

“A feeling of doing the right thing”

Forming a successful Alliance against Dublin-Deportations

Lisa Doppler

Abstract In more and more German cities, deportations are averted by hindering the authorities from picking up Refugees by different kinds of blockades. One outstanding city is Osnabrück, where a broad Alliance against Deportations has established and blocked nearly 40 deportations since 2014. Seeking to share experiences on strategies to resist Dublin-deportations, the article tries to figure out why these blockades are successful. Therefore references to the philosopher Herbert Marcuse’s thoughts on resistance are made.

As acts of practical resistance against Dublin deportations, in the German town of Osnabrück 37 deportations have been averted since 2014. By means of different forms of blockades the authorities were hindered from picking up would-be deportees and eventually their deportations could be prevented. This strategy has proven to be especially helpful with regards to Dublin II/III deportations as there is only a limited time period in which a refugee is allowed to be transferred to the EU country of first entry, according to the Dublin regulation. This time window opens as soon as the respective state accepts another state’s request to take back an asylum-seeker and closes after six months. Once this time limit has elapsed, the sending country has to process the application for asylum by itself. Through blockades as acts of practical solidarity, this time limit for transfers to other EU countries could be exceeded and eventually, the asylum procedure was brought to Germany in most of the cases in Osnabrück.

In this paper, after introducing the activist group *No Lager Osnabrück*¹ and reflecting on how this group was able to develop a stable contact to refugees

¹ I have been a member of No Lager Osnabrück, thus the article is based on my own experiences and two group discussions with other members of the group.

threatened by deportations (1), the practical carrying out of blockades and other activities of the broadly supported *Alliance against Deportations* are described (2). Seeking to share the experiences made in Osnabrück with groups situated in other cities, which are thinking about finding adequate forms of organization against Dublin deportations, the paper tries to figure out why these blockades were successful (3). Subsequently reflecting on authorities' and politicians' reactions to refugee solidarity (4), the article concludes with an appeal to everybody to make his or her city a place-to-be for refugees (5).

No Lager Osnabrück

The activist group *No Lager Osnabrück* has already existed for about 15 years and has focused its political activities on the deportation camp in Bramsche-Hesepe, near Osnabrück, for most of the time.² For people in solidarity with refugees, contact to inhabitants of camps as huge and isolated as Bramsche-Hesepe is difficult to establish. Some activists who tried to get involved with refugees in this camp were barred from entering the compound. Furthermore, refugees with a political (e.g. pro-Kurdish or communist) background were routinely transferred to other places quite rapidly, presumably because the authorities feared uprisings. Despite these obstacles, a good organizational structure was established in recent years, with jointly organized demonstrations, an Anti-Lager-Action-tour and a protest camp, blockades organized by both, refugees and supporters, boycotts of the canteen and much more. Nonetheless, cooperation with refugees rarely continued over longer periods of time. Consequently, the *No Lager* group predominantly consisted of white supporters, including many students. In 2013, the new social democratic-green coalition governing the federal state of Lower Saxony restructured the Lager in Bramsche-Hesepe and transformed it into a reception center. At that time, the group expected that deportations from Bramsche-Hesepe would cease – an assumption that proved to be wrong. Nevertheless, the group shifted its attention to the accommodations refugees had to live in after being transferred from the reception center to the municipalities. The number of such shared accommodations in the city of Osnabrück increased constantly – right now there are nine of them.

In early 2014, thanks to a helpful member of the City Council, the *No Lager*

² There is a documentary about Bramsche-Hesepe called "Der Lagerkomplex". A short version of the movie can be found here: <http://vimeo.com/64206898> [5.1.2015]. For more information see: Pieper 2008.

group obtained unofficial information that about 80 refugees living in Osnabrück were to be deported back to the countries where they had first entered the EU in the following months, due to the Dublin II regulation. In order to respond to this thread, the activists decided to intensify their networks with refugees in the city, visiting their houses regularly and asking them to join the group's weekly plenary session. But from the perspective of some of the refugees, the *No Lager* group seemed strange:

"Some friends told me that there are some university students who want to help us. I thought that they are fools, they can't help us. And when I went to attend a meeting in March 2014, I still thought it is not good, they are talking very long and they are only ten students. How do they want to change what is in old men's hands, in politicians hands?" (Zamar1, GD2).

