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# Resisting emergency shelters and humanitarianism: Asylum seekers' struggles for fair accommodation in Berlin

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**Abstract**

This article analyses how local "anti-Lager" activists and asylum seekers challenged the state-sponsored humanitarian approach to refugee accommodation in Berlin, Germany, during the "long summer of migration" of 2015/2016. In line with Germany's post-WWII "liberal-constitutional political culture" regarding political asylum, the Berlin government framed the setting up of inappropriate buildings such as sports halls as emergency shelters for asylum seekers as a humanitarian gesture. Local activists, however, in line with "alter-globalisation's social justice political culture", contested this approach as they found it patronising and marginalising. They decided to work directly with asylum seekers housed in the emergency shelters and to engage with them in a long-term political struggle for fair housing and civil rights. While asylum seekers also protested against the shelters, they mainly engaged in ad hoc forms of a "pragmatic politics of resistance" to cope with their everyday realities and demand better accommodation and equal rights. However, despite differences in the political cultures of local activists and asylum seekers, they organised collective protests against the shelters because they both agreed that state-sponsored humanitarianism ignored the material and civil equality of asylum seekers.

KEYWORDS: long summer of migration, political cultures, Berlin, emergency shelters

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## Introduction

What people consider to be a liveable space often remains inaccessible to them, especially in cases of displacement. Asylum seekers[1] frequently live in overcrowded refugee camps until they find better accommodation. In Berlin, local authorities set up special emergency shelters throughout the city in 2015 to prevent asylum seekers from becoming homeless (Podgornik Jakil, 2016). However, as emergency shelters offered poor living conditions, asylum seekers often organised protests to demand more humane accommodation. When the local *anti-Lager* (Eng. anti-refugee camp) activists from the initiative *Lager Mobilisation Network* (LMN) became aware of the dissatisfied asylum seekers, they invited them to their assemblies in a local community space to plan collective actions for appropriate accommodation of all asylum seekers in Berlin. I argue that the ways in which three main groups of actors (i.e., state officials, asylum seekers, and local political activists) perceived the suitable way of accommodating asylum seekers depended largely on their specific political cultures. I show how the political cultures of local activists and asylum seekers, which were based on the demand for material equality and equal civil rights, challenged the German state-sponsored humanitarian approach to accommodating asylum seekers.

This contribution is situated in the period of the "long summer of migration" (Bojadžijev & Mezzadra, 2015; Römhild et al., 2017; Speer & Kasparek, 2015), also known as the "refugee crisis" of 2015, and its aftermath. The *long summer* refers to the migratory movements across Europe in late summer of 2015 when in August alone more than 100,000 asylum seekers crossed the Aegean Sea (Beznec et al., 2016). According to the UNHCR (n.d.), 850,000 crossings, mainly in overcrowded rubber boats, took place in 2015 as opposed to 41,000 in 2014. Although the majority of refugees arrived from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan due to on-going civil wars and armed conflicts, many people from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran, the Caucasus region, and the Horn of Africa joined them due to increasing poverty, environmental degradation, and political violence in their regions. After arriving in Greece, they used the "Western Balkan Route" across Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, and Slovenia to travel to economically wealthier and asylum-friendlier Central European (Germany and Austria) and Northern European (Great

[1] With the term *asylum seekers*, I refer to all people that applied for asylum, regardless of their current legal status (refugee status, rejected, humanitarian protection, etc.).

Britain, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway) countries in the hope of obtaining international protection (Juran & Broer, 2017).[2]

Germany accepted the most asylum seekers in comparison to other European states. Over one million asylum seekers entered the country in 2015, and almost 1.2 million asylum applications were registered between 2015 and 2016 (Landesamt für Flüchtlingsangelegenheiten). Even before the long summer of migration, Germany's relatively generous asylum admission rate had kept the number of asylum applications relatively high since the Second World War. Partly as a conscious political stance as a result of the atrocities during the Nazi regime, Germany has committed itself to a liberal asylum system and a humanitarian attitude towards those who are persecuted for political reasons (Oltmer, 2016). However, asylum seekers living in Germany have faced numerous restrictions to equal participation, such as limited access to the labour market, educational institutions, and other basic services (Douhaibi, 2017). Access to housing has been another social impediment, as many have to stay in collective refugee facilities for a certain amount of time (Pieper, 2013). Inadequate living conditions, marginalisation, and the mistreatment by the camp administration have often prompted asylum seekers to protest. As a result, asylum seekers have been incorporated into anti-Lager initiatives organised by local political activists (Podgornik Jakil, 2019).[3] After the emergency shelters had proliferated across Berlin during the long summer, local activists used the opportunity to build new activist initiatives with the newcomers.

