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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The common sense of expert activists: practitioners, scholars, and the problem of statelessness in Europe

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Abstract

In this article, I follow a group of professionals in their efforts to address the problem of statelessness in Europe. My interlocutors divide the members of their group into "practitioners," on the one hand, and "scholars" on the other. Relating this emic dichotomization to Antonio Gramsci's dialectical take on common sense, I argue against a theoretical reductionism that regards expertise and activism as two essentially different and mostly separate endeavors, and put forward the concept of the "expert activist." Unpacking what I call the "practitioner–scholar dilemma," I show that in their effort to end statelessness, "practitioners" take a reformist route that aims at realizing citizenship for the stateless, while "scholars" are open to a more revolutionary path that contemplates the denaturalization and even the eradication of the state. By drawing on Gramsci, I suggest that the impasse the group encounters in their work might relate more to the structural constraints imposed by the state within or against which they operate than to the problem of statelessness they are trying to solve. This article contributes to a body of emergent work in anthropology that explores the intersection of scholarly expertise and activism.

Keywords Common sense · Activism · Expertise · State · Statelessness · Gramsci

Introduction

Statelessness is commonly depicted as a deplorable anomaly that should not even exist in a world of nation-states, particularly not in the twenty-first century. But almost 70 years after the first UN Convention on statelessness, Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons (1954), came into force, statelessness is not only still an issue, but a highly pertinent one. The problem was put on the post-World War II agenda of the newly formed United Nations specifically to engage with the forced

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displacement of hundreds of thousands of Jews. Since those early days, the condition of statelessness has subjected millions of people to a life without rights, especially as, in the most practical terms, people need to be recognized by a state simply to be able to effectively claim their human rights as envisioned by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). A stateless person is defined in international law as "a person who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law" (1954 UN Convention Art. 1.1). Stateless people therefore lack "the right to have rights," as Hannah Arendt, drawing on Kant, put it (Arendt 1949: 759). Only the so-called *de jure* stateless people, who are formally recognized as stateless by a state, enjoy encompassing rights comparable to those of other refugees; the de facto stateless, who form a much larger group, do not.

An individual can become de facto stateless for a number of reasons, including the collapse of an empire and the end of colonial mandates (as in the case of Palestinians), state collapse (as in the case of minorities such as the Roma in the former Soviet Union), or the failure of states to accommodate people after war (such as in the case of the Kurds). Statelessness can also be used as a crude tool by states to rid themselves of an entire ethnic group (as in the case of the Rohingya in Myanmar) or it can be the result of discriminatory legislation, for example, when women are not granted equality with men in conferring nationality to their children, potentially rendering their children stateless. Statelessness can be an unintended consequence of bureaucratic processes as much as it can be an intentional instrument of denationalization (Gibney 2006). It can also be a way of punishing deviance, as in the revocation of citizenship from those who are found to have committed terrorist acts. Finally, individuals have been known to renounce their citizenship for political reasons or as part of their activist work, thereby making themselves stateless (Araxia 2014; Kane 2018). In Europe alone, more than half a million people are de facto stateless (UNHCR 2018). This number is likely to be an underestimation, as the available data are unreliable (ISI 2020: 91).

Given that this complex phenomenon encompasses millions of individual stories of human suffering worldwide, it is understandable that a wide range of actors have taken it upon themselves to call for an end to statelessness. The urgency with which they pursue their endeavor to act against statelessness seems warranted, as statelessness threatens to erode an individual's very sense of being, challenging it on a daily basis. The de facto stateless can be denied housing, medical care, school attendance, marriage, and even the freedom to move from one place to another.

During my fieldwork, I have developed relationships with members of some of the most visible civil society organizations in Europe that focus on raising awareness and advocating an end to statelessness, and have attended several events that they have organized and hosted over the last 4 years. Some of these people have founded small non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that support stateless individuals and stateless "communities." Yet others have their own personal histories of migration, of dual citizenship, or of transnational family histories that motivated them to become engaged in the topic of statelessness. This group also includes scholars in university or research positions working through the theoretical and philosophical ramifications of statelessness, most of them with backgrounds in international relations, law, or theoretical philosophy.

