

Challenging ‘Refugees’ and ‘Supporters’

Intersectional Power Structures in the Refugee Movement in Berlin

Nadiye Ünsal

Abstract For 20 years now, but especially since 2012, we see a growing ‘refugee’ struggle in Germany. This is not a coincidence as migration policies in Germany and throughout the EU turn out to be more and more restrictive, defensive and terrifying for people trying to enter or settle in Germany/Europe. The categories ‘refugee’ and ‘supporter’ are defining political roles of people - leftist activists, sympathizers for more rights of migrants, ‘refugees’ or people affected by the racist migration regime – who interact in the self-organization of the ‘refugee’ movement around the Refugee Protestcamp at Oranienplatz in Berlin. The problem is though that these categories are too simple and applied too quickly within the ‘refugee’ struggle in Berlin. I argue that the prevailing (dis)privilege categories ‘refugees’ and ‘supporters’ do not reflect the intersectional power structures – the nexus of class, race, gender and other power relations – in the movement and prevent us from dealing with them.

“The supporters cannot fight without the refugees, and the refugees cannot fight without the supporters.” A. of the Refugee Protest Camp at Oranienplatz and the squatted Gerhart-Hauptmann School, Berlin/Kreuzberg

This frequent saying by a comrade quoted above sounds simple, but expresses complexities on how we – leftist activists, sympathizers for more rights of migrants, ‘refugees’ or people affected by the racist migration regime – politically organize ourselves in the ‘Refugee’ Protest Camp at Oranienplatz (or *Oplatz*)

in Berlin. It also refers to categories used in the language of the movement – 'supporter' and 'refugee'. These categories should mark our positions and status in society and show how we profit or are oppressed by the capitalist system, its Fortress Europe and imperialist wars. These labels also indicate the role of all the individuals joining the 'refugee' struggle, shaping the movement's political direction.

The category 'refugee' refers to the main political subjects of the movement. Persons identified as 'refugees' are authorized to represent the movement to the public and take decisions on behalf of the movement. A 'supporter' is a person joining the movement due to their political conviction ("a world without racist borders") and/or because s/he sympathizes with the political demands of the struggle. Thus, from the 'supporter's' – rather politically unconscious or naive – point of view, 'refugee' usually means *person of color* (poc) from the Global South, who has no right to stay, who is deprived of her_his basic rights, who is living in Europe/Germany under inhumane conditions and permanent threat of being deported back to another country. This perspective still also includes – but not necessarily – the recognition of 'refugees' as political subjects.

The problem is though, that these categories are too simple and applied too quickly in the self-organized 'refugee' struggle in Berlin. What I want to argue in this article is that the prevailing (dis)privilege categories 'refugees' and 'supporters' do not reflect the intersectional power structures – the nexus of class, race, gender and other power relations – that affect the people interacting as the movement. They prevent us from dealing with the internal power relations and alliances in the movement. These categories, for instance, foster sexism in the 'refugee' movement in Berlin. In the following I want to look closer at sexist power structures in the movement based on my personal experience and self-criticism as a 'supporter', who is also a woman of color.

I think that we have lost mutual trust and solidarity, because we ignored these power relations that caused division, frustration and desolidarization. To continue the 'refugee' struggle, we need to come together for a deep self-critique to strengthen our community, continue reflecting on and to emancipate ourselves from all kinds of oppression – as a crucial part of our political work! Collective self-critique and learning from it on the ground of our (political) experience should enable us to bond politically and foster our solidarity to become a critical (movement) community.

In this article I will share parts of my experience I made in the core group of the Protest Camp at Oranienplatz that has been constantly active from the

beginning up until now.¹ I argue that if we want to fight capitalism with all its forms of oppression, we have to start with ourselves. Thus look on how we specifically in this movement reproduce capitalist oppression. I think that now the very necessary critique of power, violence and discrimination in the movement is hiding somewhere behind 'refugees' and 'supporters'. But there are many more inequalities constraining the self-organization of the movement.

“We are here and we will fight, freedom of movement is everybody’s right!” – Refugee Protest Camp at Oplatz

We, German/European citizens, especially with an academic education, are part of a minority that profits from imperialism and all its colonial continuities. We lead privileged lives guarded by social welfare systems, while others are forced to migrate to Europe and struggle to survive here, illegalized.

