

for her angry tone, saying that I had caught her in a week in which “people like her” were “really frustrated” with the district council, while Klaus Böhlen explained his dissent towards the council as follows:

“They say: ‘As the district council, we decide. All those volunteers, that’s great and we can also invite them to events and shower them with praise, but we’re not letting them influence us in our decisions. Where would that lead?’”²²
(Interview with Klaus Böhlen: 25/4/2016)

My interlocutor thus felt that the district council did not take them seriously and would not include them in their decision-making processes. Our conversations also shed light on a longer history of conflict between volunteers and the local authority. Keen to voice their increasing discontent with this situation, my interlocutors told me, their initiatives had recently joined forces to request a meeting with council representatives in order to discuss their conflictive relationship.

Summing up, I would argue that the acts of protest in Offenburg did indeed come with political outcomes. Although the asylum seekers’ request to cook for themselves went unaddressed, their protests nevertheless contested the conditions of reception and recast the relationships of solidarity in the town. They brought about contrasting storyings and intensified already existing conflicts between volunteers and governmental actors. In response to the protests, the volunteers challenged the governments’ prerogative to decide upon those included and those excluded from humanitarian protection. This is another clear example of how relationships of solidarity that build on a humanitarian imaginary can come with political meanings and effects.

5.5. Concluding Remarks: The Agency of Asylum Seekers in the Contestation of Solidarity

This chapter investigated how actors involved in the reception of asylum seekers made sense of and responded to protests in emergency reception facilities in the wake of the long summer of migration. I illustrated that the political

22 Translation by LF. German original: “[...] sie sagen: wir entscheiden, wir als Landratsamt entscheiden. Das mit den Ehrenamtlichen ist super und die kann man dann auch zu den Empfängern einladen und so und vielfältig loben, aber wir lassen uns doch in unserer Entscheidung nicht reinreden, wo kommen wir denn da hin?”.

agency of asylum seekers, i.e. their capacity to change the conditions of their reception, was *intermediated* in various ways in response to their protests. The storying of events by actors involved in the reception of asylum seekers was central for determining whether the protests were considered meaningful political action or stripped of political content. The two case studies that were discussed in more detail in the course of this chapter suggest that it was the latter of these two possibilities that prevailed.

In both cases, the issue of food took on important political meanings. It presented a way for asylum seekers to draw attention to their grievances and to pressure local governmental actors into addressing their demands. Nevertheless, actors involved in their reception employed it as a means to *depoliticize* their reasons for protesting. Through publicly staged ‘food tests’, local governmental actors distilled the protests to mere dissatisfaction with the food provided and, almost sarcastically, offered additional spices to season the meals. In doing so, they (re)constituted the asylum seekers as ‘bare life’, beings reduced to their basic needs, while (re)affirming their power to decide upon the conditions of reception. These depoliticizing responses substantially limited the asylum seekers’ scope for political agency.

The storying of the protests also recast a key tenet of the governance of migration, the discrimination between ‘genuine’ and ‘bogus’ asylum seekers. On the one hand, the asylum seekers in Bad Waldsee were relegated to the role of suffering victims and passive recipients of humanitarian help. This was most apparent when volunteers explained the asylum seekers’ acts of protests in terms of their vulnerable and traumatized condition. On the other hand, the protesters in Offenburg were recast as ‘bogus’ refugees or economic migrants whose presence was deemed illegitimate and whose actions were explained as being ‘all about money’.

Despite these *depoliticizing* responses, however, the asylum seekers’ protests came with transformative effects and opened up political possibilities. They brought about storyings that *recast* the ‘right’ subjects and terms of solidarity. In the wake of the protests in Bad Waldsee, volunteers problematized how relationships of solidarity became instrumentalized by either the givers or receivers of help. In Offenburg, volunteers recast those deemed economic migrants as ‘rightful’ recipients of help and support while voicing dissent towards the governmental discrimination between ‘genuine’ and ‘bogus’ asylum seekers. In the latter case, the protests also led volunteers to intervene in their increasingly conflictive relationship with governmental authorities, demanding to be included in local decision-making processes.

This illustrates, I would suggest, how asylum seekers actively shaped and contested the solidarities that emerged around the long summer of migration, however limited and intermediated their agency may be.