I have found my way into this group through my work as a country-of-origin expert. In this capacity, I have been writing reports for First-tier and Upper Tribunal courts in the UK, mostly in cases where asylum seekers self-identify as stateless ethnic Rohingya.[1] While acquiring expertise in writing these reports and understanding how the British immigration and asylum system operates, I have also met other experts working for (I)NGOs, think tanks, and research institutes. I began to develop a keen interest in understanding how these professionals tackled the problem of statelessness after having attended a range of both high-profile and low-key events. I experienced "analytical doubling," as the anthropologist Dominic Boyer (2008) called the predicament of being an expert in one's own right while researching other experts going about their work, but only to a certain degree, as my interlocutors would determine which of the respective camps I belonged to at any given moment. They decided when they wanted to address me as an expert (scholar) who they knew was also carrying out ethnographic fieldwork among them, and when they wanted to relate to me as an ally (activist) and would demand that I stop analyzing them. In concrete terms, this meant that they would tell me when to write things down and sometimes even suggest what I should be writing down, and when to put my notebook away. Thus, I became part and parcel of a dilemma my interlocutors seemed to grapple with and which I had already observed early on in my research. I refer to this as the "practitioner–scholar dilemma." Rather than positioning myself firmly on either side of it or trying to assume a detached, outsider's perspective, I use their positioning of me as a heuristic device that allows me to inquire into the very characteristics of this dilemma and how it relates to the problem of statelessness.

In this article, I will explore the practitioner–scholar dilemma in terms of Antonio Gramsci's theoretical work on common sense. Gramsci's differentiation between *senso comune* and *buon senso* ("good sense") articulates well with my interlocutors' emic division into "practitioners" and "scholars." Gramsci regards these two concepts as nested in one another rather than as standing in opposition.

I will relate Gramsci's work on common sense to literature that aims at decentering and denaturalizing the state, such as the autonomy-of-migration approach, as well as to literature on expertise and activism. I will suggest that while it can be fruitful to shift toward a denaturalization of "the state" perspective, the impasse that expert activists encounter in their work and the practitioner–scholar dilemma they experience within their own group relates more to the structural constraints imposed by the very states within or against which they operate than to the problem of statelessness they are trying to solve. My focus in this article thus lies on the structural predicaments expert activists face when working in the field of statelessness.

My data consist of written observations, photographs, the recording and subsequent transcription of free-flowing conversations, oral presentations and speeches, journal

[1] In general, First-tier Tribunals hear appeals from citizens against decisions made by government departments or agencies. The First-tier Tribunal (Immigration and Asylum) deals with appeals against decisions made by the British Home Office concerning the permission to stay, deportation, or entry clearance. The Upper Tribunal is responsible for handling appeals against decisions made by the First-tier Tribunal (see also Good 2007).

entries, and textual documents, all obtained from participating in workshops, conferences, and policy briefings in various European settings such as universities in the UK, museums, and event spaces in The Hague and at the European Youth Centre and the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. My ethnographic research is ongoing and involves in-person and online attendance at thematic webinars on the topic of statelessness, in annual stakeholder meetings, and the launching of new reports and other publications.

The dialectics of common sense and good sense

For Antonio Gramsci, revolution could only be realized through class struggle since even "to be human one must be part of some social aggregate" (Gramsci 1916, cited in Germino 1990: 47).[2] Not only did he contemplate the dialectical relationships between class and the individual and between work and theory; he also developed a concept of "common sense" that is inherently dialectical. Understanding that he was writing "notes" and not full-fledged theories in his prison notebooks, the concepts Gramsci developed remained in flux and open-ended. This holds true for Gramsci's differentiation between the Italian terms *senso comune* and *buon senso*, concepts that he described but never really defined. He characterized *senso comune* as a "spontaneous philosophy of the multitude" (Gramsci 1971: 421), the most fundamental characteristic of which is its tendency to be "crudely neophobe and conservative" (423):

> [I]t is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and [inconsistent], in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is. (Gramsci 1971: 419)

As such, it does not carry a positive connotation; rather, it describes something that cements the status quo of what the anthropologist Kate Crehan termed "taken-for-granted understandings of how the world is" (Crehan 2011: 286). Gramsci declared *senso comune* to be an "ambiguous, contradictory and multiform concept and that to refer to common sense as a confirmation of truth is a nonsense" (Gramsci 1971: 423). There is, however, another side of common sense that Gramsci called "good sense" (*buon senso*) and which, according to him, "deserves to be made more unitary and coherent" (Gramsci 1971: 328). Rather than simply reproducing old ways of being, *buon senso* requires that the world as it is perceived by the multitude be interrogated, and that another, radically different world be envisioned. Good sense "supposes an intellectual unity and an ethic in conformity with a conception of reality that has gone beyond common sense and become, if only within narrow limits, a critical conception" (Gramsci 1971: 333–334). What Gramsci demanded