Despite all these difficult conditions, a number of 'refugees' found each other in the summer of 2012. They marched from Würzburg (Bavaria) to Berlin as an act of civil disobedience to claim their human right for free movement and the right to stay. When they arrived in Berlin, many people awaited them at Oranienplatz in Kreuzberg/Berlin, which became the location of the Refugee Protest Camp. In October 2012, this camp was set up by 'refugees' and 'supporters' of the Protest March. The general demands of the 'refugees' are: 1. Abolish *Residenzpflicht* (*mandatory residence*), 2. Abolish *Lager* (refugee internment centers), 3. Stop all deportations.

¹ Events outside of this core group are harder for me to describe, as encounters, social relations, initiatives within the movement are countless. I am writing about a history of group dynamics, rather than random participation or individual encounters. When I use the personal pronoun 'we', I mean the core group that is composed of 'refugee'/'supporter' activists, sympathizers and people who are affected by the European migration regime. Also, in some parts of this article 'we' means just the group of 'supporters' in the core group of the 'refugee' movement, who joined Oranienplatz from day one. This distinction is important in order to mark the different levels of experience I have made in the movement. The first refers to the collective experience as the movement and the latter is connected to my individual position as a female activist of color, who is negotiating and sharing her role as 'supporter' in the movement with mostly white activists. Furthermore, I am referring primarily to the 'refugee' movement around Oplatz. I am sure there are many similarities, but I do not want to speak on behalf of other 'refugee' struggles, such as the *Non-Citizens Movement*, *No Border Berlin Reloaded*, *Lampedusa in Hamburg*, *Refugee Struggle for Freedom*, *The Voice*, *Karawane* and many more.

The Protest March from Würzburg to Berlin had a great effect on the 'mainstream' image of who 'refugees' are. There were many No Border Camps, campaigns against *Lager* and *Residenzpflicht*, as well as demonstrations of groups, associations and collectives such as the Voice, the Karawane Network, Youth without Borders (Jugendliche ohne Grenzen), the Oury Jalloh Initiative, No Lager Berlin Brandenburg, Afrique Europe Interact, Welcome2Europe, Boats4People, etc. But the Refugee Protest March was the first act of civil disobedience in years that attracted major attention on almost all kinds of levels of society and the movement has set new impulses to older refugee struggles and white-majority leftist circles.² There was a wider change of the perception of 'refugees' in the white-majority left scene. This shift in perception opposes mainstream 'pro-refugee' advocacy – church institutions, politicians, NGOs, etc. – who cling to their privileges, monopolies and benefits and speak on behalf of 'refugees'.³ During the protest at Oranienplatz and our actions in Germany, we met many other civil society actors who ran 'migration' projects funded by the EU or its member states. These organizations hold their speeches and panel events without even thinking of handing the microphone to the people concerned. So how can we expect them to create 'inclusive' projects managed by 'refugees' or to use their power to support 'refugee'-initiated projects and campaigns?

The strength of the 'refugee' movement in Berlin still is that those threatened by the racist migration regime speak for themselves and confidently address the public. They unmask the inhumane conditions in German *Lagers*, at the borders of Europe, in their countries. The outstanding success of the protest may not be legislative changes, but the politicization of many German and European citizens and empowerment of 'refugees' all over Germany. Many 'refugees' feel encouraged to break their isolation in the *Lager*, overcome their fear and fight for their human rights. Its importance and visibility has increased via radical actions of civil disobedience, protest marches and bus tours through

² See also this comment on hobby-activism in Europe/Germany by Turgay Ulu in Turkish (2013). He is a 'refugee' activist from Oplatz. In this interview with him (in German), please read especially the part with the title "Meinst du, es könnte in naher Zukunft eine revolutionäre Bewegung in Europa geben?" (Ulu 2014).

³ Many *Lagers* are managed not only by private companies, but also by church organizations (Diakonie, Caritas etc.) or the social-democratic charity AWO. In effect, they are government contractors for prison-like facilities, but nevertheless they present themselves as humanitarian 'pro-refugee' lobbyists. Another example for the political exploitation of the movement are those many academics and artists that popped by to impose their 'edgy' (read: racist and cheesy) projects. These opportunists threw water, not fuel, on our smoldering protest.

Germany and Europe.⁴ The Refugee Protest Camp at Oranienplatz has become a Germany-wide movement and is now connected all over Europe and beyond. So, the emergence of this self-confident and self-organized 'refugee' protest challenged the dominant, racist image about 'refugees' in Germany. The demands of the protest and the interaction with 'refugees' turned out to be an opportunity to learn more about their situation.

