

15 Refugee Movement



Struggling with Migration and Escape: From Fighting for Equal Rights to Criticising Growth-Related Causes of Migration and Escape

About the authors and their positions

‘We’re here because you are destroying our countries’ –the slogan coined by refugee self-organisations pointedly interlinks migration and escape with the complex dynamics of global exploitation and destruction. Against this backdrop, together with my local group, NoLager Bremen, I have been actively involved in the Afrique-Europe-Interact network, an organisational process between African and European grass-roots initiatives that has been ongoing since 2009. I have written this piece myself, although I have referenced many debates and organisational experiences in this text, whether related to people who have fled to this country, deported people in Togo or peasant activists in Mali.

By:

Olaf Bernau

Translated by:

Ellen Worrell

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<https://www.degrowth.de/en/jdim/>

1. What is the key idea of the refugee movement?

The daily resistance faced by migrants and refugees is at the heart of the battle for global freedom of movement and equal rights

When several thousand people started heading for Austria on foot from Budapest’s main train station on 4 September 2015, it not only dawned on Angela Merkel but on the European public as a whole: It was not activists who were prepared to literally unhinge the European border regime in those days. Crucially, it was the basic right to freedom of movement acquired en masse by very normal people –young and old, men, women and children, believers and non-believers, those who were healthy and those who were in wheelchairs. This simple yet basic assessment refers to the fact that it is the migrants and refugees who themselves are changing Germany from within Europe –and not just since the summer of migration in 2015, which has been misleadingly labelled by the political mainstream as a ‘refugee crisis’.

Here in this country, the phrase ‘Germany is not an immigration country’ was stated in the government’s coalition agreement at the beginning of the Kohl era in 1982. In his wonderful book *Die Bleibenden* (‘The Remaining’), journalist Christian Jakob (2016) cuttingly states that ‘the migration policy was a migration-obstructionist policy’. However, migrants and refugees have not accepted the notion that Germany did not want to be an immigration country. Instead, according to Jakob, they have ‘defied this dogma, won access to Germany and have changed society in doing so’ –this can be seen in cities such as Düsseldorf, Nuremberg and Frankfurt, where 35-45% of the population are people with a migration background.

The understanding of migration and escape outlined here is based on the

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consideration that the term ‘social movement’ should not be shortened from a social science perspective, but should instead be complemented by a dimension of daily resistance that is often already taking place. It should therefore be recognised that the dogged everyday struggles, or better put, survival strategies used by migrants and refugees, are acts of resistance. In other words, they are highly effective attempts to break down the borders of citizenship, to open up new transnational areas of freedom and equality, and to demand and make use of a right to mobility.

And yet: Even if the actual epicentre of the battle for freedom of movement and equal rights centres around the movements of migrants and refugees that are largely enabled by migrant community networks, these survival strategies have –strictly speaking– also always overlapped with interventions from political stakeholders. This refers to (diaspora) organisations and associations for migrants and refugees, as well as anti-racism groups, advisory services and NGOs, whereby the relevant transitions are not in any way selective. Just as politically organised migrants and refugees are mostly integrated in their migrant communities, similarly anti-racist activists have close personal and political ties with migrants and refugees. As a whole, the stakeholders and activists in question are as old and diverse as the immigration events of the past fifty years, as illustrated by certain key moments (see interface 2005):

Struggling with migration and escape since the 1960s

In the 1960s, students from African countries within the Socialist Student Union (SDS) were becoming ever more active against racism, deportations and African dictators –perhaps the most famous example being the successful demonstrations in 1964 against the racist film ‘Africa Addio’ that glorified colonialism. In the 1970s, migrants from the guest-worker generation carried out numerous protests, including in Frankfurt, against overpriced rent and a lack of Kindergarten places. The situation reached a head in August 1973 when the Ford plant in Cologne was occupied after 500 Turkish workers were dismissed after returning late from their annual leave. An ineffable alliance between the police, plant management, the works council and German IG-Metall members ended the unauthorised strike one week later. As a consequence, 100 workers were deported, some ended up in prison and 600 lost their jobs.

In the 1980s, refugees in Baden-Württemberg were continuously demonstrating against camps established by the Minister President at the time Lothar Späth (Späth quote: ‘The African bush drums should already be clear: Don’t come to Baden-Württemberg, you’ll be forced into a camp there.’). Further-

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more, not only was the Pro Asyl pro-immigration advocacy organisation founded in 1986 –for their part, the militant Revolutionary Cells (*Revolutionäre Zellen, RZ*) wrote during their refugee campaigns, which were more or less welcomed on the quiet in many places, that ‘migration movements (...) were only the billows of smoke from a volcano’ and the anti-imperialist left was therefore invited to support the ‘will and determination of refugees’.

