

## **5. RECASTING SOLIDARITY: The Political Agency of Asylum Seekers in Relationships of Solidarity**

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### **5.1. Insubordinate Recipients: Asylum Seekers' Interventions in Relationships of Solidarity**

On a weekday in February 2016, something out of the ordinary occurred in Bad Waldsee, a small rural town in southern Germany. A group of around 60 asylum seekers marched through the streets of the town centre to protest publicly against the conditions of their reception. Eventually, they gathered at the town hall and demanded to speak to a representative of the local council who could address the reasons for their protest. Most of the protesters had fled from Syria or Afghanistan and, since late summer 2015, had been accommodated at the emergency reception centre (“Notunterkunft”) in Bad Waldsee. This interim facility for 170 asylum seekers was established at the local community centre when existing reception schemes proved insufficient. After several months of waiting for their asylum cases to be processed, the refugees became increasingly discontent and aimed to publicly call attention to various issues surrounding the situation they found themselves in. Their reasons for protesting ranged from demands for their asylum cases to be processed to anger at incompetent management staff at the facility to discontent with the intolerable living conditions they faced. Following their protest march, the asylum seekers continued their actions with what they termed a “hunger strike” at the reception centre: for several days, a majority of the inhabitants collectively refused the food served in the canteen in order to draw attention to their grievances. With these protests, the asylum seekers in Bad Waldsee clearly showed that they were not prepared to silently accept the terms and conditions of their reception, choosing instead to make themselves visible as insubordinate recipients.

These protests were not an isolated case in the area of my field research. From early to mid-2016, in the wake of the long summer of migration, similar incidents occurred at several interim reception centres across southern Germany. For instance, in April 2016, asylum seekers protested against their transferral to a container village in Offenburg, where they were no longer allowed to cook for themselves. They organized a protest march and collectively refused the food served at the canteen. In early February 2016, the inhabitants of an emergency reception centre in a neighbourhood of Stuttgart protested against the intolerable hygiene at the facility by means of a collective “hunger strike”. Just a few days later, there was a public protest at another interim facility in Stuttgart, at which asylum seekers demanded that their asylum cases finally be processed. These are just a few of the examples that gained media coverage during my field research. There may, however, have been many more examples of protests within emergency reception centres that went unnoticed by the public or were strategically covered up by the governmental actors responsible for the facilities.

Conditions at emergency reception centres had been quite tough from the outset, but, during the first half of 2016, they became increasingly intolerable for their inhabitants. When regular initial reception centres proved to be insufficient and overcrowded during the long summer of migration, additional interim facilities were hurriedly set up across Germany, thereby averting a situation where asylum seekers had to sleep on the streets (cf. Hinger, Schäfer & Pott 2016). In some places, public sports or assembly halls were turned into reception centres; in others, large tents or “container villages” were established in improvised locations such as car parks. In many cases, more than one hundred asylum seekers with different backgrounds and nationalities were squeezed into a single space that, if they were lucky, had been divided up into smaller compartments via thin partition walls; in Bad Waldsee, for instance, four asylum seekers had to share a compartment of nine square metres. At these interim facilities, asylum seekers often had to contend with a lack of privacy, insufficient sanitation, contagious illnesses, an absence of cooking facilities meaning external service providers catered for them, and a shortage of competent employees able to address their concerns. Moreover, due to the sharp increase in the numbers of asylum seekers, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) was unable to process and manage all the accumulating asylum cases. Asylum seekers thus routinely spent months waiting under such conditions for their asylum cases to be heard.

In critical migration studies, scholars have discussed such situations of waiting and ‘being stuck’ as a central technology in the management and governance of asylum seekers (Rotter 2016; Turnbull 2016; Fontanari 2017; Tazzioli 2018). Yet, they have also pointed to the agency of asylum seekers and their ability to resist and challenge these static conditions (Griffiths 2014; Ramsay 2017; Eule et al. 2019). For instance, Kallio, Meier and Håkli (2020: 3) argue that “waiting does not equal staying still, indifferent, or unchanged [...] spaces of waiting are thus also spaces of struggle, action and political possibility”. The protests at emergency reception facilities in the area of my field research illustrated strikingly how asylum seekers also challenged and resisted the conditions of their reception around the long summer of migration.