Confronted with this protest and the devastating situation of migrants and 'refugees' induced through Europe's and Germany's colonial policies, 'supporters' of the 'refugee' movement may face questions such as: What do my privileges have to do with a person who has to flee and their situation here in Europe? What about my own racisms and structural power? How to evaluate the way the system governs the people affected by these exploitative border- and postcolonial policies? How can I fight against this regime? Is the 'refugee' movement also my own struggle? Is this protest part of my emancipation from this neoliberal order? Can I even dare to take over representative tasks on behalf of the 'refugee' protest? And so forth.

Little knowledge about the ruling asylum and migration policies and political unconsciousness of most sympathizers of the protest created a lot of problems though. The 'refugees' living in the tents were instrumentalized by government officials, who applied colonial divide-and-rule tactics to exterminate the camp, and were criminalized by the media and politicians.⁵ On top, we had to defend ourselves against racist police brutality during actions and demonstrations. Thus, the 'refugees' of the Protest Camp at Oranienplatz faced not only the repression by the state but as well white-supremacist paternalism by politicians, church institutions, NGOs and – also by 'supporters'. Every day, we had to fight against this racist domination among us and outside of the movement. The attacks and repression against 'refugees' could also reverberate between us. White supremacy is a power structure, not just an attitude, constraining all political and social interactions, negotiations with politicians as well as all our internal meetings.

We find ourselves in a group that is complex and conflicting. Many political subjectivities – such as sympathizers, white/non-white 'citizen' activists, 'refugee' activists, persons affected by the migration regime, etc. – are involved in the self-organization of the 'refugee' movement in Berlin. White supremacist be-

⁴ For more information see <http://www.oplatz.net>.

⁵ There is a lot of information online about the 'Oplatz agreement' (*Oplatz Vereinbarung*) with the Berlin Senate, the eviction of Oranienplatz in April 2014 or the roof occupation (*Dachbesetzung*) of the inhabitants of the squatted Gerhart-Hauptmann-Schule in June 2014. Also check <http://www.oplatz.net>.

havior harms our political self-organization. The lack of political consciousness in the movement creates internal power relations that constrain our political work and stability. We depend on mutual trust and solidarity, because the movement faces strong repression. Every 'refugee' is also a fugitive due to restrictive laws and regulations, such as Residenzpflicht or Dublin II/III.

Challenging the categories 'supporter' and 'refugee'

Most 'supporters' hold passports of imperialist nations and are free to move almost anywhere. Poverty, wars, economic and ecological exploitation as well as systematic oppression of 'refugees' maintain our privileges. Because we are not ideal people, but ideal idealists, our movement has the expectation that 'supporters' – mostly white, middle-class Germans(!) – should reflect on their privileges by exchanging with 'refugees' based on *their* history and analysis of these global inequalities. After all this self-reflection, 'supporters' should use their privileges to strengthen the movement. According to that they are not encouraged to speak for the movement, but let the 'refugees' do it. In theory, this should nurture mutual understanding, political awareness and solidarity, but for our daily self-organization white paternalist behavior constitutes still a huge obstacle.

Most 'refugees' see all people who want to help the movement as 'supporters'.⁶ But many 'supporters' use this term only for people with a leftist background, who support the abolitionist demands of the 'refugees' and treat them with respect, not like the opportunist actors mentioned above.

One theory embraced by most left-wing 'supporters' is *Critical Whiteness*. Many are involved in different political movements and leftist groups and know the prominent contemporary debates in the leftist spectrum about the dominant social order in their own societies. Critical Whiteness challenges the way racist power relations are shaped – also within the left – as it defines racism as a solid power structure, not a reformable opinion. Therefore the whiteness of 'supporters' privileges them in meetings, planning of actions or production of

⁶ On the other hand, a lot of 'refugees' have gone through many political (no border-activists and *sans-papiers* networks) and humanitarian (churches, UNHCR etc.) encounters, actions, struggles in Europe. These individuals have a much broader understanding of what support should mean. Also they usually connect more quickly with self-organized settings.

knowledge about the movement. Their white, German, middle-class socialization gives them controlling positions within the movement, even if they claim they're just acting in solidarity with the 'refugee' activists. They enjoy better access to German and international media (discourses), administrations (such as district, Berlin Senate, asylum authorities), lawyers (for casework) or to general social, art, academic and political networks. Most 'refugee' activists have no access to these kind of networks and therefore depend on the opinion of 'supporters'. These monopolies shroud our communication. Who knows what through whom? And who defines what is important for the movement and what not? Many political actors pick a favorite 'supporter' as the go-to contact instead of talking directly to the 'refugees'.