In the course of reunification in the 1990s, there was a truly racist wall of hate directed at migrants and refugees. In 1992 alone, Nazis killed 34 people in Germany. The right of asylum was also de facto abolished in 1992, which –together with the Asylum Seekers Benefits Act introduced in 1993 and deportation figures that increased tenfold between 1988 and 1993– resulted in refugees’ living and residence situation intensifying extremely. Correspondingly, not only were migrant Antifa groups founded at this time, but also more self-organised refugee organisations, including The Voice Refugee Forum, the Brandenburg Refugee Initiative and the Caravan for the Rights of Refugees and Migrants (see Jakob 2016).

In the 2000s, *kanak attack* –a network in which mainly second and third-generation migrants were active– took to the stage; and the struggles which had begun in the 1990s became more distinct. And all this continued under a predominantly repressive federal migration policy.

By the 2010s at the very latest, as a consequence of the expansion of the EU border regime, the situation on the EU’s outer edges or indeed in transit countries such as Ukraine, Libya and Morocco became ever more dramatic. In response to this, since 2009, there have been numerous mixed networks – those comprising refugees and non-refugees– such as Welcome to Europe or *Afrique-Europe-Interact*, whose programme also aims to offer practical intervention on the transit routes heading for (western and northern) Europe; one particular example is the *WatchTheMed Alarm Phone*, an emergency number for refugees who find themselves in an emergency at sea. Finally, 2012 must be highlighted since this year saw the beginning of a cycle of political protests by refugees that continued until 2014, and which found support among the German public like never before –with the consequence that refugee solidarity ‘has not only become a dominating social movement and a booming industry, but also a pop-cultural hype,’ as Christian Jakob writes in his aforementioned book.

The right to have rights as the programmatic essence

With all the diversity among themes and debates, the connection to rights has emerged as the lowest common denominator from the very beginning,

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and was paradigmatically formulated in the manifesto of the Kein Mensch ist illegal (“No person is illegal”) network that sprung into being in 1997 at the documenta X exhibition:

‘Every person has the right to decide for themselves where and how they want to live. The regulation of migration and the systematic denial of rights conflicts with the demand for equality in all social and political respects, based on the notion of respecting every person’s human rights, regardless of their origin and papers.’

More specifically: Until now, the normative point of reference for the battles outlined above is what was formerly postulated by the philosopher, Hannah Arendt, as the ‘right to have rights’. However, it was always indisputable that rights are not guaranteed by anything or anyone in reality –particularly not by the state. Rather, in reference to the motto of escape and migrant battles, they must be eked out step-by-step: From their initial formulation and recognition as part of general conventions (such as at UN conventions, for example) through to becoming entrenched as a positive, i.e. valid and therefore enforceable, right (see Bernau 2006).

Escape and migrant debate currents

Not only are refugee self-organisations unhappy with the focus on local conditions; mixed networks such as Afrique-Europe-Interact are equally unhappy. Rather, they are including the backgrounds of escape and migration, for which the fulminant position paper, ‘On colonial injustice and ongoing barbarism’, published in 2009 by The Voice Refugee Forum is cited as an example:

‘[...] [t]he human story will one day remember the ‘Western Civilisation’ as the most cruel, destructive and ostracising power that has ever existed. Will we ever know how many billions of people lost their lives directly or indirectly as a result?’

These contextualisations were, however, disputed for a long time. More specifically, it means that within the environment of kanak attack, such an approach runs the risk of degrading people as playthings in objective pressure situations: It would play into the hands of a humanistic discussion, which considers refugees and migrants merely to be helpless victims, even to accept the situation but not as social stakeholders who (offensively) demand and use their rights. However, this debate has now calmed down. Due to time constraints, many groups only focus on the local situation but do not (or no longer) question the necessity to also systematically consider the cau-

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ses of escape and migration in principle.

A similar approach applies to a second debate current, which also arose at the beginning of the 2000s under the heading 'Re-economising anti-racism'. The starting point was a thesis arguing that fortress Europe not only seeks isolation, but may also be interested in systematic illegalisation in order to foster a giant pool of low-paid workers who are easy to blackmail –whether it is for the construction industry, agriculture or household service sectors. At that time, nobody questioned the factual effects of this kind of action (whether intended or not) that accompanied the EU border regime. However, groups such as The Voice Refugee Forum feared that focussing too closely on exploitative racist situations within the job market could detract from refugee-policy battles, particularly against camps, deportations and other discriminating measures.