During that time, some refugees began to organize themselves as well:

"We, the Pakistani people and people from Somalia and Eritrea first met in Friedland, near Göttingen [first reception center for Lower Saxony]. From there, we were transferred into different cities. Some of us came into the same *Heime* [shared accommodations] in Osnabrück. Soon after arriving here, more and more got rejected their asylum. We made up an own refugee group in one of the *Heime* to try to find a way to handle the situation. But we did not know anything about the laws of Refugees in Lower Saxony and we did not have the resources to organize own protests. In that situation we met with persons from the *No Lager* group. Some came to the *Heime* to talk about the actual political situation and to try to help the Refugees in Osnabrück. First we did not know who they were. We were sure that these guys are from the police as they asked so many questions." (Nife, GD1)

Gradually, with lots of translation work and also with the help of an experienced activist from Hanover, the skepticism diminished: "Today we laugh about that!" Nife (GD1) added and Zamar concluded: "But slowly I saw it's different. I was part of the first demonstration and also of the first blockade and it was really nice" (Zamar, GD2). One of the new accommodations was located near Osnabrück's autonomous center *SubstAnZ*, a fact that strengthened the contact between refugees and the *No Lager* group. Kathrin, one of *No Lager*'s activists, recalled another surprising reaction. When the residents heard "that two shared accommodations for refugees would open here, they founded a group

to support them, but there had been a very good [neighborhood] network before so some people from the network said they wanted to support the Refugees from Rosenplatzquartier" (GD2, Kathrin). *No Lager* was relieved to hear about the newly established 'Working Group Refugee Assistance' at Rosenplatzquartier – instead of right-wing citizen protests there were people welcoming the new refugees, at least in one part of the town. The working group, in cooperation with the local church, organized material support and German language classes. They started with a charity approach, but when they heard about the planned deportations, many of them got involved politically, too.

The Blockades

"The first blocking was on the 11th March [2014] and it was a Somali guy who was to be deported. [...] First we did not know what to do, but then in plenary we spontaneously decided to block the door. At two o'clock a.m. everybody called each other's friends and other groups, 60 people were mobilized very fast. I did not expect that. [...] When we blocked the first time, we did not know what would happen next. The supporters stood in front of the door and the refugees inside behind the door. [...] We were waiting for the police and the *Ausländerbehörde* [Foreigners' Registration Office]. At 3 o'clock the car for deportation arrived. They were standing there, watching and after ten minutes the police arrived. Two guys from the police came to the front and talked with some people in German. I don't know what, but they were talking really strongly. Everybody was raged and confused what would happen next. Will there come more police? But nothing happened. We were standing there until five o'clock, very excited." (Zamar, GD2)

Shortly after the first blockade, the group organized a demonstration in order to gain public attention on the issue of deportations. With about 600 participants mobilized in only four days it was a success. The demonstration helped to explain to other refugees that there were people acting in solidarity with them:

"The demonstration was so important for us. Even they [the other refugees] were scared, they came to the demonstration because their own case problems are so huge. The main focus was to tell the people that they have to face the reasons why refugees are coming and to question the big problems we have in our home countries.

Our impression of the first demonstration in Germany we ever went to was that we did not need to fear the police, we felt protected by the supporters." (Nife, GD1)

Everybody was surprised that not only refugees and the radical left, but also lots of other citizens participated. Of course, a demonstration does not stop deportations, but the goal to gain public attention was achieved, especially as the press seemed to transmit the message of refugees being in a difficult situation. Before that, the *No Lager* group had usually been branded as a group misusing refugees for 'their own political aims', now there were emphatic or at least neutral articles.³

While organizing the first blockade for a Somali who was to be deported to France due to Dublin II-regulations, nobody could exactly envisage the consequences and afterwards the refugee was not informed by the *Ausländerbehörde* on how the authorities would further proceed in his case. Only by contacting the *Federal Office for Migration and Refugees* [*Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge*, BAMF] some activists ascertained that the authorities had prolonged the Somali's deadline for transfer, arguing that he had withdrawn from his deportation. In several conversations with the *Ausländerbehörde*, the group of supporters argued that they had witnessed him being prepared for departure but that the blockers did not let him out. In the end, the extension of the deadline was taken back: "It wasn't easy, but in the end we achieved that my case now is examined in Germany",⁴ the Somali refugee summarized.⁵

Soon, more and more refugees received deportation notices, in accord with the Dublin II regulation. For the group the aim was clear now: to bring the asylum procedures to Germany in order to avoid deportations to countries like Italy where the situation is even worse. In some cases, a residence status can be obtained, for example for Eritrean and Somali refugees who, due to ongoing wars in their 'home' countries, would not be deported. For refugees who got a rejection in Germany and therefore with pending deportation to their countries of origin the blockades are at least a method to gain more time.