So, we constantly have to control ourselves and also others to *not* talk *about* people *without* them. For many leftists this (self-)control is highly important. For others – due to lack of awareness regarding their own privileges and racisms – it is not.

Such tensions appear in all open movements and protests which take place in open space – such as the Protest Camp did. Anyone can enter the scene and immediately be identified and treated as 'supporter' or 'refugee'. This free access brings about that anyone can speak on behalf of the movement. Overambitious 'supporters', who want to impose their ideas, may then be another obstacle to 'refugees' simply because they intervene too much with their *own* political and personal agenda instead of discussing different ways and options together.

One of the ideals of the 'refugee' movement at Oplatz is to fight racism. We discuss how capitalism produces racism and how we can reflect and emancipate ourselves from it, hoping we can realize a community without borders. But of course not every individual in the movement identifies with anti-capitalist thinking. We want to promote to the outside how we imagine a world without borders practically – "No Border, No Nation, Stop Deportation!". But how can we propagate such a vision? Are we even aware of all those borders constraining us in the movement? We need to learn better from our movement-history. This could enable us to promote more practical examples of how we can become a community in solidarity that is trying to practically elude the repression of the border regime, its isolation and exclusion.

It is still a big challenge for us to become such a critical community: We are a complex group and our categories are not helpful. Some 'refugees' reject their (non-)status as a tool for European states to restrict their movement. Some 'supporters' have gone through the European asylum regime themselves and are

still facing racism as people of color. In these cases for instance the prevailing categories do not assume and relate at all to the different realities of people affected by the border regime. In contrast to this, some white 'supporters' believe that labels prevent 'our' movement from achieving *their* imagined unity. Others say the fight against racist asylum policies, the border regime and wars is a collective one and emphasize everyone's political responsibility instead of social positions. Here, those who "refuse to be put in these boxes" should not forget their structural power and privileges in society.

When it comes to the sexist structures in the movement, I argue that these categories support patriarchal and racist alliances between the men in the movement. The 'refugee' movement around Oplatz is a male-dominated movement as many WLBGTIQ* (Women, Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Trans, Inter, Queer) 'refugees' are – generally speaking – objected to much more structural violence in their own lives which is in many cases an obstacle to join the struggle. The 'male refugee' has become the only relevant reference of the movement, which on the other hand means that other oppressed positions in the movement are left out or are not "that important". Predictable, when decision-making is dominated by men. Thus, the way our interactions are ordered through these categories is not reflecting the existing subjectivities as well as power structures on site. How we refer to each other politically must be connected more to how we generally analyze power relations and oppression reproducing the capitalist system and again the internal power relations of the movement.

Sometimes I even have the impression that we – the core group of Oplatz – even just rely on these labels without really understanding what their background is. What they should mean for each and every single person. These categories are meant to mark positions and roles in the movement, but what if those who carry these labels are not aware of that? Or simply do not fit in that category?

I often have the impression that for many 'supporters' it is easier to lean on these categories than to face their privileges and political responsibilities: "I am just a supporter". Our privileges and positions in society must play a role in the movement, but putting all kinds of people into two boxes in order to negotiate their roles in the movement is not the accurate way to reflect on ourselves and our political goals. What should actually be our lowest common denominator? The color of our skin? To hold a passport or not? The emancipation from capitalist oppression?

What about freedom of movement for everyone?!

Let's look at the 'support' structure: Who does the care work? Through the following examples – based on my experience in the movement – I want to clarify how power, tasks, representation and recognition are being negotiated in the movement and what our collaboration generally looks like. This should highlight the dysfunctionality of the above mentioned categories.

Mostly white WLGBTIQ* (Women, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Inter, Queer) do the invisible jobs, such as cooking, infrastructure, cleaning, translation, taking minutes of meetings, emotional and legal support, conflict resolution, grant writing, organization and coordination of actions, events or fundraising events, etc. Not just one job, but several at the same time!

Male 'supporters' instead tend to join demonstrations and actions, moderate press conferences, speak at public events on behalf of the movement, or are powerful contact persons for politicians and lawyers etc. They monopolize powerful knowledge and networks. This works, because most 'refugees' in our protest are men. Together, the men built patriarchal alliances in the movement. They mutually share trust, knowledge, recognition and representative tasks while often excluding or not recognizing the engagement of WLGBTIQ* 'refugees' and 'supporters' in decision-making and representative tasks. Even worse, male 'supporters' tend to show blind loyalty to male 'refugees' in fear of losing their male privileges in the movement instead of addressing sexism when due.