2. Who is part of the refugee movement, what do they do?

Between networking and conflict: The escape and migrant movement as a giant mosaic

If we take the thesis formulated at the beginning seriously, which suggests escape and migration events are at the heart of escape and migrant battles, it should be understandable why a precise description of the social composition of this movement landscape is hardly achievable, at least not quickly. Particularly since this setting comprises different people and generations – each with different education, work and immigration histories, not to mention differing political views.

Nevertheless, in recent decades there have always been attempts to bring together these various stakeholders, such as in 1998 when the Caravan for the Rights of Refugees and Migrants first went on tour, or since 2005 as part of the Young People Without Borders initiative calling for a right of residence, or at three NoBorder conferences in Frankfurt between 2010 and 2014. It may have worked occasionally, but in principle, it must first be recognised that real differences cannot be conquered or levelled out without further ado. To be more specific: Third-generation activists, who were born and have grown up in Germany, do not automatically have the same interests and priorities as irregularly employed nursing staff from Ukraine or refugees from Togo who are directly threatened by deportation.

Trans-identitary organisation processes

In the meantime, the conduct of numerous German activists was always determined by ignorance, dominance and paternalism. As an example, when at the International Refugee Congress in Jena in 2000, attended by around 600

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people from forty countries, the campaign against residence requirements came to life, the left-radical mainstream at the time reacted ignorantly, or even contentiously. The project was labelled as ‘humanitarian’ and therefore ‘limited to refugee policies’; furthermore, due to its persistence, The Voice Refugee Forum was accused of ‘piggy-backing’ on the guilty conscious of European activists, simply with the aim of recruiting ‘campaign soldiers’. Those scolded in this way were critical that this negative attitude was an expression of *white* ignorance with respect to a racist special regulation, which represented a permeating experience of humiliation, isolation and intimidation throughout refugees’ daily lives, and is therefore largely responsible for the fact that many refugees would hardly appreciate their right to political action or organisation.

Taking these and other similar conflicts that have occurred into account, particularly as part of the Anti-racist border camps (1998-2003), a new approach was sought within the NoLager network (2002-2007): Activists with and without escape and migration experience reached an agreement to work on a trans-identity ‘We’ project as part of intensified cooperation, with the aim of creating a political stakeholder that takes the different starting positions seriously but uses this as a basis to formulate common perspectives, interests and demands, therefore breaking down the polarising us-and-them position arising from the racist social structure, at least on an anti-racist field.

The operational framework is based on the motto famously created by the (Australian) Murri activist Lilla Watson and printed on t-shirts by the Brandenburg Refugee Initiative in 2003: ‘If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.’ As a practical maxim, the concept of accountability that originated from critical-whiteness discussions among others was used (without this being theoretically discussed, however); i.e. the self-commitment of *white* activists to make themselves allies of refugees, migrants and people of colour –along with systematically sharing their willingness, money, time, linguistic competency and other privileges.¹

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• For the (border camp) conflicts mentioned here, as well as the fundamentals of the critical-whiteness concept, see Bernau (2012) and transact (2014).

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3. How do you see the relationship between the refugee movement and Degrowth?

Growth-related causes of escape and migration as the lowest common denominator

Relations between degrowth and certain intervention currents of the escape and migrant movement are literally obvious. Because numerous reasons for escape directly or indirectly result from a capitalist growth imperative: It does not matter if we talk about market openings, privatisation, investment facilitation, land grabbing, access to resources or resource wars, we are always referring to growth, often coupled with brutal economic competition –in other words, we are referring to increased sales opportunities, profitable investments, cheaper production locations, the appropriation of raw materials that are necessary to keep the capitalist high-performing economy running. Furthermore, there are also indirect connections: such as with climate change, which further aggravates the continuously precarious situation of small farming households; or the fact that working together with corrupt regimes is almost unavoidable in order to implement imperial interests. In this respect, it cannot have been purely coincidental that the early degrowth debate (which admittedly operated under different names) predominantly subsided in the early 1980s, while countries in the south fell into ruin under the auspices of neoliberal structural adjustment programmes from the IMF and World Bank in the name of growth.

Yet there are also contradictions and grey areas abound since growth is not at all seen as a negative development by many migrants and refugees. They would rather see their money transfers (which account for more than double the foreign aid figure) contribute to raising the living standards of their families and local communities. In principle, this is to be welcomed with open arms but it is primarily concerned with meeting basic needs such as access to food, water, education and health services (either through increased consumption or small-business investments). At the same time, it can also result in materialistic actions for profit. In this case, migrants and refugees are financing status symbols such as large houses and cars with some of the money they are earning in Europe. But this is also far from objectionable, at least if we consider that the lifestyle enjoyed by most people in rich industrial countries continues to generate a significantly larger CO₂ footprint than in the Global South. Instead, this materialistic excess is problematic because it acts as a kind of promotional event for the capitalist consumerism model in each of these countries, and therefore the search for ecologically and socially acceptable developmental alternatives are regularly undermined.

