […] target regularization. […] [CA] is *an avant-garde movement precisely that found a voice parallel to the political struggle, which wants to capture citizenship and become an actor of change, that is to say, to make the change for itself.*

CA's civic interventions are thus rooted in a notion of performance-based deservingness whereby civic engagement serves to demonstrate the sans-papiers' good moral character and civic worthiness.

During FG3, we directly interrogated CA about the potential ambiguities of this strategy (see McNevin 2013; Nicholls 2013). I6 immediately made it clear that 'The goal of CA is not to be regularised, it is rather to be active and, obviously, also take steps on the road to regularisation'. I2 in turn emphasised that 'we certainly know that we are not going to get regularised through CA, […] but we have chosen to position ourselves instead of being *victims*'. The vast majority of undocumented migrants adopt a passive attitude whereby they live their lives in the shadows, hoping for a collective regularisation. Interpretations that call into question the transformative potential of 'active citizenship' practices therefore neglect to appreciate the reversal in power relations between the state and undocumented migrants that they aspire to set in motion. This, however, is not a simple task, as we show in the next section.

Matching 'professional' standards: recognition of equality

In this section we argue that the second intervention that we jointly undertook to apply for awards demonstrates the tension between *equivalence* and *equality* that undergirds undocumented activists' quest for recognition in civil society. Following Uitermark, Nicholls, and Loopmans (2012, 2546) we adopt a relational perspective that considers CSOs to be 'established' and informal collectives to be 'challenging' actors within the field of civil society. The findings of our PAR show that CA's civic engagement had to be presented in ways that converge to prevailing modes of organisation within civil society to acquire *recognition of equivalence*. Yet, we also demonstrate that the failure to redistribute status between challenging and established actors in civil society can stand in the way of *recognition of equality*.

Fitting informal citizenship practices into formal boxes

We will focus our analysis here on the two awards outlined above (see methods section). While preparing the application for the first award, we noticed that several categories were

difficult to fill in for an informal collective without formal organisational status. In the absence of a mailing address, we used the address of an allied organisation. Under the heading 'job title' for the contact person we wrote 'initiator' and for 'Employees in your organisation' we clarified that CA was led by volunteers. The 'Financial information' section could not be filled in, as CA is not eligible for subsidies. Indeed, as I4 explained during FG1, earlier attempts to apply for subsidies through partner organisations resulted in disappointment:

> We had tried through the person with whom we work in partnership … to get subsidies and when she went to talk to the Minister in charge of poverty she was very keen on the project, but as soon as she heard about the 'sans-papiers', she changed her mind and said that she didn't want to give subsidies.

Furthermore, it is remarkable that the political impact of CA's civic engagement literally did not tick many of the boxes in the applications. The rest category 'additional info you would like to provide' was therefore used to highlight the unique character of this initiative. In June, we received the message that CA was one of the 13 nominees for the 'a future for people on the run' Award.

For the second award, we proposed the project 'Cuisine du monde pour tout le monde' to a jury of CSO professionals. We were careful to depict the practices of CA in such a way that they met the requested criteria. First, the text pointed out that the initiative was taken by undocumented migrants and actively involved refugees. Second, we emphasised that they 'succeeded in building structural links with the refugee community in Brussels'. Third, we expressed their sustainable impact by pointing out that 'more than 1,000 meals were made twice a day with food surpluses and donations'. Fourth, we demonstrated public support by underlining the recruitment of volunteers and partnerships with NGOs. Fifth, we indicated that CA wanted to increase the stability and mobility of their operations.

Later that month, CA was selected as one of three nominees for the welcoming award in the category 'association'. The fieldnote excerpt below illustrates some of the challenges CA faced during the award ceremony:

> On a rainy evening in 14 April, I arrived at Daarkom, the Flemish-Moroccan Culture House in Brussels, to attend the award show. During the reception, it was striking to see that the vast majority of the attendees were Flemings without migration background. I5, I4, I3, I2 and I1, all showed up for the award show. I noticed that one of them struggled to keep his eyes open. […] He told me that he was very tired because he had been working all night to organise files in a doctor's office. […] "But I did not want to miss this" he joked. There was no translation provided during the show. A fellow researcher and I each took place at the margins of the group to translate from Dutch to French. Despite the many presentations, speeches and lectures, members of CA could only partially follow what was going on. Our attempts at simultaneous translation, despite our whispering tone, were repeatedly treated with shushing sounds. The only moments CA members could understand were a poem and some classical songs in Arabic. When CA was announced as the winner, everyone joined on stage. The presenter addressed them in Dutch. We hurried up the stage to translate the questions for them.