[2] Antonio Gramsci developed his theoretical oeuvre while trying to survive fascism: he was imprisoned in 1926 by the fascist-dominated Italian legislature while he was serving as a parliamentarian for the Italian Communist Party and thus should have had political immunity from arrest. He was put on trial in 1928 and was sentenced to twenty years in prison. When he died in 1937, he had spent 11 years in confinement, the last two of which he suffered from untreated medical conditions so severe that he could no longer write. In the years prior to that, he had produced a total of thirty-three notebooks, in which he laid out his revolutionary ideas on what was needed for true social transformation.

was thus nothing less than "a new common sense and with it a new culture and a new philosophy which will be rooted in the popular consciousness with the same solidity and imperative quality as traditional beliefs" (Gramsci 1971: 424). Crehan summarized these two aspects of common sense as follows:

> For Gramsci, common sense is a multi-stranded, entwined knot of, on the one hand, clear sightedness (good sense), which, like the little boy in the story, is not fooled by the sophistry of the Emperor's tailors; but, on the other, blinkered short-sightedness that clings defensively to the comfortable and familiar. (Crehan 2011: 284)

Common sense in its conservative connotation, however, only allows for what Gramsci termed "passive revolution," a form of incomplete hegemony (Gramsci 1971: 105) whereby innovative elements are introduced into society by an incipient social group, but without enough force to truly revolutionize old forms of governance. These groups have "the function of 'domination' without that of 'leadership'" (Gramsci 1971: 106). In passive revolution, the work of intellectuals might lead to the initiation of changes, but it lacks the power to see them through to the end. This results in a permanent dialectic between revolution and renovation, not unlike the Gluckmanian or Turnerian model of structural equilibrium that is only briefly interrupted by episodes of dispute, upheaval, or conflict, and symbolically interspersed with rituals of rebellion. During this time, people are allowed to vent their anger and frustration, only to then be reincorporated into the structure, which is constantly changing but never overturned.

In her monograph, Crehan links common sense to Gramsci's work on subalterns and intellectuals, clarifying that subalterns "live in a common sense world rooted in the narratives of those who dominate them" (Crehan 2016: 61). Gramsci's concept of subalternity encompasses subordination in all of its many forms, including internalized subordination, in which the subordinated come to see the hierarchies of the world they inhabit as inevitable and inescapable, as the will of God or the law of nature (Crehan 2011: 275). The role of intellectuals would be to help disseminate the narratives of the subalterns, which are usually drowned out and go unheard because subalterns lack the necessary resources to effectively promote their alternative aspirations. While intellectuals, according to Gramsci, have never been a class in and of themselves, they are determined "by the role they play in the process of a given class's production of knowledge" (Crehan 2016: 32). Their task is "to turn that class's incoherent common sense into coherent political narratives" (Crehan 2016: 31). These narratives already exist and do not need further validation, but they do have to be "recrafted to resonate with the concerns of a given historical moment" (119). They are present only as traces and require the action of intellectuals, as Gramsci called these "leaders," to be brought to the fore.[3] It is, therefore, not the intellectuals' ideas and capacities *as individuals* that are sought, but their ability to represent of an entire

[3] Kate Crehan (2016: 146) mentions the Occupy Movement, with its rallying cry "We are the 99%," as such a radical, commonsensical reconfiguration of an established American common sense. Likewise, for Ugo Mattei, "a holistic revolution" is needed to overcome the state and the market in order to rehabilitate common sense: "We need a new common sense recognizing, outside of the Western liberal hubris, that each individual's survival depends on its relationship with others, with the community, with the environment" (Mattei 2011: 12).

social class, whose knowledge they are to spread more widely and coherently and in whose name they are to act. Gramsci thus shifts from a focus on individual intellectuals to a concern with the kind of knowledge they engage in, the sources of their knowledge as such, and their embeddedness in social structures. These criteria lie at the heart of his distinction between "traditional" and "organic" intellectuals. All of my interlocutors are intellectuals who want to put their knowledge about statelessness to practical use, but who face constraints by the very state system they are fighting or arguing against. Following Gramsci, I interrogate what kind of intellectuals my interlocutors are: their intent is to speak for the stateless, who form a distinct and marginalized social group. However, the majority of those active in the field of statelessness are not or have never been stateless themselves. How does their embeddedness in the state system from which their identity and their economic stability derives impact their ability to transform a "crudely neophobe and conservative" common sense into a "coherent political narrative" when it comes to the issue of statelessness? Gramsci alerts us to the fact that, besides paying attention to the very activities of intellectuals, it is also necessary to scrutinize the structural conditions within which intellectual activity becomes possible at all. In the case of statelessness, it is therefore necessary to take the state itself into account, not only with regard to how my interlocutors position themselves alongside or against it, but also with regard to how the state system structures the very possibility of engagement.