The white male 'supporters' are not just whites in a 'refugee' movement, but men in a male dominated movement, thus they do not only hold a privileged position in race but also in gender relations. Most of them fear being called a racist much more than to be called a sexist.

The movement misses no occasion to declare how it opposes racism and colonialism. But, we discuss racist and colonial policies mostly with male 'refugees'. These individuals are not only 'refugees' who are affected by racism – as 'supporters' are not only white – they are all also men! But to struggle together, we need respect, not conformity. Even when male 'refugees' have to deal in their lives predominantly with racists incidents of any kind and white male 'supporters' enjoy so many white privileges, still it is for me a difference when we are interacting – in mutual(!) solidarity – as a movement. We need solidarity, trust and respect to feel the power and motivation to fight together against the European border regime and to bring about social change. I cannot be motivated to join a struggle, when my 'comrades' do not see my problems

and are unwilling to change the circumstances. Neither can other WLGBTIQ* 'refugees' and 'supporters', so they leave. And with them their (unrecognized) skills, experience, political and social approaches and strategies. No one expects white male 'supporters' and male 'refugees' to pick up arms in our defense, but the least they could do is stop arming the aggressor.

Male alliances and white-guilt⁷ gave male 'refugees' excessive power, space to speak and marginalize other opinions as well as to push individual interests. Several accounts of sexualized oppression in the movement were reproached with racism instead of even recognizing sexism as a political problem.⁸ Sexist behavior by male 'supporters' was not identified as discriminatory but excused, because of their 'important' role in the movement. We need to recognize that being a 'supporter' or 'refugee' in the movement is not a self-sufficiently existing positioning! We are all more than that.

In contrast, WLGBTIQ* 'supporters', who have contributed to the movement in many ways, are expected to justify themselves, while male 'supporters' ignore or do not comprehend almost all timid criticism. Under these circumstances, WLGBTIQ* 'refugees' and 'supporters' can't expect any broader community accountability beyond personal loyalties.

The fight against repressive borders needs more solidarity from everywhere but first amongst ourselves. We need to understand better how the intersectional power relations in the movement constrain us and how to elaborate on it in order to find a way to continue growing together as a movement. I am convinced that a collective self-reflection regarding these unsolidaristic alliances can also be conducted without again imposing leftist models of *safe spaces* or white supremacist approaches on how to deal with and communicate these problems. We know each other for almost three years and have met in a very

⁷ The concept of *white guilt* describes the constant fear of white people to reproduce racism which leads to an uncritical and untransparent behavior towards non-white persons. This again reproduces racism as people are again only reduced to their skin color and not dealt with as subjects who also can be wrong or open for criticism. The white guilt attitude is not a conscious reflection of racist structures and its consequences. It is a very common racist behavior of white people. They again hide behind their white privileges, so *they* choose when to interfere in cases of discrimination ('I am white, I am not in the position to act or to talk') instead of reflecting their own role and responsibility in that (cf. Kilomba 2010; Bee 2012, 2013).

⁸ I am aware that white WLGBTIQ* supporters often hold privileged positions in society. This often leads to racist interactions and interdependencies with – in most cases – male 'refugees'. In the core group of Oplatz discrimination produced by white WLGBTIQ* 'supporters' was not such a frequent topic. In those cases some of us would immediately address dominant, racist behavior – just as it was the case for anyone else.

intense setting – such as the Protest Camp – that constitutes our collective history. This should be a solid ground for involving ourselves more around the questions in how far the political and social dynamics we are producing in squeezing political functions into ‘refugee’ and ‘supporter’ are creating exclusion, ignorance, violence and desolidarization within the movement.

Borders of Self-organization

In the following I want to list some concrete examples of these male alliances in the movement to render our complex relations more comprehensive.

