

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

offsprings, marches that openly displayed hostile attitudes towards asylum seekers and stirred up anti-immigration sentiments (see De Genova 2015; Virchow 2016; Vorländer, Herold & Schäller 2016; Jäckle & König 2017). Many of those who supported refugees around that time depicted their actions as a means to influence these tendencies in specific ways and bring about changes towards a 'better society'. At times, thus, refugee support turned into political action in the Rancièrian sense outlined above. Although works in the field of critical migration studies have engaged with political action in migration societies for years, the transformative potentials stemming from practices that are not openly depicted as "left-wing political activism" have gone little noticed. In the following paragraphs, I sketch out how this book contributes to ongoing discussions in the field. I argue that the contested practices of refugee support and migrant solidarity invite us to rethink political action in migration societies in more relational terms.

Works in the field of critical migration studies have often turned the notion of asylum seekers as mute and passive victims on its head, while drawing attention to their expressions of political agency (Bojadžijev & Karakayali 2010). Thus, scholars have dealt intensively with instances of refugee and migrant activism (see for example Johnson 2012; Nyers & Rygiel 2012; Tyler & Marciniak 2013; Ataç, Rygiel & Stierl 2016; Steinhilper 2017). They argue that it is only through the subjectivization of non-citizens who are structurally excluded and stripped of political rights that the unequal power relations at play can be challenged (Topak 2016). Such works draw on the concept of the *autonomy of migration* (see for instance Papadopoulos & Tsianos 2013; Scheel 2013; De Genova 2017). This line of thought regards the irregular border crossings of migrants as subversive acts that challenge sovereign power and contest the parameters of the modern nation-state. From this perspective, the spatial movement of irregular migrants is always also a social movement that crucially alters the way people live together in the arrival countries (cf. Karakayali & Tsianos 2005).

Around the long summer of migration, the growing influx of asylum seekers did indeed set in motion profound transformation processes that affected the basic parameters of living-together in migration societies. However, my findings suggest that the migrants' capacity to bring about change and transformation depended largely on the *responses* of established citizens and their contested social imaginaries and practices. In other words, the parameters of change were subject to contestation and negotiation between different actors and individuals in the arrival society.

Scholars also often take their cue from Isin's works on "acts of citizenship" (Isin 2008; Isin & Nielsen 2008; Isin, Nyers & Turner 2008; Isin 2012). Isin regards instances when migrants claim an own voice as disruptive moments that challenge the distinction between legitimate citizens and non-citizens, the central premise of sovereign power (see for instance Walters 2008; Mc-Nevin 2011; Nyers & Rygiel 2012; Ilcan 2014). In his seminal book *Being Political – Genealogies of Citizenship* (Isin 2002), he outlines how the category of citizenship had historically become ever more inclusive in response to such disruptive acts, gradually integrating groups that were formerly excluded, such as slaves or women. Through such "acts of citizenship", asylum seekers and irregular migrants become claims-making subjects within the nation-state in which they reside (Johnson 2014).

In the course of my field research, I came across numerous moments when asylum seekers claimed an own voice and made themselves visible as claims-making subjects contesting the conditions of their reception. In the fifth chapter, I investigate the spontaneous protests of asylum seekers in so-called 'emergency reception centres', interim forms of accommodation that came with increasingly intolerable living conditions for its inhabitants in the wake of the long summer of migration. In the sixth chapter, I investigate more organized and long-term instances of migrant activism that occurred in a small town in the area of my field research. In both cases, however, the asylum seekers' scope to demonstrate political agency and to influence their conditions of reception proved highly contingent on the (de)politicizing responses of various actors on the ground, including those who engaged in practices of refugee support. The migrants' acts of citizenship were thus *intermediated* through their relationships with established residents. This chimes with the thoughts of Johnson (2012: 118) who, writing on migrant activism, argues that "the citizen becomes a necessary partner [...] for change to be effective". Political action in migration societies, I would argue, is thus always relational, unfolding in practices and relationships of solidarity.

