

## **2. Activism by, with and for migrants in Hamburg**

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Firstly, this chapter entails a depiction of an exemplary scene: The We'll Come United Parade that took place in Hamburg on September 29, 2018. It offers the reader a glimpse to better understand my research setting. It is a personal account of the day and I should add that I have myself been involved in the organization. I hope to transmit some of the difficulties, hopes and strengths of this political fight. The parade was organized by a nation-wide network of self-organized, anti-racist and antifascist initiatives, which brought 35,000 people to the streets, making it one of the biggest demonstrations by, with and for migrants in Germany until then. This description is not meant to be representative or exhaustive neither of the activist groups I researched nor of this particular day.

Secondly, this chapter contains a reflection of my own positionality, which deals with my position as a researcher and a person in and beyond this research project. I agree with Bryant's conviction that at the beginning of a research project researchers should "try to articulate their motivations and relationships to the research and its key issues" because "[c]laiming that one has no preconceptions is not convincing, nor is it defensible." (2017, p. 152) Given my multiple roles of involvement in the research setting and my privileged positionings, I consider positionality even more relevant than it is anyways.

### **2.1 We'll Come United—Anti-racist parade in Hamburg (September 29, 2018)**

"We turn on the light and turn up the sound. The mics are there for those who need them, to tell it like it is: The history of our society is the history of migration. It is just as unstoppable as the solidarity of the many. So, call us

storytellers. We are here. We are coming. We are staying. On Sept 29, 2018 the streets will be ours." (We'll Come United, 2018)

It is a crisp Saturday morning in late September in Hamburg. The sky is of a bright blue, the air is still cool from the night, and the big square in front of the city hall is almost empty. It's too early for the tourists. The offices are empty because of the weekend. The shops have not opened yet. Only a few police vans are parked at the side of the square. Looking more carefully, I see that there are two bigger groups of people standing on the other end of the square. Otherwise, everything is silent. Suddenly, a truck enters the street beside the square, a few seconds later another one follows, and yet another one, and so on. All at once, something is getting started here. The trucks line up along the sides of the square and in the streets right next to it, as if pulled by invisible but clearly organized threads. People immediately start to prepare with those who are already here. Groups of people start to assemble next to each truck, forming a busy buzzing all around. People climb up on trucks' sides, rolling up the tarps, others unpack banners, build sculptures, draw posters or make other decorations. The trucks are starting to transform—from gray uniform transport vehicles they turn into something more lively: colorful monuments, airplanes, dream statues, safe spaces, playgrounds, clubs, rooms of education, boats, memorials.

Walking from one to the other, it is almost impossible to take in all the messages that are only starting to be put up: *knowledge is not white; women breaking borders; decolonize!; we'll dance UNITED; Freedom of Movement; Migration ist die Mutter aller Gesellschaften; Familienleben für alle; Smash Racism and Borders; Our Love is louder than Fear; Kein Mensch ist Illegal; Laut gegen Nazis*. The square is filling up with colors, noise and people. Some women are sitting on the ground painting more slogans on balloons and cloth. Nearby two people are holding a third one installing a sign on top of a truck. Kids are jumping on and off the loading ramps. And then, the square is full of people. It is hard to pass through the crowd and reach the stage where just the brief presentation of all the trucks takes more than an hour. Women, Black people, children, queer people, refugees, men, white people, People of Color, migrants, Germans, Sans-Papiers and many more—they all hand each other the microphone on this stage, claiming the day, the city, society. It's easy to tell that it's not a normal day, not the usual German demonstration, by the diversity of people present on and around the stage. People speaking up, standing hand in hand, showing a society of the many that already exists.

I stand next to the group of people who jointly make the closing statement of this opening by the We'll Come United network. Despite all joint conviction, there are also tensions. A young woman who is part of the group makes a very short statement and is not allowed to add something later on when she recalls better what she wanted to say. The whole process is sharply planned. The speeches had to be in German and English because it would have taken too long to interpret. Someone being overwhelmed by this situation of speaking in front of thousands of people is not planned. No time to give time.

When the program on stage is finished, the procession of trucks is already moving. Getting through the crowd of smiling, busy, chanting people around each of them means moving slowly. Moving from one truck to the other is a passage from dancing on the street to careful listening to experiences of flight or political demands to clouds of whistles or words of remembrance, grief, rage but always also of hope. It's impossible to grasp the whole of emotions, activities and faces that move through the city in this never-ending call for visibility, solidarity and future. No one can understand all the languages spoken on the trucks, in the audience and on stage. But everyone gets the message that one activist puts into words: "Love is the only solution." But anger and determination are part of this too: "The fight has to continue, if we want to continue dreaming and hoping," says someone, and: "You cannot fight for us without us." A reminder of the importance of standing together, claiming the fight and acting in solidarity. Speaking up are those who too often are not heard nor seen, those who are creating their own future, even though others keep destroying it.