So far, the voices of asylum seekers have played a marginal role throughout this book. The practices of refugee support that I investigated during the long summer of migration often served quite diverse interests and did not necessarily empower asylum seekers to voice their own demands. This tendency echoes academic works outlining how asylum seekers become “mute victims” (Rajaram 2002) or “speechless emissaries” (Malkki 1996) in the context of their humanitarian reception. In consequence of humanitarian imaginaries, asylum seekers would become ‘bare life’ that is reduced to its basic needs and deprived of political agency (Agamben 1998; Vaughan-Williams 2009; Darling 2014; Schindel 2016; Vandevooort 2020). And still, scholars working on refugee and migrant activism have pointed to the need to take into account the political agency of asylum seekers (see Nyers 2011; Squire 2011a; Tyler & Marciniak 2013; Ataç et al. 2015). For instance, Moulin and Nyers (2007: 357) emphasize that “refugees are problematizing [...] regimes of power/knowledge and making their own interventions in the governmentality of care and mobility”. Agier (2010: 40) illustrates how asylum seekers’ protests repoliticize their ascribed identity as ‘silent victims’, challenging the parameters of a humanitarian imaginary.

This chapter contributes to this body of work by illustrating how asylum seekers’ expressions of political agency are *intermediated* through relationships of solidarity. In what follows, I investigate how actors involved in the humanitarian reception of asylum seekers make sense of and respond to their in-subordinate acts. On the one hand, I take a closer look at how such moments of interruption intervene in and contest the ‘right’ conduct of solidarity. On the other hand, I investigate how asylum seekers’ protests lead to a reconsideration of practices of refugee support, how they provoke the parameters of helping to be disputed and how they subsequently *recast* the contested soli-

darities that developed around the long summer of migration. In the protests that I witnessed during my field research, the issue of food took on important political meanings. It served as a political platform that brought to the fore differing and competing interventions in the parameters of a humanitarian reception. The issue of food also provided a clear illustration of how different actors intermediated the asylum seekers' scope for political agency. Throughout this chapter, I thus conceptualize asylum seekers' political agency as the intermediated capacity to alter and contest the conditions of their reception in favour of a different alternative.

I draw on field research during and shortly after several protests that occurred in southern Germany in the first half of 2016. I focus on two intriguing incidents that were particularly revealing for the purpose of this chapter: firstly, the aforementioned acts of protest in Bad Waldsee, and, secondly, an incident in Offenburg, a medium-sized town at the southwestern edge of Germany. I refer to interviews with protesting asylum seekers; with representatives of the local government; with volunteers; and with reception centre staff such as managers, security guards and social workers. In addition, I draw on my own observations at the respective reception facilities during and after the acts of protest. I also consider the media coverage by analysing local newspaper articles that reported on the incidents. My aim is to provide multiple perspectives on the insubordinate acts of the protesting asylum seekers.

This chapter consists of four parts. In section two, I scrutinize my analytical perspective on *intermediated agencies*. I then take a closer look at the storying of the protests in Bad Waldsee via different actors involved in the reception of asylum seekers. In section four, I provide insights into another case study from the medium-sized town of Offenburg. In this context, local governmental actors (re)defined the protesting asylum seekers as economic migrants who should be excluded from humanitarian protection, a conception that was, however, highly contested by volunteers in the town. I close off with concluding remarks on the role of asylum seekers in the recasting of solidarity.

## 5.2. The Intermediated Agency of Asylum Seekers

Academic works on migrant activism offer useful starting points for a conceptualization of asylum seekers' interventions in relationships of solidarity. Such studies point to the need to take into account the agency of asylum seek-