Meanwhile, the Working Group from Rosenplatzquartier had the bright idea to build up a telephone tree to better organize the blockades. People from

³ An overview of newspaper articles and TV reports can be found here: <http://nolageros.blogspot.eu/presse/pressespiegel/> [4.1.2014].

⁴ Quoted in: Doppler, Lisa (2014): Per SMS mobilisiert. In: analyse & kritik – Zeitschrift für linke Debatte und Praxis, Nr. 596. URL: http://www.akweb.de/ak_s/ak596/16.htm [4.1.2015].

⁵ A report about the first successful cases can be found here: <http://www.noz.de/lokales/osnabrueck/artikel/492999/vier-fluechtlinge-durfen-vorerst-in-osnabrueck-bleiben> [4.1.2015].

different refugee supporting organizations, such as *No Lager*, *Exil e.V.*, *Caritas* and the Rosenplatzquartier people, worked together and founded the umbrella network *Alliance against Deportations*. One or two days prior to a deportation, everybody on the list received a text message or a telephone call. The strategy of the Alliance was to keep actions transparent in order to mobilize as many persons as possible. By the end of 2014, the list included 300 people. At the announced time, which usually was very early in the morning (around 4 or 5 o'clock), about 100 people gathered in front of the house. The refugees living there often served tea and sometimes people brought cakes or breakfast. In most of the cases the van of the *Ausländerbehörde* just passed by and nothing more happened.⁶ This strategy has been successful in 37 cases (August 2015).

Why does it work?

In Osnabrück, many factors came together and made the blockades successful. Of course, a group of activists cannot influence all of them but maybe some. In order to further support my arguments, I will refer to the philosopher Herbert Marcuse who reflected on successes and failures of the 1960s/70s movements in the USA and Germany. I consider his assumptions on repression, organization and alliances still fruitful today.

Preconditions

Politics matters. It makes a difference to have a local government that announces to conduct a 'more human politics of migration' as the new government in Lower Saxony did. Of course, in the end, people have to be deported according to the government's logic, but the introduced changes, such as the early transfer of refugees to the municipality or the announcement of planned deportations, are improvements, which enabled the blockades in the first place. For refugee (support) organizations this can mean that it is helpful to put pressure on politicians before elections and during coalition talks. In Lower Saxony this strategy worked at least to a degree. A more liberal government does not mean a fundamental change, but a better basis for emancipatory work, according to Marcuse (e.g. 1999: 152f.).

⁶ There have been some changes in the procedure, now the officials from the *Ausländerbehörde* get out of the car and ask for the person they are looking for (see Chapter 4).

Heterogeneity of the group and connections to other groups

The heterogeneous background of the activists characterizes the protests in Osnabrück. Apart from the refugees themselves, many students are engaged, but also people from the church, from the nearby Rosenplatz neighbourhood, from Attac, political parties (Social Democrats, the Left and the Green party) and also elderly people who had been politically active in the past. In his writings, Marcuse often referred to the importance for the radical left to form broad coalitions when confronted with brutal practices of the establishment:

“Because of capitalism’s global machinery of control, the New Left – isolated from the conservative mass of the population – is left for now with the minimal-strategy of the united front: the cooperation of students, militant workers and left-liberal (even unpolitical) persons and groups. Such a united front is faced with the task of organizing protests against certain especially brutal acts of aggression and suppression by the regime. [...] Under these circumstances, a struggle against the worst tendencies becomes the focal point.”
(Marcuse 1975: 9)

Although the people involved might not share a common understanding and critique, deportation is one of those ‘worst tendencies’ the whole *Alliance against Deportations* can agree to fight against. For radical leftist groups involved in such alliances this means not to separate from others, as left groups often do, but instead to be open and communicative. This also includes working quite visible, for instance by making the telephone list public and taking the risk that the police gets to know the respective names and activities.