To examine different perceptions of appropriate accommodation of asylum seekers in Berlin, I examine three political cultures that showed some form of welcoming attitude towards asylum seekers during the long summer. The German post-WWII *liberal-constitutional political culture* played a major role in justifying the country's "open door policy" for asylum seekers and the opening of emergency shelters in Berlin. This type of response, I argue, corresponds to Didier Fassin's definition of the humanitarian government: the administration of human collectivities that appeals to the preservation of life and the alleviation of suffering, but does not guarantee equal rights (Fassin, 2007). However, even if emergency shelters provided asylum seekers with a roof above their heads

[2] The Western Balkan Route was initially largely self-organised travel route that asylum seekers used to move across countries of the Western Balkan Peninsula towards northern parts of Europe. Under the pressure and help of the European Union, these countries started to coordinate the route through an organised inter-state transportation system (Bužinkić & Hameršak, 2018). In 2016, the European authorities largely reduced their movements by gradually closing the inter-state transportation system, militarising the Aegean Sea, and allocating funds to Turkey to stop all potential border crossings, which reduced the sea arrivals in that year to 173,450 (De Genova, 2017).

[3] Not only asylums seekers and pro-refugee activists have been mobilising against refugee accommodations, but also racist and xenophobic political groups and movements. However, I omit the latter from the designator anti-Lager initiatives.

to prevent their suffering due to homelessness, these shelters also marginalised them. The Berlin-based activist initiative LMN ("Protocol #5", 2015), which was founded by a group of local activists to plan actions against emergency shelters together with asylum seekers, was practising another political culture. While the activists claimed that the humanitarian approach of the German state functioned as a cover for marginalising asylum seekers in refugee camps, their vision of fair housing was shaped by what I call *alter-globalisation politics of social justice*. Its roots go back to the global new social movements of the 1960s and the German anti-Lager protest culture in the 1990s.

Those asylum seekers who resisted staying in the emergency shelters were still motivated by yet another political culture. Emergency shelters not only offered squalid living conditions. They also produced a humanitarian condition in which, instead of guaranteed access to basic services, shelter residents were increasingly dependent on the arbitrary will of the camp administration and volunteers. This condition led shelter residents to use individual coping practices that sometimes developed in more open forms of protest, such as pickets, which they organised alone or together with local activists. I call their contentious practices *pragmatic politics of resistance* because they linked their political demands with their everyday issues and material needs.

Despite their different political cultures, local activists of the LMN and the asylum seekers from an emergency shelter managed to plan a collective action to demand its closure. Even if the activists wanted to engage in long-term social justice activism while shelter residents wanted to improve their living conditions, they both disagreed (Rancière, 1999) with the humanitarian governance and embraced the language of human rights to demand just treatment and equal access to housing for asylum seekers.

This article draws from the ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Berlin between October 2015 and March 2017. I examined the legal and discursive frameworks the local authorities used to set up emergency shelters in sports halls in the late-summer of 2015 and to close them down in March 2017. I talked to shelter employees and the spokesperson of the State Office for Refugee Affairs to understand the legal and administrative background of emergency shelters. However, I was particularly interested in how asylum seekers experienced their stay in these shelters and how local activists of the initiative LMN attempted to mobilise them for anti-Lager activism. I joined the local activists in their regular visits to three shelters located near their headquarters in a local community office. In their office, I attended weekly assemblies and events they organised together with asylum seekers.

