

living situations of those involved differ from each other. Similarly, I would suggest that rather than erasing differences, the solidarities of the long summer of migration needed those very differences in order to effect meaningful action. Thus, this book also sheds light on the ‘imagined communities’ that were produced by practices of migrant solidarity.

1.4. The Political Possibilities of Grassroots Humanitarianism

The practices and discourses of migrant solidarity that emerged around the long summer of migration often resembled what academic studies identify as key features of a humanitarian imaginary (cf. Vandevoordt & Verschraegen 2019: 103). Barnett (2005: 724) describes this as the idea of an ostensibly “impartial, independent, and neutral provision of relief to those in immediate danger of harm”, often thought of as being located ‘outside’ or ‘above’ politics. Traditionally, academic works on humanitarianism have focused on professionalised international relief operations by large non-governmental organizations, such as *Médecins Sans Frontières* (see for instance Fassin 2007; Scott-Smith 2016). Recently, however, scholars have also directed their attention to what has been termed “grassroots humanitarianism” (McGee & Pelham 2018; Sandri 2018; Vandevoordt & Fleischmann 2020) or “citizen aid” (Fechter & Schwittay 2019). These works account for the increasing engagement of ‘ordinary citizens’ and less formalized non-professional groups in practices that are driven by a similar humanitarian logic. This book contributes to these debates by investigating the contested meanings and effects of grassroots humanitarian action around the German ‘summer of welcome’.

Works in the field of the *anthropology of humanitarianism* have intensively discussed how actions based on a humanitarian imaginary, in fact, end up reproducing the unequal power relations at play (cf. Bornstein & Redfield 2011b). They illustrate that humanitarian action is deeply contradictory, entangled with governmental actors and complicit in the discrimination of marginalized subjects – and hence comes with antipolitical effects (cf. Ticktin 2011). My field research, however, revealed that there is more to such actions: an exclusive focus on the adverse antipolitical effects of humanitarianism risks overlooking how such an imaginary simultaneously opens up transformative political possibilities in the Rancièrian sense. I would thus echo the observation by Ticktin (2014: 283) that overly pessimistic interpretations lead conceptual works on humanitarian action into a “cul-de-sac of critique”. In order to move beyond

this dead end, she calls for research that explores “new and emergent meanings of the political in and around humanitarian spaces” (ibid.). It is these emergent meanings of the political from within a humanitarian imaginary to which I devote particular attention. In the following paragraphs, I outline in more detail how this book contributes to an understanding of the political possibilities of grassroots humanitarianism.

1.4.1. The Mobilizing Effects of Emergency Situations

Humanitarian action is often discussed as being intrinsically connected to the notion of a ‘crisis’ or a ‘state of emergency’ (Nyers 2006a; Calhoun 2010). Due to this emphasis on ‘emergency’, Ticktin (2016: 262) argues, humanitarian action is viewed from a narrow temporal perspective that focusses on the immediate events and leaves no room for embedding them in a historical context or for considerations of the future. Such an imaginary would neglect the (wo)man-made causes of events (cf. Calhoun 2010). It thus resembles discourses pertaining to natural catastrophes, thought of as ‘acts of God’ or ‘bad luck’ (cf. Agier 2010). Such perceptions of ‘crises’, however, are said to discourage the assignment of blame and “rarely lead to protest movements” (Jasper 1998: 410). Others have argued that the spatial movement of refugees is generally depicted through the use of crisis metaphors, which in turn inspires humanitarian action (cf. Soguk 1999; Mountz & Hiemstra 2013). In consequence of such an imaginary, the reception of asylum seekers is said to become a non-political phenomenon while the power relations at play are ignored (Nyers 2006a).

Indeed, in the course of my field research, I realized that the image of the ‘crisis’ played an important role for those who engaged in practices of refugee support. From September 2015 on, crisis metaphors circulated widely in public and political discussions. Almost on a daily basis, new developments surrounding Europe’s ‘refugee crisis’ hit the front pages of national and international newspapers, for instance with stories about the movement of asylum seekers via the ‘Balkan route’; deteriorating conditions of reception in Germany and other western European countries; and the reintroduction of national border controls in the Schengen area (for a more detailed account on the political developments see Kasperek & Speer 2015; Kasperek 2016; Heller & Pezzani 2017; Hess & Kasperek 2017b; Hess et al. 2017). This image of the ‘crisis’ in late summer of 2015 mobilized thousands of citizens to get involved

and help ‘those in need’. Many of these helpers stepped in where governmental actors failed to provide even the most basic services to the newcomers.

And yet, in spite of their emphasis on ‘crisis’ and emergency, those who sought to help did not necessarily ignore the structural political causes of events or hold a narrow temporal perspective. Often, their actions were guided as much by a focus on the immediate event as they were by future visions of society (cf. Vandevordt & Fleischmann 2020). Quite connectedly, in his telling analysis of the search and rescue operations of NGOs in the Mediterranean Sea, Cuttitta (2018: 632) outlines how these organizations draw attention to the structural causes of humanitarian emergencies and, in the course of their actions, turn the Mediterranean in a “political stage”. In a similar vein, humanitarian volunteers in the area of my field research sometimes also turned the local reception of asylum seekers into a “political stage”. Many openly reflected on the contradictions of their practices and acknowledged that they might be helping to sustain flawed asylum policies. The notion of an acute emergency situation can thus also function as a powerful mobilizing force that draws people into actions that come with possibilities to bring about change towards a different alternative.