The award ceremony for the other prize followed a similar pattern. What is remarkable here is that few efforts were made by the organisers of both events to ensure that the nominees could follow the ceremony. Moreover, there was virtually no room for the nominees to represent their own work. The intervention shows that, besides communication

difficulties due to not speaking Dutch, the 'language of professionals' must be spoken in order to gain recognition of equivalence. The researchers therefore had to assume the role of 'mediators' by 'translating' the everyday practices of CA into narratives about 'trajectories, vision, target groups, partners and organisational structure'.

During FG3, we asked CA members how they looked back at this experience. The difficult search to 'fit' professional standards had clearly not undermined the power of recognition experienced. I1 situated its impact on the level of visibility obtained for undocumented-led initiatives:

> I think that the question of recognition, it was not in terms of the prize, but in terms of publicity, *it was recognition in relation to migrants, especially those with the status of undocumented migrants, as initiatives that have made the news and have done something positive in society* around the issue of food insecurity.

I2 elaborated on this by stating that the effect of the prize was that a collective is 'put on the same level' as established CSOs and that this is crucial for him:

> What has happened (with the price), it is interesting … because already there is, say, such a recognition, one feels a little proud … but afterwards, *here you feel that you are on the same level as NGOs with their status* etcetera, so we're just a collective, we're on the same line

Struggling to be seen and treated as equals

But, as the saying goes, winning battles still does not guarantee winning the war. Being seen and treated as equals in the field of civil society would indeed remain a constant struggle for CA. In this respect, the training that we organised for CSO professionals illustrates that the need for equivalence generates tensions. After co-presenting the PI, we reflected on the question of recognition in two focus groups with CSO professionals and CA memebrs. A recurring theme was the need for 'professional' communication about impact (FG4):

> Registering (of the impact of the food parcels on the Abbatoir) and counting how many families have arrived and have been helped; if I have to make a case for policy makers, you should come up with figures, so much people of the population, there are so many children, there are so many different nationalities, we even reach them all, they take the step to come here to get their package … That is a huge force that they [CA] have.

Prevalent norms governing the field of civil society are thus suggested as strategies to gain recognition. In addition, several professionals suggested that they should formalise their organisation and apply for subsidies. All the talk about formalisation led I2 to ask the question: 'Who are these people, civil servants?'

The fact that relieving status subordination is not simply about being regarded as 'similar' or 'equivalent', but as equals *despite* differences in modus operandi became clear from their collaboration with the NGO Cultureghem in 2016. As I3 explains, the principle of equality lies at the heart of their partnerships (I3, CSO Training): 'from the beginning we were already a collective, it is not an NGO, […] so we invested in collaboration, cooperation in partnership … with NGOs'. CA's withdrawal from the Collectmet project that they set up with the NGO Cultureghem shows the difficulties involved in acting like equals. A seemingly banal discussion about new T-shirts for the project unearthed continued status subordination. CA wanted the T-shirts to contain the slogan 'Nobody is illegal'. According to them, however,

> while our request concerns the status of undocumented people; … immediately after that it was a no [from Cultureghem] … we were requesting a mediation, a discussion with our partners. Instead of discussing and trying to sort out the situation, our representative … was gently put aside without explanation. (Press release)

After deliberation, CA decided that this violated the principle of equality within their partnership (Focus Group III):

> Behind the question of t-shirts (from Collectmet), the message about the t-shirt, 'nobody is illegal' … there is a condition check. CollectActif, as a project initiated precisely by undocumented migrants, has always kept a close eye on the fact that through the act of a partnership, the question of undocumented people is evoked … [T]he associations […] need to stop considering migrants […] like weak, submissive people.