Moreover, I joined protest actions such as hunger strikes and pickets, which asylum seekers initiated together with local activist groups across Berlin. I complemented my observations with interviews and regular conversations with the local activists of the LMN and with around fifty asylum seekers living in emergency shelters. I wrote down the demands both actors raised when speaking against the emergency shelters and was interested in what motivated them to mobilise different political actions together. I took the position of an activist researcher (Speed, 2006), as I often helped to organise events and protest actions while being attentive to the shortcomings activists faced when working with asylum seekers.

## Humanitarian reason and the opening of emergency shelters

*'Wir haben so vieles geschafft—wir schaffen das!'* [4]
Angela Merkel

The German Chancellor expressed these words when the number of asylum seekers entering Germany had reached record levels not seen since WWII, and the country was finding it difficult to manage them. Only a week before, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (the BAMF) stated on its Twitter account that the German state was no longer enforcing the Dublin regulation[5] for Syrian citizens (Oltermann & Kingsley, 2016). While this led many to believe that the Chancellor's government was inviting asylum seekers to Germany, in reality, it was pursuing its country's liberal position on political asylum in order to take in asylum seekers who had been arriving in increasing numbers since the end of 2014 (Oltmer, 2016).

The right to political asylum in Germany is linked to the liberal-constitutional political culture the country embraced after the atrocities it committed under the Nazi regime. It was written in the German constitution in 1949 and was presented as an unconditional right (Bosswick, 2000). This unconditional right was amended in the 1980s under the pressure of right-wing and conservative parties, which at that time linked the increased number of asylum applications to asylum misappropriation. In the early 1990s, several restrictions were imposed on asylum applications (e.g., people from countries designat-

[4] 'We've done so much—we can do it!' was, the German chancellor's statement at a press conference on August 31, 2015 (Monath, 2015).

[5] According to the EU's Dublin regulation, asylum seekers have to claim asylum and stay in their first country of entry, which becomes responsible for their cases.

ed as safe were no longer entitled to political asylum (Tazreiter, 2004). While these restrictive trends continued until the refugee crisis of 2015, political asylum nevertheless remained enshrined in the constitution and was presented as a "humanitarian duty" by the chancellor when she defended herself against accusations that she ignored a broader political discussion on how to respond to the refugee crisis ("Merkel sieht", 2019). Even if Germany has had one of the highest numbers of asylum applications in Europe for decades (Bade, 2003; Weber, 2016), people have been increasingly excluded from this right, either because they come from the so-called "safe country of origin" or pass through a "third safe country", which is responsible for an asylum procedure under to the Dublin regulation (Beznec et al., 2016). In addition to the falling asylum recognition rates, asylum seekers have faced restricted access to the labour market, their educational level has often not been recognised, and they have had limited access to public institutions (Aumüller, 2016). Crucially, they have been obliged to stay in collective refugee facilities for the duration of their asylum process. It was during the asylum changes in the 1980s that collective refugee facilities were formalised in German Asylum law. Since then, the state has used them to improve the control of asylum seekers and to deter new arrivals (Pieper, 2013).

In contrast, emergency shelters for asylum seekers in Berlin were not strictly regulated by the asylum law. According to the local government's press statements ("Bezirke um Nennung", 2015) they were set up because there was not enough space in the refugee facilities due to the high number of asylum claims. While there was a steady increase in 2014 with 10,375 applications compared to previous years, the number rose to 33,281 in 2015 and 28,889 in 2016, according to official sources (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge). The authorities stated that they provided a minimum infrastructure to prevent further hardship for asylum seekers. In May 2016, emergency shelters offered almost three times as much capacity as official refugee facilities (Landesweiter Koordinierungsstab Flüchtlingsmanagement). While the local government justified the shelters on humanitarian grounds, they nevertheless had some legal backing. Indeed, the prevention of the loss of physical integrity, which in this case could result from involuntary homelessness, is enshrined in the German constitution (Pogornik Jakil, 2019, p. 55-56). Combining compassion with constitutional rights, the local government responded by locating these shelters in sports halls and unused buildings. However, this approach did not proceed as hoped. These facilities did not offer any privacy and prevented asylum seekers from leading a normal life. They usually slept on bunk beds in large halls shared by 200 to 2000 people, without a kitchen and with insufficient of in-

frastructure, including showers and toilets. These shelters were fenced and protected by security guards, segregating asylum seekers from their new neighbourhoods.