1.4.2. Reflecting on the Causes of Suffering

Scholars have argued that humanitarian action is frequently guided by an emphasis on human suffering (see Ticktin 2006; Agier 2010; Bornstein & Redfield 2011b). The ultimate aim of humanitarians is the alleviation of immediate suffering through the temporary provision of food, shelter or medical care (see Ticktin 2014: 274). Various authors have problematized how actions guided by such an impulse to alleviate suffering (re)produce unequal power relations (Barnett 2016). They argue that humanitarian action reduces asylum seekers to their suffering while perpetuating inequalities between passive recipients of aid and active, benevolent citizens (see Fassin 2007). In consequence of such actions, asylum seekers would become “mute victims” (Rajaram 2002) or “speechless emissaries” (Malkki 1996). With reference to the writings of Agamben (1998), others have discussed how an emphasis on suffering paints asylum seekers as “bare life”, i.e. beings stripped of political rights and reduced to their bare biological existence (Ticktin 2006; Schindel 2016; Vandevordt 2020). In his often-cited book *Distant Suffering*, Boltanski (1999) outlines how the media periodically serve up “spectacles of suffering” that inspire a “politics of pity” among those who are better off. According to Boltanski (ibid.: 13),

such expressions of pity depend crucially on physical distance and end when the unfortunates “invade the space of those more fortunate”.

The humanitarian imaginary at play during the summer of 2015 clearly did not end at the helpers’ own doorsteps. Instead, the arrival of asylum seekers triggered an unprecedented level of compassion despite or because of spatial proximity. I came across many instances when those supporting refugees claimed that they felt morally obligated to step up in order to alleviate immediate human suffering. Indeed, many provided for the basic needs of the newcomers, such as food, clothing and medical care. However, this emphasis on immediate human suffering often went hand in hand with a reflection on unequal power relations and the structural conditions that lead to the marginalization of asylum seekers. Quite connectedly, Sinatti (2019: 143) found that volunteers and aid workers supporting refugees in Milan did not only respond to migrants’ basic needs in terms of ‘bare life’ but also “empower[ed] migrants and facilitate[d] their autonomous agency”, what she calls “enabling humanitarianism”. Feischmidt and Zakariás (2019: 89) also point to the entangled nature of humanitarian charity and political action in practices of refugee support around the long summer of migration, arguing that “the consideration of the suffering and neediness of others may increase awareness of political responsibilities, and thus stimulate the birth of political critique”. This book contributes to an understanding of how a grassroots humanitarian impulse to alleviate suffering can be coupled with a desire to bring about change towards a ‘better society’ and the articulation of dissent towards governmental decisions and policies.

1.4.3. ‘Humanity’ as a Political Identity

Scholars have outlined that humanitarian action is often inspired by the notion of a shared “humanity” (Agier 2010; Feldman & Ticktin 2010; Barnett 2011). Such an imagined category of ‘humanity’ unifies all human beings under a common identity, transcending distinctions established between groups of people by means of national citizenship (Nyers 2006a: 32). Many works have foregrounded the essentializing effects of the notion of a shared ‘humanity’ (Fassin & Pandolfi 2010; Ticktin 2016). For instance, Edkins (2003: 256) outlines how “such an approach depersonalizes and depoliticizes, and operates in symbiosis with the state”. Asad (2003) argues that the ostensibly unifying category of humanity is always an illusion since divisions resulting from unequal power relations persist. Fassin (2007: 518) illustrates how humani-

tarianism itself establishes “two forms of humanity and two sorts of life in the public space”, namely those who become the passive recipients of aid and those who are active for the sake of others.

In the course of my field research, I came across many instances when those supporting refugees framed their practices as ‘acts of humanity’. They told me that they felt morally obligated towards ‘humanity’, thus establishing a shared identity with asylum seekers. On closer examination, however, it transpired that many had quite clear preconceptions of who deserved their help and support and who did not, preconceptions that reproduced governmental discriminations between ‘genuine’ and ‘bogus’ asylum seekers. For instance, many volunteers regarded Syrians as ‘suffering victims’ and hence rightful recipients of their help and support. Asylum seekers originating from African countries or Eastern Europe, in contrast, were frequently depicted as bogus ‘economic migrants’ who should be deported. However, there were also many instances, when the notion of a ‘shared humanity’ inspired political actions that transcended and challenged dominant distinctions between ‘genuine refugees’ and ‘bogus economic migrants’. At times, volunteers employed the idea of ‘humanity’ as a political identity from which to contest deportation orders or the classification of further ‘safe countries of origin’. Furthermore, a feeling of being obligated towards ‘humanity’ mobilized a moral imperative to act that not only led thousands to get involved but also facilitated the formation of powerful alliances (see Chapter 2). Thus, the imagined category of ‘humanity’ also opens up important political possibilities in the context of grassroots humanitarian action. This book explores the notion of a ‘shared humanity’ as quite a powerful political identity from which to voice dissent and advocate for a ‘better society’.