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One final thing to consider: The degrowth summer school in 2015 was a real highlight from a social and atmospheric point of view. It was a clear display of solidarity, with an extremely friendly atmosphere, and it was brilliantly organised. At the same time, the social composition was somewhat unsettling: predominantly *white*, young and academically qualified. To put it another way: There was no need to wrestle for understanding despite different starting conditions –which almost defines the character of migration and refugee-policy battles– in the context of this summer school. Instead, a certain monoculturality prevailed, and while it did not prevent exciting debates, it was more of a paradoxical stance towards the discursive openness relating to complex problem areas around the globe– a contradiction to which I will return immediately.

4. Which suggestions do they have to each other?

What degrowth can learn from transnational organisation processes

One of the central challenges faced by social movements in Africa is to start a conversation with the general population about alternative, and therefore self-sufficient developmental opportunities. All key economic data supports the notion that, for the foreseeable future, most African countries do not stand the slightest chance of freeing themselves from their subordinate status on the global market as mere suppliers of raw materials (this focus on African countries is as a result of the work carried out by Afrique-Europe-Interact, but other similar questions also apply to other regions of the world). In light of this, the degrowth movement could certainly be a valuable counterpart for social movements in the Global South, particularly when seeking answers to those questions that appear to be from macrosocial transition perspectives. In doing so, however, it is important to remember that people who find themselves with their backs to the economic wall are predominantly interested in tangible suggested solutions, not debates on the basic principles.

And this is exactly where degrowth could learn from transnational networks, such as Afrique-Europe-Interact. Thanks to their intensive work in mixed configurations –whether it is here or in an African-European context – Afrique-Europe-Interact has gained a wealth of experience as to how it is possible to not only build trust resources step-by-step, but also shared prospects of action, despite considerable economic, social, cultural and religious differences. In practice, transnational forms of organisation tend to be highly contradictory on a political, social and personal level. For example, in Afrique-Europe-Interact in 2012 a transnational debate erupted due to the demands of many of the activists in Mali that, in order to enforce their right

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to self-defence (particularly against Islamic terrorist groups), the relatively small Mali army with its 12,000 soldiers be provided with adequate equipment, as well as training support from the German army. Of course, many European activists were literally sweating buckets while hearing this. On a social level, on the other hand, contradictions are often exemplified by questions about organisation: In every village in Mali, you will find a village chief. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that a village chief is only respected as long as he adequately represents the will of the village, which in turn presupposes a democracy-based opinion-forming process. And to conclude, the personal angle: The fact is that transnational networking would not be possible without mutual support, particularly in relation to action processes that can sometimes be nerve-racking. Nevertheless, it would be absurd to want to seek out your own alter ego in a transnational organisation of all places. In this regard, a fundamental challenge lies in repeatedly letting things stand or go uncommented (this applies to both sides), even if they shake the very foundations of your own political or personal self-image –such as when political difficulties are explained through supernatural phenomena, or e.g. regarding differing notions of gender (see Bernau 2015).

5. Outlook: Space for visions, suggestions or wishes

Get down from your observation towers and debate podiums, and join the common struggle!

This text is the result of an extremely friendly degrowth communication campaign. However, I cannot stop myself from shouting the local degrowth movement down –with respect– from their discourse-overgrown observation tower and debate podium. The balance of social power only changes in practical conflicts, such as those that should have been made clear by the depiction of escape and migrant battles.

At the same time, the decline in resources and violence has also been raised in these stories, which are tackled by many movements. From a contextual and political viewpoint, I would therefore rather see the degrowth movement participate more in battles relating to the causes of escape –no matter the framework. Furthermore, battles fought by refugees in this country are consistently reliant on low-threshold support. Both should occur in the context of power sharing, because only those movements that share and redistribute their material, time and intellectual resources will be successful in the end.

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Literature

Links

Afrique-Europe-Interact: www.afrique-europe-interact.net

bordermonitoring.eu: <http://bordermonitoring.eu/>

Forschungsstelle Flucht und Migration ('Refugee and migration research centre'): www.ffm-online.org

Karawane für die Rechte der Flüchtlinge und MigrantInnen ('Caravan for the rights of refugees and migrants'): www.thecaravan.org

Kompass – monthly Antira newsletter: www.kompass.antira.info

Watch The Med Alarm Phone: www.alarmphone.org

Welcome to Europe: www.infomobile.w2eu.net/

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