Didier Fassin has coined the term "humanitarian government" to designate the ambivalent nature of governance of non-citizens in contemporary liberal democracies (2012). Actors adhering to this political culture mobilise moral sentiments of compassion and evoke a moral imperative to immediately and temporarily alleviate the suffering of marginalised groups, but often at the cost of maintaining the existing social hierarchies (Barnett, 2013; Fassin, 2012; Ticktin, 2011). While the government of Berlin, which acted according to the liberal constitutional order of the German state, found it just to set up of emergency shelters on humanitarian grounds, it also marginalised asylum seekers in inadequate infrastructure. Asylum seekers were confronted with what I will later call a humanitarian condition, as they increasingly became dependent on the goodwill of shelter attendants and volunteers.

The local anti-Lager activists criticised the humanitarianism promoted by the local authorities, claiming that it obfuscated the fact that asylum seekers remain excluded from regular housing. I now turn to their political culture to show how it shaped their response towards the housing of asylum seekers.

## Egalitarian assemblies as a struggle for fair refugee housing

> *'The lager-mobilisation-network is an OPEN network with de-centralised working groups against … the lagers…Why there are lagers?—isolation—scaring people in the lagers—controlling people … We go inside the lagers because we want to create contact with the people inside, to … work together … We invite (not force) the so-called refugees living in those lagers we visit to be part of our group [sic].'*
>
> Excerpt from the action plan of the activist initiative LMN

The LMN was inaugurated by a group of local activists affiliated with the anti-gentrification alliance *Hände Weg vom Wedding* (Eng. Hands off Wedding).[6] In the words of the latter, the political activism of the alliance is directed against the profit-oriented development projects in their neighbourhood and the racism that results from the displacement of non-white German communities due to rising rents. Rather than working with local district offices, the alliance's primary focus is on mobilising locals at the grassroots level to address these problems. Most importantly, it advocates fair accommodation for asylum seekers whom it considers marginalised in the prison-like refugee camps ("Self-conception", n.d.).

[6] Wedding is a locality in the north-western part of Berlin.

In October 2015, the members of the alliance presented their initiative LMN in an anti-fascist venue in Berlin and invited the participants to join their assemblies. They were sceptical about Germany's humanitarian gesture of welcoming asylum seekers during the "summer events". Instead, they claimed that Germany continued to marginalise asylum seekers by opening emergency shelters. They wanted to mobilise asylum seekers for a political struggle aimed at affordable housing and equal civil rights. Their action plan was later published on a website used by anti-Lager and pro-refugee activist initiatives in Berlin.[7] Their name and the discourse they used (see excerpt) points to the core tenets of their political culture, the alter-globalisation politics of social justice. This culture has profoundly shaped anti-Lager activism in Germany. It is the influence of this political culture that deserves a brief historical overview.

The alter-globalisation social justice political culture has deep-rooted connections with anarchism, libertarian communism, and other radical egalitarian political ideologies (Juris & Khasnabish, 2013). After WWII, the first visible manifestations of this political culture started to take shape in what some have called the "New Social Movements" (Habermas, 1981), which broke out between the 1960s and 1970s in countries that geopolitically belonged to the capitalist West. These social movements were mainly composed of students and partly of workers, who protested at universities and factories in Germany, Great Britain, Italy, France, and the United States. They differed from political parties and trade unions in that they not only demanded workers' rights and a fair distribution of wealth, but they also opposed the state representative system and addressed broader social issues related to human rights, environmental protection, and colonialism and called for equal treatment of women, LGBT communities, and non-white populations (Nash, 2005). Perhaps the most important aspect of this political culture was that its adherents promoted anti-authoritarian, de-centralised, and self-organised assemblies as their mode of organising political actions (Melucci, 1980).