State/lessness theory

Anthropologists have historically dealt with stateless societies or "acephalous communities" as part of Europe's and America's colonial politics of expansion and exploitation. Most ethnographic monographs centered on "headless" ethnic groups or tried to grapple with how groups without a clear leadership or someone "in power" organized themselves and interacted with one another. Since the demise of colonialism, such work has almost completely come to a halt; the state has tightened its grip on ethnic groups to such an extent that there is, by now, no place on earth that does not feel its eerie presence. This includes hunter-gatherer societies (Sapignoli 2018) and sedentary tribes (Girke 2018) in rural Africa as much as agrarian groups in Southeast Asia (Scott 2010) or "stateless societies" in Amazonia (Clastres 1977). While the anthropology of the state is a well-established field within sociocultural anthropology, statelessness as a modern phenomenon has been largely neglected in the discipline.

In contrast to how the phenomenon was approached in the past in the context of colonial state formation, namely, as an anomaly, a focus on contemporary statelessness allows us to question "the state" in a radical manner. Bahram (2021), for example, drawing on feminist standpoint theory (Harding 2004), suggests producing knowledge on statelessness "from a standpoint informed by the experience of the knowing subject" (2021: 115). This knowing subject is a stateless person or stateless "community" that has been exploited, oppressed, or persecuted by a state (or states) and whose suffering and sense of belonging gets distorted when viewed merely "as a condition of exclusion from citizenship" (117). Bloom and Kingston (2021) likewise

call for a shift in perspective from what they call a "citizenist" approach that problematizes statelessness to a "non-citizenist" approach that problematizes citizenship. This does not preclude non-stateless researchers or activists from pursuing the topic, but they should do so with an awareness of the "epistemic agency of the stateless" (Bahram 2021: 117). Similar suggestions are being put forward in migration and refugee studies, where authors champion the "de-migrantization" (De Genova et al. 2018: 257) of the field. They argue that what we are witnessing worldwide is "a crisis of the transnational government of populations on the move" (ibid.), not a crisis that can be attributed to migrants/refugees as such. These terms have become essentializing tropes that are strategically used by states to incite anti-migration sentiments and to render those defined by these terms passive. In proposing the "autonomy of migration" approach, De Genova, Garelli, and Tazzioli contextualize how migrants' and refugees' subjectivities allow them act within "historically specific social formations of human mobility that manifest themselves as a constitutive (subjective, creative, and productive) power within the more general capital–labor relation" (241). Likewise, Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013: 191) investigate the autonomy of migration approach as "an organizing practice that allows for the production of alternative ontologies "after citizenship." Compared to these approaches, Gramsci appears more realistic (which perhaps also means more pessimistic). He reminds us to question the very system within which all kinds of activities, including intellectual ones, are made possible, and his dialectical take on common sense, in which revolution is understood more in the sense of a recursive "revolving" than as a complete overthrow is, I think, crucial when interrogating the field of statelessness today and the people who are most active in it. But before exploring how Gramsci's concepts and recent theoretical approaches to the state and statelessness map onto the practices and discourses of my interlocutors, I will introduce the concept of the "expert activist" by drawing on literature from the anthropology of expertise and the anthropology of activism.

Expert activists

What has led me to categorize my interlocutors, a particular group of skilled people, as "expert activists"? Listening to how members of this group of professionals described their work, I noticed recurring phrases such as "raising awareness," "alerting," "making noise," "waking [other's] up," and "empowering others." One interlocutor, who was pursuing her PhD while heading a small rights-oriented NGO, referred to herself as a "scholar–advocate." This got me thinking that this particular group of people consciously combined their professional skills, often acquired through long-term practice and/or academic activities, with an activist's outlook, seeing the world as something that was not only in dire need of improvement, but as something that could actually be improved. After a while, I shared with my interlocutors how I was labeling them in my notes, and they seemed to approve of it—apparently, it accorded with how they perceived themselves. "I think we are expert activists, yes…," said one of my key interlocutors. Another interlocutor employed a metaphor to illustrate that these two aspects are not easily reconciled—she referred

to herself as having an "activist devil on my shoulder," implying (although not explicitly stating) that she also had a "scholar angel" sitting on the other.

There is an interesting convergence in the recent literature on the anthropology of activism (e.g., Hale 2006; Willow and Yotebieng 2020) and the literature on the anthropology of expertise (Boyer 2008; Summerson 2010) in the sense that authors understand activism and expertise as something people *do* rather than something they are, have, or hold. For the most part, my interlocutors engage in advocating for other individuals or groups who are in structurally weaker positions than they are, arguing with those in positions of power for changes in legislation and policy, raising awareness among like-minded others in the wider public domain, and challenging established academic narratives. Their expertise lies in the confidence they have in knowing how to do that and does not necessarily come from abstract knowledge per se or from the particular position they occupy within an institution or organization.