In December 2012 the former Gerhart-Hauptmann-School in Kreuzberg was occupied by the Refugee Protest movement of Oplatz. ‘Refugee’ women⁹ who wanted to establish a Refugee Women Space on one floor of the building also participated in the squatting action. Their plans were sabotaged by male ‘refugees’ in the school building. It was not regarded as a necessary space on its own, but rather as an attempt to divide the community squeezed in that building. Men would enter the floor without any authorization and disturb it merely without any intervention by other men, who also live in the building. The women had to protect themselves against these invasions, sometimes also backed up by WLGBTIQ* ‘supporters’. The activists of Oplatz organized one time a workshop regarding sexism and the situation of ‘refugee’ women in general. But there was not so much interest by the people of Oranienplatz and the school – which was also the case for many other workshops about other topics. It was hard in general to organize ourselves together with the inhabitants from the school. Many had their own everyday struggle to make ends meet and others had simply no interest. I don’t know about any initiative by male ‘supporters’ and ‘refugees’ (except for some individuals) to carry the topic of sexism and/or the Women Space systematically into their interactions in the movement. On top, the school was quite rapidly not seen as a space of political self-organization, but rather a place where ‘refugees’ live. This made it even more difficult to find a collective way to deal with the problems around the Women Space. Despite that, the women succeeded in the end and the Women Space became an important political voice of the occupied school and for many a place to inform, empower and organize themselves until the eviction in June 2014.

⁹ I refer to the ‘refugee’ women of the Women Space as ‘women’ as it is complying with their own self-understanding.

The women of the Women Space joined meetings and events on Oplatz. Often they were not even greeted personally or recognized as activists as the daily 'political business'¹⁰ of Oplatz was always more important than growing together politically. For the few events or press conferences which would relate directly to the topic of sexism or the World Women's Day, activists of Oplatz would invite the activists of the Women Space to speak to the public. There has been even a press conference about sexism and racism in that the Women Space also took part. One male 'refugee' felt offended by their presence and the media interest for this conference. He started invading the tent in which the conference took place in screaming at the women "Who are you? I don't know you! Why do you not talk about my problems?!". Only two white male 'supporters' tried to intervene together with a few male 'refugees'. They had a hard time to hold the aggressor back and could not really manage the situation. Many WLBTIQ* 'supporters' – including me – shouted at him and left the place realizing that there is not much resistance against the aggressor. The women professionally continued with their conference. The next day the aggressor was still a welcomed member of Oplatz – also by the same white male 'supporters' that were holding him back at the press conference the day before. But if WLGBTIQ* 'supporters' and 'refugees' would speak up and appear in meetings or actions, this would cause harsh critique by the men in the movement. Such as "you are so dominant" or "she is selfish". In fact, these individuals do not realize that their male alliances make it so difficult to push individual ideas, to create more accountability or to simply be recognized as an activist.

In our meetings, we have also experienced a lot of times the silencing of 'refugee' women and WLGBTIQ* 'supporters' by male 'refugees' through comments such as "You are a woman, why should I listen to you?" There was no reaction at all by male 'supporters' and 'refugees' – only when the 'refugee' women and the WLGBTIQ* 'supporters' would react on this disrespectful behavior collectively. There are even some male 'supporters' that answer to cases of sexist oppression with racist comments such as "Most refugees don't know what sexism is". These individuals tried to make us believe that most of the male 'refugees' do not even know when they are crossing boundaries!?! This is totally denying the experience and (in)sensitivity for gender roles in other societies in this world in which those same persons have grown up to become a 'man'.

¹⁰ The first year of the Protest Camp was very intense and we saw many political actors who would present their ideas to us. Also the Protest Camp was the place where we would receive requests from other groups and organizations as well as organize our campaigns and actions. The Protest Camp was – until its eviction in April 2014 – a protest in public space, where people would sleep in tents and huts. We had many infrastructural problems, conflicts as well as physical and political attacks to deal with.

Another practical example regarding the internal power relations in the movement is that mostly WLGBTIQ* 'supporters' care about the support for the single asylum cases of 'refugees' or other individual solutions where as many male 'supporters' are even not part of such groups or do not agree on helping out for bureaucratic assistance. Most white male 'supporters' are too hesitant when it comes to their own privileges.

Another incident to count here happened during the time of the preparation for the *Refugees Revolutionary Bus Tour*¹¹ (2013). One white male 'supporter' would insult me only because I did not share his opinion on how to deal with a specific asylum case of one 'refugee' activist. We were all so much overloaded with organizational work and stressed but this should not excuse his behavior. I was upset, but the people around told me not to be, because "He is a good guy, and is doing a lot".