This political culture continued into the 1990s and took the form of the "alter-globalisation movements" that supported the Zapatista uprising in the 1994 and protested against the summits organised by institutions such as the World Trade Organization in Seattle in 1999 (Ibrahim, 2015; Razsa, 2015). More recently, it resurfaced in the Global Occupy Movement between 2008 and 2012. This worldwide movement responded to the repercussions of the global subprime mortgage and financial crisis and supported pro-democratic movements during the Arab spring. Its adherents occupied public squares and organised assemblies directly on these locations to promote the inclusion of vulner-

[7] https://oplatz.net

able populations that felt excluded from their political-economic systems (Graeber, 2014).

This brief description of what I believe were the three main waves of alter-globalisation social justice movements shows that this political culture has strong egalitarian, direct-democratic, and anti-capitalist tendencies when it comes to organising political actions and promotes solidarity with marginalised people from all around the world, especially from the Global South.

Activist groups and social movements in the Federal Republic of Germany have been significantly contributing to the development of this political culture since the late 1960s. They began primarily as feminist and environmental initiatives (Katsiaficas, 2006) and were accompanied by activists who, due to the increasing privatisation of social housing in the 1980s, organised direct actions to demand affordable housing (Holm & Kuhn, 2011). Concomitantly, adherents of this political culture started to show solidarity with Southern and Eastern European and non-European asylum seekers who became victims of racist attacks during the years of the "German reunification" in the 1990s. This solidarity led to the gradual development of anti-Lager and anti-deportation initiatives, which included asylum seekers living in refugee camps (Katsiaficas, 2006, p. 153). In fact, when in October 2015 I spoke with an activist who used to be part of a former anti-Lager initiative in the Berlin-Brandenburg area, he told me that for at least two decades various local anti-authoritarian, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist alliances had visited and observed living conditions in refugee camps. They aimed to build direct contacts with asylum seekers in order to plan collective actions against the camps.

How this political culture was embedded into the LMN's modus operandi became clear when I joined the initiative's assembly in mid-November 2015. I met with the local activists in a community office, which they used for free because some of them worked there. Many were already activists in various local anti-authoritarian, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist initiatives. Indeed, the majority was from the alliance *Hände Weg vom Wedding*. At the beginning of the assembly, we sat in a circle and agreed to respect proposals for actions of all participants equally. One of the main initiators of the LMN was a former refugee. He opened the floor by saying: 'Refugees welcome? But welcome where, in lagers? These lagers have to close, so they can live like normal human beings.'

With this sentence, he lampooned the German government's humanitarian attitude toward asylum seekers. He promoted the anti-Lager activism as the right way to struggle for fair living conditions and social justice. Others agreed that Germany used a humanitarian discourse mainly to conceal the structural discrimination of asylum seekers. Hu-

manitarianism, they claimed, can only provide temporary solutions but its patronising attitude towards asylum seekers does not offer a way to struggle for equal civil rights. One participant added: 'Humanitarian organisations do not change anything; they do not ask asylum seekers what they really want.' Rather than doing humanitarian work, the participants agreed to invite asylum seekers staying in the nearby emergency shelters to their assemblies. They believed that, in this way, asylum seekers could equally participate in the process of creating political demands for fair housing and challenge the existing structures that marginalise them in German society. However, as much as the activists of the LMN saw organising egalitarian assemblies together with asylum seekers as a struggle for social justice not all asylum seekers could easily identify with such ambitious goals.

## Contesting the humanitarian condition with pragmatic demands

*'...[asylum seekers] are safe and warm; even their children are cared for...'*[8]
Silvia Kostner

In 2016, Berlin witnessed a surge in protests against emergency shelters organised by their residents, the asylum seekers who arrived during the long summer of migration. I had the chance to attend at least four protests: a hunger strike in front of the State Office for Health and Social Affairs (LaGeSo) and three pickets in front of three different shelters. I immediately noticed that shelter residents were the active organisers. They received support from activists of local anti-racist and anti-capitalist initiatives who provided them with loudspeakers, placards, megaphones, and similar. In their protests, they combined their demands with their everyday practical problems; with the borrowed protest equipment, they were able to attract public attention. In this section, I show why and how asylum seekers resisted the humanitarian condition in their emergency shelters.

