

darities that developed around the long summer of migration. In the protests that I witnessed during my field research, the issue of food took on important political meanings. It served as a political platform that brought to the fore differing and competing interventions in the parameters of a humanitarian reception. The issue of food also provided a clear illustration of how different actors intermediated the asylum seekers' scope for political agency. Throughout this chapter, I thus conceptualize asylum seekers' political agency as the intermediated capacity to alter and contest the conditions of their reception in favour of a different alternative.

I draw on field research during and shortly after several protests that occurred in southern Germany in the first half of 2016. I focus on two intriguing incidents that were particularly revealing for the purpose of this chapter: firstly, the aforementioned acts of protest in Bad Waldsee, and, secondly, an incident in Offenburg, a medium-sized town at the southwestern edge of Germany. I refer to interviews with protesting asylum seekers; with representatives of the local government; with volunteers; and with reception centre staff such as managers, security guards and social workers. In addition, I draw on my own observations at the respective reception facilities during and after the acts of protest. I also consider the media coverage by analysing local newspaper articles that reported on the incidents. My aim is to provide multiple perspectives on the insubordinate acts of the protesting asylum seekers.

This chapter consists of four parts. In section two, I scrutinize my analytical perspective on *intermediated agencies*. I then take a closer look at the storytelling of the protests in Bad Waldsee via different actors involved in the reception of asylum seekers. In section four, I provide insights into another case study from the medium-sized town of Offenburg. In this context, local governmental actors (re)defined the protesting asylum seekers as economic migrants who should be excluded from humanitarian protection, a conception that was, however, highly contested by volunteers in the town. I close off with concluding remarks on the role of asylum seekers in the recasting of solidarity.

## 5.2. The Intermediated Agency of Asylum Seekers

Academic works on migrant activism offer useful starting points for a conceptualization of asylum seekers' interventions in relationships of solidarity. Such studies point to the need to take into account the agency of asylum seek-

ers and irregular migrants, underlining the political significance of those moments when non-citizens make claims on a nation-state to which they technically do not belong (Nyers 2006b; Rigby & Schlembach 2013; Ataç et al. 2015). For instance, Johnson (2014: 204) argues that a migrant is “a transgressive and disruptive figure in world politics who challenges the ways in which we understand political subjectivity and agency”. Others have outlined that, in moments when they raise their own voice, migrants challenge the primacy of citizens as legitimate political subjects within the nation-state (McNevin 2011; Ilcan 2014). In doing so, they are said to blur the dividing line between citizens and non-citizens, thus questioning the central premises of sovereign power (Nyers 2006b). McNevin (2011: 2) therefore regards acts of protest by asylum seekers as “contestations of citizenship” that undermine the *raison d'être* of the nation-state.

Such reflections on the political agency of asylum seekers often build on the works of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière (Rancière 1998, 2001, 2009). Rancière argues that the limits of the political are contested when those who are not represented in the dominant order make claims to be counted. From such a perspective, moments of disagreement and interruption constitute the essence of the political, something he expresses as follows: “Politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part” (Rancière 1998: 11). Building on Rancière’s writings, scholars writing on migrant activism often tend to ascribe a naturally destabilizing quality to those moments when asylum seekers make claims and constitute themselves as rights-bearing subjects. For instance, this is illustrated in a special issue of the journal *Citizenship Studies* on migrant activism, in which the editors proclaim that, in remaking citizenship “from the margins”, migrant struggles exhibit “transformative potential” (Ataç, Rygiel & Stierl 2016: 530). Such works are also inspired by an ‘autonomy of migration’ perspective that refuses to see migrants as objects of governmental control and, instead, stresses their transformative power (see for instance Papastergiadis 2000; Papadopoulos, Stephenson & Tsianos 2008; Mezzadra 2011). This line of thought regards unauthorized migration flows themselves as a social movement that continuously resists and challenges governmental attempts at regulation. However, I would echo the thoughts of Walters (2008), who cautions against romanticizing and overestimating the agency of irregular migrants in staging resistance and disruption.