1.4.4. The Political Power of an ‘Apolitical’ Positioning

Scholars have problematized how humanitarian action is commonly understood as an ‘impartial’, ‘neutral’ or ‘apolitical’ practice (see Barnett 2011; Fassin 2012). Practices inspired by an impulse to alleviate suffering are often depicted as being ‘outside’ or ‘above’ politics (Bornstein & Redfield 2011b; Ticktin 2011; Fassin 2012). As Nyers (2006a: 32) puts it: “Humanitarian action and political action are cast as two distinct and separate modes of acting and being-in-the-world”. While the realm of politics is often associated with negative attributes (cynical, self-interested, amoral), humanitarianism is commonly

seen as a positive counterweight or remedy (compassionate, principled, impartial) (*ibid.*).

During my field research, many of my interlocutors also asserted that they ‘only’ wanted to help but did not want anything to do with politics. Elsewhere, I problematized such an understanding of ostensibly ‘apolitical’ humanitarian action as a persistent and powerful myth (see also Redfield 2011; Fleischmann & Steinhilper 2017). A claim to act ‘beyond’ or ‘outside’ of politics masks the fact that such action is always embedded in a specific political and social context marked by unequal power relations. Nonetheless, supposedly ‘apolitical’ practices of refugee support were also frequently imbued with transformative political meanings and effects in the Rancièrian sense: they came with possibilities to challenge, contest or reform conditions of exclusion and discrimination in migration societies. Many did not hesitate to take a stand in public, others voiced dissent at governmental actors and migration policies or demonstrated a clear will to influence political decision-making processes. I also came across instances when an ‘apolitical’ position was strategically employed in order to make political aims more effective (see Chapter 2). At times, thus, claims of ‘apolitical’ action present a powerful political position from which to instigate change towards a different alternative.

1.4.5. Humanitarian Dissent

Scholars have also outlined how humanitarian actions are often deeply entangled with governmental actors and policies. Most strikingly, Fassin outlines how humanitarianism and government have increasingly tended to merge and argues that they have developed into forms of “humanitarian government” in which human beings are managed and regulated in morally charged ways (Fassin 2007, 2012). In her study on the role of compassion in French immigration politics, Ticktin (2011) likewise illustrates how “regimes of care”, spanning both civil society and state actors, govern migrants through an emphasis on care and compassion. In consequence, Ticktin argues, asylum seekers need to highlight their physical suffering in order to obtain entitlements and rights. In his book on international paternalism, Barnett (2016: 10) points out how Marxian analyses have long blamed humanitarians and philanthropists for helping to maintain a system of exploitation. Humanitarian action thus seems to form part of the very ‘cynical’, ‘self-interested’ and ‘amoral’ world of politics that it claims to remedy.

Despite their claim to remain ‘outside’ of politics, grassroots humanitarians in the area of my field research also became the object of governmental intervention and control and complicit in the governance of migration (see Chapter 3). However, at the same time, many volunteers criticized such governmental interventions in their role and conduct, voicing a strong will to remain independent. They embedded their actions in a humanitarian imaginary that simultaneously expressed criticisms of governmental actors, openly counteracted their decisions and voiced dissent at existing policies (see also Fleischmann 2017). In a similar vein, Stierl (2017: 709) found that dissent and criticism might also be articulated “from within humanitarian reason”. He analyses the subversive potentials of humanitarian action and argues that there is a “wide spectrum of humanitarian imaginary” that comes with differing possibilities for subversive acts (*ibid.*). Walters (2011: 48) contends that the relationship between humanitarianism and government is complex and ranges from co-optation to provocation. Vandevordt and Verschraegen (2019) suggest that practices of refugee support around the long summer of migration might be approached as a form of “subversive humanitarianism”, which they define as “a morally motivated set of actions which acquires a political character not through the form in which these actions manifest themselves, but through their implicit opposition to the ruling socio-political elite” (*ibid.*: 105). Thus, I would argue that not only humanitarianism and government are tending to merge, as Fassin (2012) previously outlined, but also humanitarianism and grassroots political action.

1.5. Rethinking Political Action in Migration Societies

The contested solidarities that emerged around the long summer of migration developed in response to a politically tense environment. EU member states were deeply split over how to distribute the growing numbers of asylum seekers fairly, some reintroduced national border controls, while more and more migrants drowned on their perilous journey across the Mediterranean Sea (for a more detailed account on the political developments see Kasparek & Speer 2015; Heller & Pezzani 2017; Hess et al. 2017; Agustín & Jørgensen 2019; Rea et al. 2019). In addition, the German public appeared increasingly divided in relation to the topic of migration (*cf.* Hinger 2016; Hinger, Daphi & Stern 2019). From late 2014 on, many German cities became sites of weekly protest marches organized by the Pegida movement and its regional