Between November 2015 and June 2016, around one hundred shelter residents of different national backgrounds, ethnicities, and genders attended the LMN's assemblies. The reason for their active participation was the successful outreach work of the initiative's activists, who regularly went to three shelters not more than fifteen minutes away from their headquarters. In November, many residents still tolerated their shelters, claiming that they did not expect to find an apartment immediately. However, as days turned into months, poor living conditions and bad treatment by the shelter administration started

[8] Statement of the LaGeSo's press spokesperson for the newspaper Die Tageszeitung (Wagner, 2015).

to frustrate them. What motivated them to join the assemblies was the opportunity to look for solutions to their everyday problems.

Overall, the majority of residents who joined the assemblies spoke of the inability to prepare their food, the constant presence of rats, inadequate sanitary facilities, and, above all, the complete absence of any privacy. For instance, during one assembly, a Syrian woman complained that the administration does not respect her needs and once called her a "dirty Arab". A Palestinian man from her shelter quickly added that a few residents were kicked out of the shelter because they complained about the terrible living conditions they shared with 200 people sleeping on bunk-beds in a sports hall. As I learned later, the administration illegally prohibited the residents from criticising the problems in the shelter.

What annoyed the residents the most was that they had to comply with the shelter rules, even if the living conditions made it impossible to follow them and the administration determined them arbitrarily. However, the administration neither offered solutions to their problems nor answers to their requests for help with their asylum cases. For this reason, many also joined the LMN's assemblies to obtain legal information about their asylum rights. Although they were supposed to receive this information and were entitled to legal consultation under the Asylum Law, they were frequently left to the goodwill of the shelter workers and volunteers without professional experience.

In emergency shelters, asylum seekers had to endure what I call the "humanitarian condition". The shelters were set up on humanitarian grounds and were initially planned for a short period, but they remained open for almost two years. Feldman writes that the emergency nature of humanitarian responses often becomes a condition of life than a mere crisis response (2012), while Fassin distinguishes humanitarianism from human rights in that the former appeals to the right to life in particular (Fassinm, 2012). Humanitarian condition limited the rights to which the residents were entitled during their asylum process, while they had to accept the squalid living conditions and arbitrary rules in their shelters. However, they would not endure these conditions without showing resilience or even resistance.

After visiting the nearby shelters with the local activists, I noticed that the residents resisted in two ways. First, to circumvent the rules they found unfair, they employed non-confrontational forms of resistance. For example, they purchased stoves to secretly cook their own food and hung sheets over their beds to produce some privacy. Due to hygiene and fire standards, both were not allowed. Food was provided but was of poor quality, and the residents could not choose where and when to eat it. The shelter admin-

istration was aware of these forms of resistance and partially tolerated them, as it knew that, otherwise, protests could erupt. Thus, the residents engaged in these forms of resistance to cope individually with their everyday realities by negotiating the limits of what is allowed in their shelter.

Second, when residents recognised that the issues from their shelter were collective, they sometimes collectively organised protest actions, often together with local activist initiatives. I call their practices of resisting the humanitarian condition "the pragmatic politics of resistance". Their practices are shared by migrants all over the world who organise against deportations and for equal civil rights (Marciniak & Tyler, 2014; Nyers, 2019; Papadopoulos et al., 2008; Prieto, 2018; Rigby & Schlembach, 2013).

As Prieto writes in his book on illegalised Mexican immigrants in the US (2018), the demands of immigrants should not be too hastily equated with the broader commitment to the social justice activism of activist organisers. Rather, these marginalised communities frequently voice pragmatic demands. They aim to improve their everyday life and not to revolutionise the status quo.

Nevertheless, I believe that their resistance constitutes a political culture in two ways: first, marginalised communities may not show long-term commitment to political activism (Merry, 2006). However, they use "everyday forms of resistance" to make immediate demands for improving their current material situation, to use the terminology of Scott. Second, by disagreeing with their current situation, they challenge the state's citizenship regime by demanding equal and just treatment. What makes a disagreement political is that the excluded, by expressing it, demand equal acceptance in the political community (Rancière, 1999).

Despite the plurality of backgrounds of asylum seekers who attended the LMN's assemblies, the pragmatic demands they shared were based on material improvements and civic equality. In the last section of this paper, I show how the LMN activists and the shelter residents, despite the differences in their political cultures, agreed to jointly organise a picket line in front of an emergency shelter.

