

6.4. The Conflicting Imaginaries of Community

The conflicts between the refugee activists and local actors in Schwäbisch Gmünd are not only telling in regards to differing understandings of the 'right' conduct of solidarity but also shed light on contrasting imaginaries of collectivity and togetherness in migration societies. They were rooted, I would argue, in conflicting notions of *local community* that ultimately proved incompatible. On the one hand, local actors portrayed the community in Schwäbisch Gmünd as a positive antidote to the world 'out there', while focussing on the social integration of asylum seekers *within* the boundaries of the town, thereby often neglecting structural conditions of discrimination (Subsection 1). On the other hand, the activists raised awareness of the structures of discrimination and isolation that reached far beyond the boundaries of the 'local', illustrating how they determined the refugees' experiences on the ground (Section 2 and 3). In what follows, I investigate these differing notions of community in more detail.

6.4.1. Local Community as an Antidote to the World 'Out There'

During my field research on the practices of refugee support around the long summer of migration, I came across the name Schwäbisch Gmünd countless times. From 2014 on, the narrative of the *Gmünder Weg* ("the Gmünd way") painted this small town in Swabia as a particularly successful example of a well-functioning 'welcome culture'. Repeatedly, governmental actors in the area of my field research and numerous national and regional media accounts referred to the town as a role model in regard to an active civil society, favourable local administrations and harmonious cooperation between different actors involved in the reception of asylum seekers. The mayor of Schwäbisch Gmünd, Richard Arnold, became not only the face of the *Gmünder Weg* but also a figurehead for the ostensible German 'welcome culture'. He repeatedly appeared as a keynote speaker at governmentally organized conferences in Baden-Württemberg, while national TV channels and newspapers carried reports on his achievements.

I would suggest that it was not so much the actual handling of asylum seekers that made Schwäbisch Gmünd the success story it seemed to be, but the fact that the town had been particularly successful in promoting an image of local community that had been embraced by the public. The narrative of the *Gmünder Weg* might thus be read as a response to contemporary needs and

conceptions of togetherness in migration societies rather than as a model of how to integrate asylum seekers successfully.

The romanticized image of ‘the local’ that the town has promoted successfully is illustrated on its official website, which contains detailed information on the ostensibly successful integration of asylum seekers and the implementation of a local ‘welcome culture’ in Schwäbisch Gmünd:

“Schwäbisch Gmünd is a tolerant, open-minded town that welcomes anyone and everyone! Schwäbisch Gmünd epitomizes a welcome culture that not only includes the accommodation but also the reception and integration of refugees. This revolves around individuals and their abilities and talents. The town’s mayor and the numerous professionals and volunteers working in Gmündian asylum politics focus first and foremost on interaction and decentrality: from schools and kindergartens to German language classes, volunteering projects and neighbourhood work [...] this is *togetherness*. As a *community of values*, the town can master the challenges of today.”¹⁹ (schwaebisch-gmuend.de: 2017; emphasis added)

This extract encapsulates strikingly how the local government of Schwäbisch Gmünd promoted a positive image of local “togetherness” and presented the town as a “community of values” that welcomes “anyone and everyone”. With such a harmonious local community, the text suggests, it is possible to “master the challenges of today”. This emphasis on local togetherness and harmony also features prominently in the section of the website entitled “Community”. It provides detailed information about the “various offers and possibilities” that “facilitate the integration of refugees into the community” (schwaebisch-gmuend.de: 2017).

This imaginary connects with academic works that discuss how the term ‘community’ generally elicits positive connotations and emotions (see Williams 1981: 76; Amit 2002; Creed 2006b; Mayo 2017). For instance, in

19 Translated by LF. German original: “Schwäbisch Gmünd ist eine tolerante, offene Stadt, die jede und jeden Willkommen heißt! In Schwäbisch Gmünd wird eine Willkommenskultur gelebt, die nicht nur die Unterbringung, sondern vor allem die Aufnahme und Integration von Flüchtlingen beinhaltet. Der einzelne Mensch mit seinen Fähigkeiten und Talenten steht dabei im Vordergrund. Das Stadtoberhaupt und die vielen hauptamtlichen und ehrenamtlichen Mitstreiter in der Gmünder Flüchtlingspolitik setzen dabei vor allem auf Begegnung und Dezentralität: von Schulen, Kindergärten, über Deutschkurse, Ehrenamtsprojekte und Quartiersarbeit. [...] Es ist ein Miteinander. Mit dieser Wertegemeinschaft wird die Stadt die aktuellen Herausforderungen meistern.”