When we reach the water by the harbor, the sun is setting. People sit down on the street, by the trucks, on the harbor walls. They talk, eat, nap. Ironically, all this takes place in the area of the city where racism is especially present and oppressive on a daily basis. The special task force of the police has made the St. Pauli Hafenstraße its main site for showing active about drug criminality. Black people and People of Color are controlled and harassed here every day. Some do not come here anymore because they cannot move freely. For others, it's the area they know, where they meet people and where there is also a lot of solidarity and support. Because this is also one of the areas that historically and symbolically most clearly stand for Left organizing, resistance and struggle in Hamburg. Today, maybe the crowd allows to move more unnoticed and might offer recognition. The realities overlap and dreams and claims are weaved into them. The clouds that had accompanied the parade during the day have disappeared, leaving an almost cheesy evening sky on the silhouette

of the harbor. Despite the pugnacious demands and the serious experiences, the atmosphere is exuberant. On the top floor of a building near-by the press group offers an impressive panorama perspective to media representatives, trying to help transmit the feelings and claims of the day to those not present. In another organized space close-by some groups already do a direct evaluation round. In a stuffed room without much air, we discuss what went wrong, what to improve, what to do next, when to meet again. Outside the crowd disperses into their multiple realities.

## 2.2 Positionality

What follows is a personal account of how I see what brought me to where I am now: topic-wise, methodologically, normatively, ethically, politically and socially. As such, it is not typically included in most academic publications at all. Still, as part of my epistemological and methodological decisions, I see it as a sign of respect and transparency to share these reflections with my readers.

In a way, I have always had an intense fascination with civil society activities from my early studies onwards. Certainly, my own political views have always been close to many of the movements I read about. I think that I always felt respect for those who dedicate so much of their time to a specific cause. Seeing people give their lives—sometimes literally—to improve the world, not just for themselves but for everyone, has surely inspired me to aim at using the resources I have to also work on this. This account shares my personal development throughout the last years from mainly looking at social movements from an outside perspective toward being involved in them. The feelings while working on this research have often been inspiration—by all the people I was allowed to meet and learn from—, anger—given the unbearable and unjustifiable situations people have to deal with—, indignation—because I am part of the small portion of people that has privileges to (not) do whatever they want—, powerlessness—when seeing how little things change and how small I am—, but also hope and joy—when being so warmly welcomed in groups and being able to live moments of empowerment and solidarity.

The Long Summer of Migration is often depicted as a turning point in the perception and presence of flight and migration in the European and German public discourse. I must admit that I was also not particularly engaged with questions of migration before. For a long time, the right to move was a taken-

for-granted privilege for me, which I had and used since birth, but which I only later started to reflect on critically and question more. I witnessed the opening of the inner-European borders, heard about the tightening of the outer ones. Of course, while living in Sicily I came across the situation in the Mediterranean, also given that migration has always been an obvious and visible part of everyday life on this Southern island between Europe and Africa. However, I was not too much involved in doing something about it.

The part of the summer in 2015 that nobody in Europe could have missed I was in the US. The following half-year, I followed what was happening from afar. As for many, this led to a strong urge to finally *do something*. When I came back to Germany, I got involved in an alliance in Hamburg organizing the International Conference of Refugees and Migrants<sup>1</sup>. I joined the assemblies and was actively involved in a working group. Strictly speaking and apart from demonstrations, this was probably my first real activist experience altogether. And it certainly was very significant for me. I learned so many things I wasn't aware of before: topics, backgrounds, experiences, framings, assumptions taken for granted. Given my social movement background as a student, it was invaluable to confront my theoretical knowledge and my own white German perspective with these groups' realities. The focus of my PhD research clearly originates here.

One strong notion that I took from the conference and that, I think, is very embedded in my research, methodologically and in terms of prior knowledge about the field, is finding a more equal footing: trying to work and talk with instead of about people. I started to reflect more explicitly on how I was positioned as a white German cis-female academic within these activist groups engaging for migrant, precarious, BPoC life realities. That involved evident notions, as well as, for me, at that point, not so obvious ones. Being advantaged and privileged in so many ways I did not know about before—being used to speaking in public or in English, having experience with group discussions, but also having a warm home to go back to, a financially stable situation, being at home, etc. Especially addressing my own internalized racist socializing, learning about anti-racism and exploring what my role as a white person can be in these struggles have been significant developments throughout these past couple of years.