So to conclude, men have many freedoms in our movement, but what about the freedom of movement for everyone – including WLGBTIQ*? The fear¹² – of especially white male 'supporters' – of being addressed as racists is *their* political scale for positioning, not solidarity as such and our overall political individual and/or collective responsibility in the 'refugee movement'. The fact that most white activists misunderstood Critical Whiteness and rather withdrew from *their* white-guilt meant also putting aside their intersectional positions (gender, race, class etc.) while still acting in a male 'refugee' dominated movement. This (un)consciousness and/or ignorance created these male alliances lacking solidarity. But on the other hand the reactions of white male 'supporters' regarding sexism in the movement cannot just be traced back to their so called political (un)consciousness as a 'supporter' that does not want to criticize the behavior of male 'refugees'. I have explained before that many white male 'supporters' hold very powerful positions in the movement, therefore I identify an ambivalent and discriminatory relation between these male-alliances, the share of power and (male) privileges in the movement and the marginalization of other relevant positions in the movement. The ignorance towards intersectional positions in the core group of Oplatz was and is still causing the oppression of the many other actors in the movement that are not part of this male-dominance but still play a crucial role.

¹¹ Check: <http://www.oplatz.net>.

¹² See note No 7: *white guilt*.

The refugee movement – a safe space?

Of course we already have few tactics to fight – in this case – oppressive male structures. WLGBTIQ* persons do have allies – rather among male 'refugees' than among male 'supporters'. One gave me my title quote. These are men we trust, who always intervene when there is injustice or transgression by other men, who use their male privilege and take the aggressor aside to explain why his behavior was disrespecting personal boundaries. They would also help out for infrastructural tasks during actions (cooking, setting up actions, camps etc). But only a minority of men in the movement are aware of their power and responsibility. The few men who try are quickly exhausted, since the daily protest drains too much energy and time.

There are other 'approaches' in the anti-racist No Border movement in Germany, as described in the last brochure of *transact* (2013). The article "Let's not wait till things escalate" is a discussion about 'mixed' awareness groups ('mixed' in this sense means 'supporters' of any gender and mostly male 'refugees'). They try to address unjust behavior and physical/verbal transgressions that occur during activist camps or single actions. The movement around Oplatz also tries to apply this diversified awareness structure, but mainly during precise actions, such as lately the Protest March for Freedom from Strasbourg to Brussels in Mai/June 2014¹³. It is hard to compare the approaches presented in the *Transact* brochure, as they deal mainly with short-term actions and gatherings. They do not seem to be an appropriate answer for the day-by-day structure and needs of the 'refugee' movement in Berlin.

It has to be mentioned here that there are as well other examples of intersectional power relations in the 'refugee' movement in Berlin. I could have as well given an account of cases in which classist behavior excluded activists in decision making and representative tasks. This as well has a huge effect on how we are collaborating or not within the movement. I decided to give concrete examples regarding sexism in the movement, because I am myself affected by it and also because the male alliances in the movement are not along class or race but patriarchal lines. The way power is shared in the daily practice of the movement is not according to the lines of power supposed to be drawn through the category 'supporter' or 'refugee'.

It would be helpful and motivating if the core group of the movement around Oplatz could find a way to come together for a deep and transparent process of self-reflection. I think we could be more united and grow politically more

¹³ Check <http://freedomnotfrontex.noblogs.org>.

together if we would accept the fact that people are not only 'supporter' or 'refugee'. In these boxes in which we do not at all share the same self-understanding and ideas. Individuals are also male-dominant, opportunist, capitalist, egoist etc. This fact has simply been ignored in the movement. The categories 'supporter' and 'refugee' are being applied without any political contextualization. In the case of Oplatz it means they are being applied in a political space dominated by black and poc men supported by white men of various kinds of class- and political backgrounds. This lead so quickly to those patriarchal alliances I have described before. All our heterogeneity is being pressed into two categories that are again supposed to perform certain roles. The labels are not a 'guarantee' for political awareness and for that do not prepare us well to fight against colonial and racist policies produced by the capitalist system. We cannot propagate to the outside that we want to abolish the racist/capitalist border regime, while at the same time we are kind of ignoring the same oppressive structures inside of us. This ignorance is very destructive for the progress of such a tough but important movement.

To say it again, we all have to be more aware of how we practically can deal with privileges and other power structures to emancipate ourselves from their oppressiveness. This should be an essential part of our political work. I do not expect the 'refugee' movement with all its highly important political topics and it's balancing of campaigns and pressure from individual asylum cases to become a safe space for WLGBTIQ* in the queer feminist sense. But I do demand that we overcome the heroization of men and therefore the ruling definition power regarding discrimination held by male 'refugees'. We should respect the different realities and recognize the discriminations in the movement. We could start with collectively learning from our collective history to become a more critical and solidarious community.