Conclusion: towards a more nuanced perspective on the perils and promises of active citizenship

This paper contributes to ongoing debates on the perils and promises of active citizenship by revealing the underlying recognition processes at play. On the one hand, existing scholarship warns that active citizenship potentially reinforces the neoliberal mantra of activation and reserves extending rights to the culturally and morally deserving. On the other hand, non- citizens who act as citizens despite their legal status are said to contest and transform dominant ideologies of citizenship. Instead, we argued for an approach that looks closely at the processes through which undocumented migrants pursue their quest for recognition and did so through PAR. We argue that PAR holds a number of advantages over ex-post analyses and critical readings of active citizenship practices and policies. Firstly, PAR is more strategically placed to unravel how processes of recognition unfold and evolve over time. Secondly, since researchers need to actively position themselves and jointly set up interventions, PAR allows researchers to gain a more intimate understanding of the social fields wherein recognition takes (or fails to take) place. Thirdly, designing and implementing these interventions calls into being constructive interdependencies between researchers and the communities under scrutiny that create opportunities to enrichen academic knowledge with practical knowledge and vice versa.

Two key theoretical insights follow from our analysis of CA's quest for recognition. First, we have demonstrated that, in the absence of political openings, active citizenship can provide a viable strategy for undocumented migrants to create solidarity and build diverse publics. Compared to the overt protest tactics of the sans-papiers movement (see Nyers and Rygiel 2012; Nicholls 2013), the active citizenship displayed in this case *indirectly* claims rightful presence by highlighting the capacity of undocumented migrants be a positive force in society (what we call 'performance-based deservingness'). Legal recognition still shimmers on undocumented activists' horizon, but they consciously choose to position themselves as active agents in society rather than passive subjects of migration policies. On the level of individual subjectivities, undocumented migrants thereby attempt to 'shake off' the stigma that comes with their status (Gonzales 2015). Sustainability, food poverty and preventing food waste are issues around which undocumented migrants can more easily establish equivalence and entice people to support their cause.

Second, formal and informal rules of the game reproduce status subordination in the field of civil society when they prevent 'challengers' like undocumented-led organisations to be recognised for who and what they are. The case presented in this paper shows that civil society is structured in such a way that it renders informal practices nearly invisible. The need to gain recognition of equivalence increases the reliance of challenging actors on support of established CSO professionals, thereby potentially preventing the redistribution of power and status. This pressure to conform requires challenging actors to continuously remain vigilant and, if necessary, fight to secure their right to act and speak as equal partners.

Based on these findings, we argue that merely looking at active citizenship as a neoliberal mantra or contestatory activism fails to acknowledge the inherently ambivalent nature of undocumented migrants' quest for recognition. Rather than simply acknowledging this ambivalence (see McNevin 2013), we push the discussion forward by showing how undocumented migrants, in their quest for recognition, have to navigate a field of tension between the need to acquire equivalence while seeking equality. Building on Fraser (2000), we argue that *recognition of equality* essentially involves redistributing status to become full partners in social interaction. However, we claim that *recognition of equivalence* also requires conforming to prevailing norms and forms within civil society. It is precisely this tension that makes 'active citizenship' such an ambivalent notion.

While this study has focused on the mutual relations between undocumented activists, CSOs and citizen publics, relational dynamics at the inter-subjective (see Swerts 2018) and state-society levels are equally deserving of scrutiny. When and how the redistribution of status involves informal and/or formal mechanisms aimed at acquiring equivalence and/or equality should also be investigated in more detail. In this respect, setting up PAR around the question of legal recognition could be a fruitful way to learn more about how the state responds to active citizenship. Finally, more longitudinal research is needed to trace how undocumented migrants shift strategies and tactics over time in response to changes in political climates.

Notes

1. These and all other italics added by the authors.
2. Despite his junior position in the government, the right wing State Secretary has become one the country's most popular politicians, amongst others by posting almost daily highly critical messages on migration and migrant integration on his social media accounts.
3. Per the explicit request of the respondents, all names of the six founding members of CA where replaced by pseudonyms. In order to be able to differentiate between which member is making a statement, we agreed to number respondents from I1 to I7.

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