Positionality involves the process of reflecting one's perspective and position within the research setting—how it impacts what and how I perceive

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<sup>1</sup> <http://refugeeconference.blogspot.eu/>.

and interact with it (Wilkinson, 2014, p. 403). For me, continuously reflecting on my position as a researcher, and thus as a person, in the research setting and in relation to the research participants has been incredibly valuable. On the one hand, it is essential to reflect on these things for myself. For example, because my assumptions have implications on my methodological and theoretical choices. Additionally, I could not put on paper how much I have personally learnt in the last six years in this process. On the other hand, it is crucial to make these choices and assumptions visible to others, to enter into dialogue and to make my positions and perspectives transparent. I would say that reflecting on and addressing racism, learning about post-colonial perspectives, feminist notions, socio-economic inequalities but also plain and simple human and relational issues have found their way into my methodological choices and the analytical focus of my research in general. However, it is never finished, and this publication probably includes and reflects different stages of this very process.

Constructivist grounded theory is a research approach that allows the researcher to integrate these reflections into the process explicitly. As an approach, it is open enough to let me as a researcher give up some control and take the time to explore while also following certain methods to give direction and guidance to the whole. Both the underlying philosophical ideas and my methodological choices imply that this can never be a closed chapter. Rather, it must be an ongoing process and task for me to keep reflecting on the issues, questions and positions I encounter. It includes challenging myself, "solving" some or revisiting them later-on, re-engaging with them when they emerge at other points in time or being able to let them go for a while when they prove less relevant in certain situations.

As is evident by now, when it comes to my research context, activism by, with and for refugees and migrants in Hamburg, I entirely share the general claims that this movement is making: for the rights of migrants and refugees, against borders, deportation and racism. With my research, I got back in touch with some people and groups in Hamburg that I still knew from organizing the conference. I generally approached them as a researcher and an activist from the very start. I reflected this double role from the beginning, as the following memo excerpt shows, which also raises the uncertainties that come with this:

"Of course, this is an extremely important issue that will not stop coming up. I do have a double role and I still have to figure out, or better I have to

continuously and with every single group, figure out what my roles exactly are. There is no either-or but very blurry lines that I have to be as open as possible about." (Memo *Joining meetings in a double-role* from 17/01/18)

For me, participant observation does not mean that I am only silently observing. I got actively involved, in some groups more and in others less. Generally, these years have been a process of personal development in terms of political engagement—though as always certainly not a linear one. Within and beyond these groups and even this movement, I became increasingly active and involved but through the writing stage and paid labor also disengaged again. This also means that, to some extent, I was becoming part of my own research subject. Yanow and Schwartz-Shea interestingly refer to this as “enhanced reflexivity,” describing the double role of the researcher as “sense maker” in the more classical sense and, at the same time, as “primary data source” in terms of her own experience (2014, p. 391). In fact, writing field notes for example certainly takes the perspective of who writes them. Sometimes, especially with memos, my feeling was that I was interviewing myself just as I was interviewing others, only more frequently and analytically.

This also comprises that I got to know people on a more personal level, had drinks with them, was invited to birthday parties, made friends. I am aware that all of this can lead to me having too much of an insider view, for instance, meaning that I could romanticize things or have a one-sided view of them. At the same time, I will always be an outsider in certain ways: I am not the one most strongly suffering the consequences of colonialism and racism, I hold a passport that lets me travel wherever I want, I went to school and university and can find work—or even allow myself not to for keeping to learn—, I am white, and I am at home here (and this could go on). Throughout the years, all this has made me continuously reflect on if and how I am entitled to research a fight where I am not part of the groups of people with lived experiences. I think that this reflection is critical—not just but, of course, centrally because it is at the core of my research. I have to ask myself why I, as a white, German academic, should be the one to document, interpret and analyze migrant rights activism (L. T. Smith, 2012, p. 17f.). That is one reason why I focus on mixed group contexts that I was myself involved in. Aiming at taking the claim “Nothing for us without us” serious is not just essential within activist struggles and daily life, but it is also, maybe especially, necessary in academia. Thus, I am an outsider *and* an insider to my research context in various ways.

Engaging with complex constellations of positionalities is part of this process. I tried to do this through methodological tools, such as memo-writing and the field diary, which means that I was constantly engaging in a dialogue with myself, trying to take steps back, asking myself critical questions and not shying away from these topics. It also meant engaging with ethical concerns regarding my interaction and relationship with groups and people, being as honest and transparent with them as I am trying to be with myself without giving up my research position. Sometimes the groups themselves addressed these topics and reflections. I explicitly talked to activists about my role and position as a researcher or about being white and German in the groups. As will become clear in the empirical and analytical parts of this book, questions of privilege, inequality and perspectives centrally also come up within the groups themselves. These have therefore been very fundamental questions for my research in multiple ways. All these thoughts and discussions have been defining in shaping my research and they re-emerge throughout this dissertation.