One stream of the literature approaches the interface between activism and expertise from the perspective of activists and freelancers who turn themselves into experts. This gets discussed under the rubrics of "street science" (Corbun 2005), "counter-expertise" (Fortun 2001; Fortun and Cherkasky 2009; Topçu 2008), and "rebellious lawyering" (López 1992). Brian Glick has more recently argued that, nowadays, lawyers are also part and parcel of activism and deserve to be studied as such by legal scholars. He even goes so far as to suggest that legal activism should be taught to students of law (Glick 2017: 612, 621). Likewise, Florencia Arancibia explores the transformation of an expert into an expert activist. She investigates the "co-production of activism and expertise," arguing against the dichotomization of expertise and lay knowledge as well as the "boundary work as it relates to social movements," where often "scientific" expert practices are pitted against those of activists, even when they are all engaging in the same field, setting, or conflict and share the same goals. She also argues against the depiction of "grassroots activists as passive receptors of the knowledge provided by experts" (Arancibia 2016: 484). Expert activism, she holds, does "not create knowledge fields per se, but generate[s] new ways of producing, organizing, and using expert knowledge" (483, emphasis in original):

> [I]t is rather the movement that provides spaces within which intellectual innovation takes place and provides the opportunities for new intellectual types to emerge: intellectuals are transformed through their movement activity, even where they may bring many of their preconceived ideas and social networks with them. (Arancibia 2016: 485, drawing on Eyerman and Jamison 1991)

In the limited literature, we have on expert activists so far (see also Frickel 2011), an emphasis thus emerges not only on collective over individual action, but also on the dialectical aspect inherent in these two conjoined categories. While the term "expert activists" might at first be viewed as tautological, as activists are often experts and experts increasingly engage in applying their expertise to advance social change, it is nevertheless worthwhile to focus on this complex conjunction, both for its historical trajectory and because it continues to be of concern to our interlocutors. It has also acquired a new, even more politicized dimension, as the term "activist" is increasingly being applied by politicians and the media in a derogatory manner to discredit the work of engaged experts (see Beyer 2021).

In the following section, I introduce some of my ethnographic data from a conference I attended in 2018 in the UK, focusing on how the practitioner–scholar dilemma plays out concretely and why "expert activists" in the field of statelessness in Europe are not "organic intellectuals" in Gramsci's sense of the term. This analysis will help account for my interlocutors' sense of being "stuck" in their work on statelessness.

The practitioner–scholar dilemma

"Although I have 'Doctor' in front of my name, I am actually a curious person," Rita Vermont[4] declared at the very beginning of her opening speech at a conference on statelessness that I attended. The conference was held in the UK in 2018, and it carried the pairing of "theory and practice" in its subtitle. I listened closely: Is having a PhD somehow supposed to preclude being curious? I wondered. The audience of roughly 250 participants had gathered at a downtown university campus in London for 2 days in order to, according to Rita, "have conversations amongst each other that maybe don't happen often enough." We were to "start relationships, help start projects, continue projects and make our work more effective." This was not to say that we should not talk to the people we had come with or already knew, Rita clarified, hinting at the tendency to stick to the people one already knows at such events, but it was clear that the conference was set up in a way that would allow for new dialogues and new knowledge to emerge: "speed dating," impromptu poster sessions, fishbowl discussions, and other interactive and didactically innovative formats were offered, alongside the more traditional panels that were flagged out as "theoretical" or "practice-oriented" and that focused on particular case studies or on strategic litigation.[5] The participants came from academia, legal clinics, corporate law firms, and the NGO sector, and also included some individual stateless persons.[6]

After this event and over the course of my ongoing research, I kept bumping into more or less the same people. Advocating an end to statelessness in Europe occurs within a social group whose members know each other well, who cooperate with one another, read each other's publications and reports, and attend each other's public events. And yet, the practitioner–scholar dilemma struck me even before members of this group spoke to me about it. As it turned out, many of my interlocutors made it part of their very introductions—sometimes right at the beginning of their presentations, as Rita did above. Why was it so important to emphasize that differentiation?

After Rita had opened the conference, the person she introduced next was a scholar to whom she assigned the task of "giving us an introduction to statelessness"—an interesting move, given the fact that we were all, in one way or another, already experts on the topic. Simone Anderson thus began her talk, picking up on

[4] All names are pseudonyms.

[5] Strategic litigation uses actual court cases to raise awareness of the cause for which the strategy is mobilized. It aims at setting precedents or initiating far-reaching change that goes beyond the individual court case at hand.