So far, works on migrant activism have only rarely investigated how acts of protest alter and recast relationships of solidarity in migration societies. Yet,

a number of works point to the relational qualities of the political agency of asylum seekers. For instance, Topak (2016), based on his findings on protests and hunger strikes by asylum seekers in Greece, argues that: “It is one thing to demonstrate political agency, quite another to have that agency recognized” (ibid.: 8). According to Topak, few works take into account that protests and resistances often do not have the consequences the asylum seekers intended and generally enjoy limited success. In a similar vein, Johnson (2014: 192) suggests that migrant protests require the interventions of citizens in order to be regarded as meaningful political action, writing: “The citizen becomes a necessary partner – indeed, a central partner – in effective change, and is the translator of action into political agency on behalf of the non-citizen”. Huysmans (2006) argues that migrant protest is only of political significance if it is mediated by public media and human rights organizations.

In line with these works, my field research in southern Germany showed that protests in emergency reception centres only provoked discussion and action from actors involved in their reception if they became visible to the public eye. For this reason, governmental actors often tried to prevent asylum seeker protests from coming to public attention. The head of the city administration of Stuttgart, for instance, turned down my requests for an interview on the protest at a local emergency reception centre with the excuse that it would mean entering a ‘secure area’ to which there was no public access. In another case in Stuttgart, I witnessed how representatives of the Greens, the main governing party in the state government of Baden-Württemberg, directly intervened in order to stop asylum seekers from staging a public protest march shortly before state elections were scheduled to be held.

In this chapter, I thus explore asylum seekers’ political agency as their *intermediated capacity* to bring about change that transforms the dominant order in favour of a different alternative. With this conceptualization, I emphasize that agency is always relational, that it only comes into being in relationships of solidarity with those deemed legitimate citizens. Through the intermediation and translation by other actors involved in their humanitarian reception, actions of protesting asylum seekers are either cast as meaningful political action or deemed illegitimate. In other words, asylum seekers’ protest actions only offer political possibilities to transform the status quo and to enact a more inclusive alternative if they are mediated as meaningful political action.

Such an analytical perspective puts emphasis on the *storying* of protests through actors participating in the contestation of solidarity, for instance volunteers, governmental representatives or social welfare organizations. This

connects to an apt observation by Tyler (2013: 12f, emphasis in original), who writes: “It is often not events of protest [...] but rather the *storying* of revolts [...] which *matters* most”. Building on Tyler, I argue that the storying of migrant protests is of crucial importance not only to develop a more nuanced picture of how asylum seekers recast the terms of their reception but also to illustrate how humanitarian action might become a site of political possibilities. As I will illustrate in the following sections, the responses mediating the political agency of asylum seekers in the area of my field research ranged from *depoliticizing* to *politicizing* storyings; storyings that were contested among different actors. They either circumscribed the asylum seekers’ scope of agency and stripped their protests of political content or they translated them into meaningful political action. In the following sections, I investigate how different actors in Bad Waldsee (Section 3) and Offenburg (Section 4) made sense of and responded to moments when asylum seekers raised their own voice and made claims.

### 5.3. (De)politicizing the Meanings of Food: The Intermediation of Migrant Protest in Bad Waldsee

Food took on important political meanings during the protest in the small southern German town of Bad Waldsee. As part of their protests, the asylum seekers not only staged a march in the town centre and demanded to speak to local governmental representatives, they also engaged in a subsequent “hunger strike”. Almost all of the 170 inhabitants of the emergency reception centre collectively refused their food, which was supplied by an external service provider three times per day, in order to draw attention to the reasons for their protest. The collective refusal of food appeared to be a central means for asylum seekers in the area of my field research to voice discontent and to call attention to their problems. Many of the instances of protest in the first half of 2016 involved similar ‘hunger strikes’, although some of my interlocutors claimed that they were not ‘real’ hunger strikes since the asylum seekers continued eating food from elsewhere. In what follows, I provide insights into the storying of the protests in Bad Waldsee via different actors involved in the reception of asylum seekers. I show how the refusal of food provided at their reception facility served as a means for asylum seekers to demonstrate political agency. Actors involved in the reception of asylum seekers, however, used it as a means to *depoliticize* the protests and to reduce them