### Claiming human rights on material grounds

> *'Food is bad … we cannot sleep … we cannot learn … we need only a small place where we could have privacy and cook our own food … these are our demands. This place is not for humans.'*
>
> Words of a female Kurdish shelter resident while picketing (November 2016)

> *'Our rights as humans are being violated. We have to be respected as humans!'*
>
> Slogans from the placards during the picket in front of an emergency shelter (November 2016)

After June 2016, the residents gradually stopped joining the assemblies organised at the LMN's headquarters. Among the reasons, I noticed, were different motivations for collaboration between the local activists and the shelter residents. The local activists felt that instead of planning collective actions for fair housing and civil rights, they often ended up helping individual residents with their everyday problems. The residents gave up attending assemblies because the activists did not solve their issues, such as finding better accommodation or providing useful legal assistance. Even though assemblies were also used to plan actions, such as writing protest letters to state institutions about what was happening in the shelter, their different political cultures led to frustration on both sides. Nonetheless, the activists continued to visit the shelters in the coming months and maintained good relations with the residents.

In November 2016, after their appointment at the LaGeSo, two residents saw in their *Kostenübernahme* (an official document that identifies asylum seekers as eligible for housing, that their emergency shelter was classified as permanent collective accommodation). Whether that was an administrative mistake did not matter after the news had spread among other residents. They became furious. Not only were they tired of the bad living conditions, but every month the shelter administration promised them that they would soon be moved to better accommodation.

As their response, the residents contacted the local activists, who in turn invited them to rejoin the LMN's assemblies. A few days later, about fifty residents attended. They used the assembly to talk about their everyday experiences and connected them with their demands. For instance, one complained: 'I need a calmer place to learn and live. I have heart problems, and I need a room. Many people have psychological problems. I just want this camp to close.' Another contested the humanitarian condition more explicitly: 'Since we are in Germany, we are obeying the law, and for once it would be nice if we were heard.' Both residents saw it unjust to accept the current situation. Even if the shelter was part of the state programme to prevent homelessness and suffering that could

result from it, asylum seekers experienced this gesture as marginalising and patronising. They wanted the shelter to close down.

During the assembly, the local activists mainly took the task of moderating and translating between different languages, as some knew Farsi or Arabic. Since the residents did not have any knowledge about organising protests in Germany, they asked about the peaceful political actions that could attract public attention. Refusal to eat the food provided and not complying with the shelter rules were discussed as potential protest repertoires. After an hour of deliberation in which both sides weighed up the possibilities for successful action, the residents decided to hold a day-long protest in front of their shelter. The local activists offered the necessary infrastructure, a speaker with a microphone and contacts to the journalists who could ensure media coverage.

Even though the action was planned against one emergency shelter, the activists of the LMN felt that this planning process was an important part of anti-Lager activism. Indeed, they used a self-organised assembly in which asylum seekers were equally involved in creating political demands for fair housing. Concomitantly, since the residents lost hope that the state will provide them with better housing and equal treatment, the activists offered a more inclusive way to make their experiences and demands heard. Although both actors were shaped by different political cultures, they agreed to organise the protest because of their common critique of humanitarian governance, which ignored asylum seekers' material conditions, and the LMN's readiness to make asylum seekers equal part of the decision-making process to voice their demands.

A few days later, I joined their picket. When I arrived there in the morning, the pavement in front of the fence surrounding the shelter was already crowded with protesters. Since it was a cold day, the residents occasionally returned inside to warm up quickly. Nearly all of them joined the picket. The local activists mainly took over the logistical tasks. They set up the loudspeaker and registered the protest when the police arrived; according to German law, at least one person has to be listed responsible at a "spontaneous protest". Despite the biting cold, the mood was joyful as the residents danced to the music coming out of the speaker and displayed their placards, which they had prepared together with the activists. Eventually, they used the microphone to talk about their experiences in the shelter and read their demands in front of the journalists.