[6] There were also two UN delegates and a member of the EU present, but they did not mingle with the other participants and stayed only for their own panel.

how Rita had introduced her: "I will be giving an introduction on statelessness, but from my position … say, [highlighting] some of the problems I think we need to be working on together." She then confessed to having written a different presentation, "but [I] then decided that it was way too academic and looking only at theoretical work," and so she decided to talk about something else instead. Before she began, she must have felt it necessary to declare the following:

> I feel humbled because I am sitting here with people who actually are making important differences in the world. And as I see it, people who are working on theory have the luxury to raise problems without really having to find solutions. So what I am going to show here are some of the problems that I think there are … where I think we can be working together. What I am going to do is look at the interrelationships of theory and practice. (Simone Anderson 2018)

Since Rita had announced that Simone would be giving an "introduction to statelessness," she felt compelled to provide a definition of the concept, starting with its legal definition as laid out in the international conventions and adding "group statelessness," which affects whole "communities," as well as "spatial statelessness," which refers to geographical areas outside the effective control of any state and the individuals confined therein. "Introduction out of the way," she then declared, and began her actual talk, in which she introduced four understandings of statelessness. The first three were rather standard ones that conceptualize statelessness as an anomaly, as one encounters in most of the scholarly literature and the reports of NGOs. Such understandings were also in line with most of the "practitioners'" stances on the topic, as I would find out later.[7] The fourth understanding Simone mentioned turned the established perspective on its head by asking what it would mean to regard citizenship as the anomaly instead, and how we should account for the fact that many stateless people have come to embrace statelessness as an integral aspect of their identity. These questions and the theoretical assumptions behind them were of interest to many of the scholars I met that day and in other venues at later stages of my research, and I personally found this approach interesting and challenging as well.

After Simone's talk, it was Michelle Owen's turn, a practitioner, apparently, as she declared at the very beginning, "I will take you from the theoretical back to the very practical." In this way, she also indicated that she had classified Simone's talk as "theoretical" and that Simone's intention to recast her talk to better suit the audience and to address "the interrelationships of theory and practice" might not have been so successful after all. At the end of Michelle's talk, and much to my disappointment, the panel ended without an opportunity to engage in any open discussion; everyone dispersed for the coffee break. As a

[7] I shall only briefly identify the first three understandings here without going into greater detail, as this article is not about them. The first understanding was labeled the "realist approach," which views stateless people as powerful and dangerous. The second approach was called the "humanitarian approach," according to which stateless persons are vulnerable and weak. The third understanding was called the "development approach," which views stateless people as underutilized units of the development industry.

consequence of attending these opening talks, over the course of the full 2-day event, I paid particular attention whenever my interlocutors stressed their practitioner-ness or their scholar-ness. The discussion I had been looking forward to finally came about after a panel that consisted entirely of scholars who focused on what Simone had labeled the "fourth understanding" of statelessness. I personally felt quite inspired after the four talks, as I had never before heard, for example, a legal scholar demanding "the end of the state" or a political theorist questioning "the privilege of citizenship" and shouting, "We should all be stateless!" to an audience at least half of which were people trying to get rid of their statelessness, thus of the very thing the scholar just announced as desirable. But as one of the four panelists clarified, these revolutionary notions were easier said than done:

> We are not ready to let go of our own privileges. It is easy to put it out there, but many of us have struggled to think it through: all the stuff you have to let go – language, concepts, evidence – a lot of that goes back to the state.

The panelist had identified a crucial point: how is it possible at all to think of statelessness without thinking of the state? This, for me, is a key question that needs to be asked when it comes to statelessness, as the very word assumes the state as the status quo, and those who are subjected to statelessness as essentially lacking. Here the Gramscian concepts, which cannot be detached from the state, are most useful. For Gramsci, subalterns (such as stateless people) never exist in isolation from the state. The nature of their subalternity, writes Kate Crehan, is in large part defined by the specific ways they are incorporated into the state (Crehan 2016: 16). In Gramsci's reasoning, class is equally linked to the state. State formation and class formation go hand in hand; they are both historical phenomena that are inherently dynamic and co-constitutive of each other. For a new social group to acquire the requisite cultural and moral skills to establish hegemony, a conception of the state is necessary—Gramsci termed this "statolatry" (1971: 268–269). This phase in the historical development of a social group allows for an "initiation to autonomous state life and the creation of a 'civil society' which it was not historically possible to create before" (Gramsci 1971: 268). Thus, the state—the actual state apparatus as well as conceptions of what "the state" is—is needed for any social group to succeed in its goal of eventually assuming a hegemonic position.