I am trying to finish this article since December 2014. Many things happened since then in the movement. But there were two incidents with three women of color which are of great importance for the movement and the topic of intersectional power relations.

On the 10th of December 2014 our dear comrade and symbol of the struggle in the squatted school – Sista Mimi – died while 200 cops raided the school. They came officially due to fire safety reasons but in reality to arrest some people because of the roof occupation in June/July 2014. Mimi was one of those who was searched for, but on that day she was not in the building. Sista Mimi was one of our most famous female "freedom fighters". She devoted herself a lot for the community in the school building and established "the social center"

that was located in the small pavilion-building in the school yard. She cooked for us and the people from the school. She tried to bring us all together and protected the community against attacks coming from outside – such as cops or the district. In the end, the social center was again contested by the male inhabitants of the building... Now, we cannot hear her strong voice anymore, but she has left the movement her empowering and truthful message: “We are one”¹⁴. By mid-May, the movement met two other strong women Gina Dent and Angela Davis. Therefore, I would like to finish this article in quoting Angela Davis as she is until today strongly connected to anti-racist, feminist and anti-prison struggles. ‘Refugee’ activists of different political groups had the opportunity to exchange with her what happened in their struggles so far and ask each other questions. The International Women Space was of course also an important part of this meeting. By the end of our exchange, Angela Davis would stand up and thank the women for their participation in the meeting and their activism. And then she would turn to the men and demand them to involve more in feminist thinking “because the violence of the state, the violence of the prison and the violence of the system, is exactly the same violence you are putting on women”.

Literature

Kilomba, Grada (2010): *Plantation Memories. Episodes of Everyday Racism*. Münster.

Bee, Melanie (2013): “Critical Whiteness” Coming to Life. Antiracist Relationship –Building. URL: <https://www.transformativejustice.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Migrazine-Final-eng-pdf.pdf> [23.9.2015].

Bee, Melanie (2012): Critical Whiteness – ein falscher Freund? Antirassistische Lehrpläne für den Unterricht aus den USA und ihre Übersetzung in Deutschland. In: ZAG Nr. 61. URL: <http://www.zagberlin.de/antirassismus/archiv/61criticalfalsch.html> [23.9.2015].

transact (2014): How is your liberation bound up with mine? Ideas about mixed Organising-Processes, the Power of Definition and Critical Whiteness. URL: http://transact.noblogs.org/files/2014/02/transact6_en.pdf [23.9.2015].

Ulu, Turgay (2013): Berlin’de 1 yıldır sokaklardayız. URL: <http://devrimciproletarya.info/avrupa-devrimciligi-hobi-devrimciligidir/> [23.9.2015].

¹⁴ “We are one” is as well a song of the music group of the ‘refugee’ movement in Berlin – the *Antinational Embassy*. This band is consisting of ‘refugees’ and ‘supporters’.

Ulu, Turgay (2014): Interview mit Turgay Ulu. URL: <https://waffenderkritik.wordpress.com/2014/04/11/interview-mit-turgay-ulu/> [23.9.2015].

Autor_innen

Mein Name ist Nadiye Ünsal. Ich habe Kulturanthropologie und Politikwissenschaften studiert (M.A). Rassismus und das europäische Grenzregime sind beides Themenfelder, die mich intensiv beschäftigen. Ich möchte weniger akademische Diskurse, aber umso mehr selbstorganisierte Proteste zu dieser Thematik vorantreiben. Ich bin Teil des *Bündnis gegen Rassismus* (Berlin) sowie stark verbunden mit den deutschlandweiten Geflüchtetenprotesten. Zurzeit arbeite ich gemeinsam mit zwei Frauen of Colour an einem Dokumentarfilm zu anti-rassistischem Widerstand von Menschen, die selbst von Rassismus betroffen sind. Wir hoffen mit der Filmarbeit bis zum Frühjahr 2016 fertig werden zu können.

Empfohlene Zitierweise

Nadiye Ünsal (2015): Challenging 'Refugees' and 'Supporters'. Intersectional Power Structures in the Refugee Movement in Berlin. In: *movements. Journal für kritische Migrations- und Grenzregimeforschung* 1 (2). URL: <http://movements-journal.org/issues/02.kaempfe/09.ünsal-refugees-supporters-opplatz-intersectionality.html>.

Lizenz

Dieses Werk ist lizenziert unter einer Creative Commons Lizenz (4.0: Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Keine Bearbeitungen).