Breaking the isolation of Refugees

For some activists, participating during the blockades is all what they do, but there are lots of people who do much more: they attend weekly plenaries, give German language classes, and organize lawyers and so on. In the summer of 2014, collective gardening projects and cooking events, film screenings and parties were organized. Friendships were formed and the (spatial) separation of citizens and non-citizens, spurred by isolating housing politics, was broken, at least to some extent. In the autonomous center it now goes without saying that refugees participate at parties, in plenaries and also in keeping the house in order. What has changed, too, are the plenaries of the *No Lager* group itself: With about 20 refugees and 20 supporters attending every week, translation

into several languages and active attempts to create mechanisms to reduce barriers became necessary, so that refugees feel comfortable in a predominantly white space. Furthermore, it is great to see that at least for some of Osnabrück's citizens, inhuman treatments of refugees can no longer be ignored. The situation of tolerating the different treatment of 'Others' is what Marcuse referred to as 'Repressive Tolerance': "Tolerance is extended to policies, conditions, and modes of behavior which should not be tolerated because they are impeding, if not destroying, the chances of creating an existence without fear and misery" (Marcuse 1964: 1). The blockades became the focal point of all refugee solidarity, a collective act of resistance, which strengthens and radicalizes the whole network of refugee support. For lots of people the attitude has changed from tolerating and helping refugees to fighting together for an existence without fear – they practice what Marcuse called 'Liberating' or 'Real Tolerance'.

Appeal to the deep human need to care for others

Besides the rational, political dimension, there is a deep feeling of meaningfulness which people in an alienated world seldom have:

"The old man told me he read [about the blockades] in the newspaper and he has always been politically active in his life and he is not happy about politics, the situation in Germany at the moment that it is so difficult to get asylum and the deportations and that he wanted to join the protest. And he also said that this is very hard for him because he cannot stand for a long time so he has to bring a chair!" (Kathrin, GD2)

Some more quotations about the motivation of elderly people participating can be found in a TV-report:⁷ "It makes me proud to be citizen of Osnabrück when I see this." "It just gives me the feeling of doing the right thing when I am here and that is a good feeling I don't have very often."⁸ According to Marcuse, getting active, adopting a political/radical position and escaping impartiality, not to accept politics as a given anymore, is a process of freeing oneself from indoctrination (Marcuse 1965: 7). And for him, caring for others is a deep human instinct that is concealed in capitalism but that can shine through in protest movements (Marcuse et al. 1981: 37f.). Now knowing what it means to do the right thing, it has become a routine for those people to get up at

⁷ "Hallo Niedersachsen", 14.10.2014. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8J0nNvMDxp8> [4.1.2015].

⁸ Own translation.

four o'clock once a week and stop a deportation, even when it is dark, cold and rainy.

Reactions

Boris Pistorius, minister of the interior of Lower Saxony and former mayor of Osnabrück, stated in a TV-interview that he was sympathizing with the activists but that the law had to be executed nevertheless. And the police president of Osnabrück, Bernhard Witthaut, expressed quite vaguely that deportations enforced with violence did not make sense at the moment: "For me it is a question of proportionality to deport people in such a situation when the efforts are not in a relation to what might happen next"⁹.¹⁰ This shows that a brutal eviction of blockades with injured supporters would not fit the self-image of Osnabrück and Lower Saxony's interior ministry.

Therefore, the responsible institutions now have to find a way to stop the blockades without provoking a scandal. One attempt is to change the content of the deportation letters – instead of waiting in their houses, refugees now have to wait outside in front of the house with their luggage, ready to leave. The deportation is still easy to prevent: The activists now group around the refugee and when the *Ausländerbehörde* asks "Where is XY?" everybody answers "I am here!", including the person concerned.¹¹ As before, the deportation officials have to leave without the refugee. In August 2014, a member of the City Council said that in the future they would only announce the first deportation attempt.¹² Towards the end of 2014, these letters were issued by the *Ausländerbehörde*, stating that person X was not ready to come on that day and that the next deportation would take place without prior notice. However, at least with regards to the refugees in contact with the *No Lager* group, this did not happen until now (June 2015). In general, the authorities seemed quite incapable to deal with the situation.

⁹ Own translation.

¹⁰ The interview with police president Bernhard Witthaut can be found here: <http://clyp.it/chhkanw> [21.1.2015]. The clip from the NDR program "Hallo Niedersachsen" (19.5.2014), in which Boris Pistorius states more or less the same, has meanwhile been removed from the internet: http://www.ndr.de/fernsehen/sendungen/hallo_niedersachsen/Hallo-Niedersachsen,sendung64156.html [21.1.2015].