Drawing on Gramsci, we can say that the state as the current hegemon always needs to be factored in, not *even* in the case of social movements whose aim is to overthrow the current state order or who question the very naturalness of a world divided into states, as in the ethnographic material I present in this article, but *especially* in such cases. This point is crucial when addressing statelessness in a context where, on the one hand, practitioners aim to incorporate stateless people into states by helping them acquire citizenship, while, on the other hand, scholars question the very naturalness of the state and of citizenship, and envision a radically different world.

In the same panel, another self-declared practitioner stood up and voiced the constraints she felt were imposed on her: "We are practitioners," she declares. "If we are not to see a lack [in statelessness], where should we take our thinking? What should we do?" By asking where she should take her "thinking," she made

it clear that, although she is a practitioner who is preoccupied with finding "solutions" and "doing," she also, of course, thinks deeply about the very phenomenon she is trying to get rid of. That there is no practice without theory is something the practitioners, some of whom have PhDs and all of whom have higher education, are aware of. But why downplay one and prioritize the other? The expert activists I am working with have been socialized in an environment where they have learned how to become experts. They have also learned how to represent a certain body of knowledge to others in an expert manner, which allows others to recognize them as experts in their field of practice. Finally, they have been approached as experts, and it is through such public recognition by others—whether stateless people or those representing them—that they have come to accept that label. All of the people I work with are members of organizations, no matter how small and informally organized they might be. They do not present themselves as individually motivated actors, yet they also do not necessarily act exclusively in the name of or as an organization. They do not, in other words, let the organization speak for them. Rather, being a member of an organization allows them to communicate more effectively what it is they do as expert activists. The frame of the organization thus helps them present particular types of interests and practices as expert knowledge rather than as individual viewpoints. My interlocutors would frequently say, "We at [organization's name] engage in …," but would not personify the organization itself as doing something. While an individual's situated speech can become "devoiced" as an expert opinion (as shown by Summerson 2010: 25, drawing on Mehan 1996), it is not the organization that is speaking on the individual's behalf. Rather, it is still the individual who is now speaking as an expert, thus, as a member of a group, as a carrier of expertise itself. However, they do so from opposite ends of the practitioner–scholar dilemma—something they are aware of and frequently reflect on. Coming back to Gramsci's differentiation between *senso comune* and *buon senso*, I argue that the practitioners have embraced the conservative part of common sense, which focuses on the state as a necessary aspect they have to factor in rather than work against. Their petitioning, appealing, litigating, awareness-raising, and pressuring are aimed at integrating stateless persons and groups into existing nation-states. They are aware that, logically as well as practically, it is this very institution of the state that allows statelessness to exist in the first place, and they know that the majority of stateless people are made stateless by states, which is as true today as it was in colonial times. Nevertheless, the practitioners' practices sustain the theoretical concept of the state precisely because statelessness is regarded as an anomaly that should not exist in the first place. They thereby naturalize the state and do not question or challenge its existence, and only highlight its inadequacies. This contrasts sharply with the very task the scholars have set for themselves: they dare to be idealistic—revolutionary, even—when they cry out, "We should all be stateless!" They have embraced what Gramsci termed *buon senso* in that they imagine—in their scholarly writing as much as in their public presentations during these events—a world without states, where "noncitizenism" (Bloom 2018) would be the new norm(al). Or at least it would be a "normal" in which the category of citizenship gets scrutinized and treated as the problem rather than as a solution to statelessness (see Bloom and Kensington 2021; Cole 2017).

It is important to emphasize that both camps want to change the current status quo. They all want to change a de facto existing political problem from an informed position. None of them wants to withdraw into the ivory tower or, conversely, to focus exclusively on action to the complete neglect of thinking. But, both camps have voiced a feeling of being "stuck" or dissatisfied—the practitioners because no satisfactory solution ever seems to materialize, the scholars because the revolution never seems to come. Simone Anderson's "interrelationships between theory and practice" were often mentioned in the fora I attended, but rarely productively discussed, let alone successfully achieved. Rita Vermont took the first step at addressing the practitioner–scholar dilemma head-on during the London conference when she said:

> There has been a lot of progress in protecting people's rights as stateless. If we go into philosophical questions of going beyond the nation-state, I want to hear practical solutions: How do we envision a world beyond nation-states? How do we vote, for example? (Rita Vermont 2018)

Another member in the audience challenged the four panelists:

> The answer cannot be to abolish the nation-state because the only place where people can come together and exert democratic rights is within the state. We can't renounce that and give it up to a few international courts. We have to create universal solidarity among the people within a state. (Unknown woman 2018)