Works in the field of critical migration studies have also engaged intensively with activist networks that advocate for the rights of migrants and asylum seekers and act from a decidedly 'leftist' political position. Scholars point out how such groups openly denounce injustices related to the modern nation-state and its territorial borders (see Millner 2011; Rygiel 2011; King 2016; Monforte 2020). For instance, there has been great interest in *no border activism*, a loosely connected network of activists who call for the abolishment of territorial borders, advocate for a right to free movement, and take a stand

against the nation-state (Walters 2006; Rigby & Schlembach 2013; Burrige 2014; Gauditz 2017). These works shed light on the transformative and subversive potentials that emanate from practices of refugee support. However, they often focus solely on groups and individuals who describe their practices as 'leftist' and deliberately 'political'.

Many of those who supported refugees around the long summer of migration, by contrast, openly set themselves apart from 'leftist political activism' and were much more hesitant to depict their actions as a means to counteract the nation-state. Often, their practices were embedded into an 'apolitical' humanitarian imaginary that, nonetheless, offered manifold political possibilities to bring about change and transformation. There were also instances when those who engaged in practices of refugee support in their village, town or neighbourhood simultaneously held local political offices. For example, a volunteer turned out to be the deputy mayor of her village, while others asserted that they were long-term party members of the SPD, the German Social Democratic Party. These encounters made me realize that the ostensibly separate entities of 'state' and 'civil society' are in fact much more entangled and elusive (cf. Abrams 1988 [1977]; Mitchell 1991; Ferguson & Gupta 2002). I would therefore argue that political action in migration societies does not necessarily need to be formulated in opposition to 'the state', as is the case with *no border activism*, while political transformation does not always happen in a linear fashion, proceeding upwards from an entity imagined as 'civil society' openly counteracting 'the state'.

With this in mind, this book analyses how relationships of solidarity in migration societies inspire more indirect, hidden or everyday forms of political action. My aim is to investigate how political transformation can also be *enacted* on the ground through the immediate practices of committed citizens, without them necessarily making direct claims towards an entity imagined as 'the state'. This chimes in with Youkhana's (2015: 11) writings, in which she emphasizes the value of everyday practices as a means to transgress existing modes of belonging centring on the nation-state. In a similar vein, Martin, Hanson and Fontaine (2007) emphasize "the role of individuals in creating change" and argue that activism also "entails an individual making particular kinds of new connections between people that alter power relations within existing social networks" (ibid.: 80). They thus propose opening up the category of political activism to include not only actions that are conventionally considered 'political' but also everyday actions with a more limited geographic reach. Based on his case study on practices of refugee support in

Milan, Artero (2019: 158) also suggests that volunteering with refugees can become a “micropolitical practice”. Stock (2019: 136) points to the transformative potentials of relationships forged through refugee support, relationships that enable both volunteers and refugees “to engage in acts of citizenship through care practices that are conducive to more inclusive migration politics”. Bosi and Zamponi (2015) also stress the political significance of actions that seek to transform certain aspects of society without making direct claims towards governmental actors (see also Zamponi 2017).

Such conceptions of political action chime strikingly with what I witnessed around the long summer of migration. Many of those who engaged in practices of refugee support aimed to change the status quo through ‘hands-on’ interventions in their local communities. In order to take into account such more hidden, subtle or indirect forms of political action, I approach solidarity as a transformative relationship that inspires actions with contested political meanings and effects. In this way, this book aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of political action in migration societies by stressing its *relationality*, a relationality that unfolds in relationships of solidarity between established residents and newcomers.

## **1.6. Researching Solidarity in the German ‘Summer of Welcome’: Field, Access, Methods, Ethics**

This book is underpinned by qualitative and ethnographic field research conducted between late 2014 and mid-2016 in various localities across Germany, particularly across the southern state of Baden-Württemberg. In the course of my 20 months of fieldwork, I held more than 30 semi-structured interviews ranging in duration from half an hour to four hours. The majority of these interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed. They allowed me to gain insights into the motivations, interests and social imaginaries of a diverse range of actors involved in the contestation of solidarities. This spanned volunteers who sought to help refugees; self-declared political activists; governmental representatives at municipal and federal state level; people professionally employed in the field of the reception of asylum seekers, for instance in social welfare organizations; and, last but not least, asylum seekers themselves. In order to gain insights into the discussions that evolved among and between these different actors, I conducted participant observation in numerous meetings, conferences, trainings and other events related