The two quotes I used at the beginning of this section were from this picket. They demonstrate how the shelter residents and the local activists linked the residents' everyday experiences of marginalisation with the discourse of equality and human rights. As scholars have pointed out (Marciniak & Tyler, 2014; Nyers, 2019), marginalised groups

and activists frequently take public action to show that marginalised populations have a "human face" that is otherwise denied in the public discourse. Appealing to universal human rights, the shelter residents demanded that the state authorities recognise their demands and grant them equal access to better housing and recognise them as equal members of the polity. What made their protest action political was precisely this collective disagreement (Rancière, 1999) with the humanitarian governance and the demand for human rights on material grounds.

Notwithstanding the limited scope of the protest, it contributed to the already rich number of non-citizen struggles for social justice and equal citizen rights emerging across Europe (Ataç et al., 2015; Balibar, 2004; Podgornik Jakil, 2016). Most emergency shelters were closed by March 2017, as asylum seekers were resettled in modular housing that the state had built specifically for them. According to the representative of the State Office for Refugee Affairs with whom I spoke, the closing of emergency shelters and the rapid construction of new refugee facilities was facilitated by the rising dissatisfaction among asylum seekers, who increasingly protested for better accommodation.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have demonstrated how adherents of three different political cultures perceived the appropriate way of accommodating asylum seekers during the long summer of migration in Berlin. First, the motive behind setting up emergency shelters by the local government was to prevent hardships that the newly-arriving asylum seekers would endure during their asylum process. This approach was shaped by Germany's liberal-constitutional political culture, in which the right to political asylum is enshrined in the constitution and presented as a humanitarian imperative. Second, the local activists of the initiative LMN criticised Germany's official approach as a cover-up for its long-standing policy of marginalising asylum seekers. Their form of political activism was shaped by what I have termed the alter-globalisation politics of social justice. Namely, the LMN promoted holding egalitarian assemblies together with the asylum seekers, who were mainly from the countries of the Global South, to build up a long-term struggle for fair housing and social justice. The last political culture I have talked about was related to the shelter residents' everyday coping practices and resistance against the bad living conditions in emergency shelters and the arbitrary behaviour of the shelter administration. I have called it the pragmatic politics of resistance because the residents were more interested in an improvement of their living conditions than engaging in a long-term political struggle.

The conclusion I have drawn was that despite their different political cultures, the shelter residents and the local activists revealed the shortcomings of the humanitarian governance of the German state when they protested the emergency shelters. They organised a picket in front of an emergency shelter after agreeing that fair refugee housing cannot be achieved through humanitarianism alone, but by acknowledging the everyday material realities of asylum seekers in their new social setting.

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**Povzetek**

Članek analizira, kako so lokalni "anti-Lager" aktivisti in prosilci za azil med "dolgim poletnim migracijskim poletjem" 2015/2016 izpodbijali humanitarni pristop do nastanitve beguncev v Berlinu v Nemčiji, ki ga financira država. V skladu z nemško "liberalno-ustavno politično kulturo" glede političnega azila po drugi svetovni vojni, je berlinska vlada kot humanitarno gesto opredelila uporabo neprimernih stavb, kakršne so športne dvorane, za potrebe zasilnih zavetišč za prosilce za azil. Lokalni aktivisti so v skladu s "politično kulturo socialne pravičnosti alter-globalizacije", nasprotovali temu pristopu, saj se jim je zdel pokroviteljski in marginalizirajoč. Odločili so se, da bodo neposredno sodelovali s prosilci za azil, nameščenimi v nujnih zavetiščih in se z njimi vključili v dolgoročni politični boj za pravična bivališča in državljanske pravice. Medtem ko so prosilci za azil protestirali tudi proti zavetiščem, so se v glavnem ukvarjali s priložnostnimi oblikami "pragmatične politike upora", da bi se spopadli z njihovo vsakdanjo realnostjo in zahtevali boljše nastanitve in enake pravice. Kljub razlikam v politični kulturi lokalnih aktivistov in prosilcev za azil pa so organizirali skupinske proteste proti zavetiščem, saj so se strinjali, da humanitarnost, kakršno sponzorira država, ne upošteva materialne in civilne enakosti prosilcev za azil.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: dolgo poletje migracij, politične kulture, Berlin, zasilna zavetišča

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