These are pertinent questions and relevant objections that draw attention to the crucial role the state plays, independent of where my interlocutors stand as expert activists. Their practitioner–scholar dilemma is, I suggest, more than a manifestation of different emic understandings of practice and theory and how the two are related. Following Gramsci, one could argue that the two different aspects of common sense cancel each other out, resulting in neither of the camps achieving an upper hand. While wanting to help the stateless because they are "suffering" individuals or by perceiving them collectively as an alternative model of sociality, my interlocutors avoid another difficult discussion that must be had among themselves, a discussion not only about how theory and practice actually relate to one another, but about the fact that most of them speak from a standpoint that is different from that of the people they are advocating for or writing about. They separate their kind of knowledge into more "applied" or more "academic" because in neither case is it "first-hand" knowledge. In fact, they go to great lengths to clarify that they do not "speak for" the stateless; they are thus themselves acutely aware of their own "lack" in this regard—they themselves are not stateless. As such, neither "practitioners" nor "scholars" fit the criteria of Gramscian organic intellectuals, who are always members of the social group that they represent. This is not an issue that can be "fixed" by altering one's standpoint, even though it is crucial to take approaches from critical migration studies and feminist standpoint epistemology into account when it comes to researching statelessness. Gramsci is helpful in understanding statelessness in Europe (and elsewhere) because his concepts alert us to the structural constraints the state imposes on us even when expert activists are actively trying to transcend them.

Conclusion

In this article, I have drawn on Antonio Gramsci's work on common sense to analyze a dilemma encountered by members of a group of expert activists when it comes to how best to address the problem of statelessness. I have shown that the work of the so-called practitioners aims at changing the status quo of stateless people, but in doing so sustains the very hegemony of states that is the root cause of statelessness in the first place. I have also demonstrated that the eagerness of the "scholars" to question the state's legitimacy is based on a utopian scenario where a state of statelessness for all would no longer be considered an anomaly. However, if such an intervention were successful, it would rob the practitioners of their very field of practice. And as it is difficult to truly think beyond the state, the scholars' theories are thus frequently deemed "interesting," but in the end "impracticable" or "impossible" to realize.

Further research will also shed light on the question of how current efforts concerning the work on statelessness could be fruitfully understood as a kind of Gramscian "passive revolution," where change is called for, but only so that everything can remain the same. When one looks at the manifold campaigns that non-governmental and international organizations have launched in recent decades, particularly since 2014 when the UNHCR announced its so-called iBelong campaign to eradicate statelessness by 2024, the phenomenon of statelessness has become highly individualized, with the faces of individual people, predominantly from the Global South, featuring prominently in videos, photographs, and the mass media. Statelessness has been, I would argue, increasingly rendered not only a "practical" problem to which there might be a solution, but also one with "a face" or—in the case of group statelessness—a stereotypical depiction of "a community." The visual esthetics of the phenomenon have thus moved further away from the Global North and, therefore, from the origins of the (nation-)state (Anderson 1983), potentially reinforcing the idea of the naturalness of the state and, consequently, of the state as part of the solution rather than as part of the problem. The tendency to invite stateless individuals to policy briefings or conferences, asking them to give "first-person accounts" of the issue of statelessness or to "tell their stories," might thus be counterproductive, not only because it misses the systemic character of the problem, but also because it appropriates an individual's suffering for an institutional cause. On the other hand, scholars who are working on statelessness usually produce texts that bear very few traces of individual suffering—their interest lies rather with the phenomenon as such, that is, with statelessness as a potentially desirable new way of being and living together. We thus encounter the individualization of subalterns, on the one hand, and their strict categorization on the other. Further research would also need to acknowledge that, for many stateless individuals, the state continues to be perceived as an ideal entity, and they would wish for nothing more than to be a member of one and to obtain a nationality or citizenship. While for a few, statelessness might have become a marker of identity (see, e.g., Gonzales and Sigona 2017; Marushiakova and Popov 2004); most stateless people seem to be more conservative than

radical in their way of relating to the state. And as far as I can tell from my data and the available literature, a large majority of stateless individuals do not envision themselves as the spearhead of a revolutionary movement that would turn statelessness into the new status quo.

However, there is another very recent development happening in the field of statelessness advocacy and research that might lead to the emergence of organic intellectuals in the Gramscian sense: some stateless individuals have begun to set up NGOs and networks of their own, most of which are engaging in expert activism. Being in touch and working with some of them, I sense a very strong group spirit that stems from positioning their members not only in opposition to state systems, but also at some distance from the field of statelessness studies and advocacy as it is currently organized and by which they have until now been represented. It remains to be seen whether these stateless expert activists will become "organic intellectuals" in the way Gramsci envisioned, and whether they will campaign for a place of belonging that will be more in line with the conservative "practitioners" or with the revolutionary "scholars."

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