¹¹ A report on a deportation stopped by this strategy can be found here: <http://jetzt.sueddeutsche.de/texte/anzeigen/590453/Ich-bin-Taha-Ich-auch> [4.1.2015].

¹² See <http://www.osradio.de/?p=7913> [4.1.2015].

There is another development that can be observed in the city of Osnabrück as well as in Germany in general: In the context of opening a new reception center for refugees (a *Lager*) in Osnabrück, the City Council presented itself as savior of refugees and the city as a place where citizens would welcome refugees as guests. This is a smart move but the word 'guests' already expresses the problem: Refugees who are meant to come and then quickly leave again. The authorities are using the commitment for refugees as an argument for the new reception center in Osnabrück – which basically is a repressive one. As mentioned above, *Lager* are part of the system isolating refugees from society. Appropriately enough, the *Lager* opened on the 22nd of December 2014, the ideal time in the year for charitable gestures. The local newspaper was full of articles and reports about Osnabrück's 'welcoming culture' [*Willkommenskultur*¹³]: children, students and others collecting clothes and Christmas presents for their 'guests'. The mayor Wolfgang Griesert and interior minister Pistorius welcomed the first refugees and took nice pictures with Syrian children. In a way, the representatives of the system appropriated the emancipatory slogan "Refugees Welcome". This is a successful and common strategy in liberal societies, which Marcuse already described in 1964, stating that emancipatory ideas are "either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe. They are redefined by the rationality of the given system and of its quantitative extension" (Marcuse 1964: 20). "Refugees Welcome" is co-opted and integrated into the hegemonic language by people who want to do charity to silence their conscience and by politicians who want to be 'the good ones' in public perception. All over Germany the dangerous discourse separating between 'real' refugees and 'asylum abusers' is re-strengthened. Syrians, for example, are considered 'real' refugees, whereas refugees from West-African countries or Romany supposedly just come to 'profit from our social system'. "Refugees Welcome" is misused as "some Refugees Welcome".

Conclusion: Make your city a place for Refugees

Groups trying to work against deportations are confronted with a difficult task, given the analysis above: They have to be open, willing to work in coalitions and to be communicative, but at the same time they have to stick to their principles in order to avoid getting lost in hegemonic charity discourses. I think it is good to have a concrete idea of what the group is 'offering' to refugees

¹³ This German euphemism is used quite often to conceal brutal politics. Therefore it cannot be translated appropriately.

and supporters alike. The question "Who are you, what do you do?" posed to the *No Lager* group by refugees and other people interested in their work was always difficult to answer as the group had a left radical aspiration on the one hand and on the other hand their aim was to include more people. But the concept of stopping deportations is a clear strategy that offers the possibilities to either just join the actions or to get involved more intensely. For many years it was very difficult to keep in touch with refugees, as such a strategy did not exist – when refugees wanted to do something, demonstrations were organized or Germany-wide protests were joined. Either the refugees moved to other places of protest or they realized that a demonstration did not change their situation, thus they stopped coming after a few weeks. With many supporters who did not see any progress, this was quite similar.

In Osnabrück, the blocking of deportations will continue and everybody is glad that up to now there have not been any confrontations with the police. But as already mentioned, it is not only the deportations that are averted, it is also the contact created between citizens and refugees, the rupture in the separation of both, which is a real success. Furthermore, the private and political contacts have transformed Osnabrück into a much more attractive place for refugees.

Zamar: "For me, the greatest moment of last year was my own deportation that did not take place. Afterward, to thank the blocking people, I had my first speech in German and I was really nervous but I am happy I did it. [...] Another great moment was to meet people I already knew from the March for Freedom again at a conference in Berlin."

Lisa: "Do you think about moving to Berlin? A lot of Refugees who get active in politics move to Berlin because they think they can do more there."

Zamar: "I stay in Osnabrück. First, when I arrived, I thought I would go to another city, I didn't have anything to do here. But with my group now I really want to stay here. It is a nice city, I would miss it if I go anywhere." (GD 2)

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Autor_innen

Lisa Doppler is a PhD-candidate at the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture in Gießen. In her project she is bringing into dialogue voices from the Refugee Movement with the philosopher Herbert Marcuses writings on protest and resistance. She holds a doctoral scholarship from Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. <https://www.uni-giessen.de/cms/fbz/fb03/institute/ifs/prof/allg/teamalle/doppler>

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