his monograph *Community*, Bauman (2001) claims that, in an increasingly globalized and insecure world, 'community' evokes a feeling of warmth and safety. He puts this as follows:

"To start with, community is a 'warm' place, a cosy and comfortable place. It is like a roof under which we shelter in heavy rain, like a fireplace at which we warm our hands on a frosty day [...] To go on: in a community we can count on each other's good will. If we stumble and fall, others will help us to stand on our feet again." (Bauman 2001: 1-2)

According to Bauman, such ideas of 'local community' have become increasingly attractive: in an individualized world characterized by "competition" and "one-upmanship", he argues, people search "safety in an insecure world". The idea of a harmonious and stable local community thus provides a desirable antidote to the perceived reality "out there" (ibid.: 3). As he goes on to argue, such unreservedly positive notions of a local community are, however, much more a reflection of current needs and desires than of the actual situation on the ground. He summarizes these needs as follows:

"Where the state has failed, perhaps the community, the *local* community, the physically tangible, 'material' community, a community embodied in a *territory* inhabited by its members and no one else (no one who 'does not belong'), will purvey the 'being safe' feeling which the wider world evidently conspires to destroy?" (Bauman 2001: 112-113; emphasis in original)

The success of the *Gmünder Weg*, I would argue, rested to a large extent on the town's enthusiastic promotion of such positive notions of 'local community'. The narrative offered a desirable antidote to the 'challenges' out there and thus responded to a longing for togetherness and dependability in a physically embedded community. To quote Bauman, it depicted this small Swabian town as "a paradise lost" to which "we dearly hope to return", so that we "feverishly seek the roads that may bring us there" (ibid.: 3). The *Gmünder Weg* was particularly successful in presenting itself convincingly as a road that might lead us to membership of a harmonious community.

The narrative of the *Gmünder Weg* epitomizes a recurring feature of the practices of refugee support that I investigated in the course of my field research: those who sought to help often (re)produced an image of a particularly harmonious local community with regard to their own village or town. This positive image of local community is thus emblematic of the social imaginaries pertaining to many of the practices of refugee support that built on

humanitarian parameters. Such practices often drew up and reproduced romanticized images of local community based on mutual support and personal immediacy. In the previous chapters of this book, I illustrated how established residents often emphasized their willingness to contribute to the public good in *their* neighbourhood, village or town. The local, in this context, was not only an important mobilizing force but also opened up political possibilities that put an emphasis on presence (see Chapter 4).

The narrative of the *Gmünder Weg* built centrally on the idea that mutual help and support formed a prerequisite for a harmonious local community. This was illustrated by the high public visibility of the local citizens' initiative supporting refugees and the placement of asylum seekers in voluntary community work. According to the town's official website, this voluntary, unpaid work by refugees served as a means to "be part of the social fabric" of the town. In several media articles, the refugees of Schwäbisch Gmünd were depicted as particularly 'helpful' in that they voluntarily contributed to the public good in the town, for instance by collecting litter in green spaces. Volunteers and the local council also placed refugees in work at high-profile public events, such as the "Landesgartenschau 2014", a regional garden show that brought an estimated two million visitors to Schwäbisch Gmünd. Several articles in regional newspapers reported on the refugee volunteers helping to make this huge event happen, by staffing ticket offices, for instance. One of these articles pictured smiling and seemingly happy asylum seekers volunteering at the garden show (Gmünder Tagespost: 21/4/2014)²⁰. Through such means, I would argue, the city council promoted an imaginary of local community based on mutual help and support.

An emphasis on personal immediacy and face-to-face interaction further contributed to the success of the *Gmünder Weg*. Various media accounts promoted these facets of local togetherness when reporting on the seemingly successful integration of refugees in the town. This was most evident in the reporting on Schwäbisch Gmünd's decentralized housing scheme. With this approach, the city council aimed to accommodate refugees in smaller units dispersed across the town instead of in one large central facility (cf. Hinger & Schäfer 2019). The high public attention paid to this decentralized accommodation scheme often put a special emphasis on personal immediacy. For instance, a short report on the *Gmünder Weg* that was broadcast on the TV channel '3sat' in January 2016 presented its decentralized housing scheme as

20 See: <http://www.gmuender-tagespost.de/p/731066/> (last accessed 1/8/2020).

an important factor in the successful local integration of asylum seekers. In an interview that was broadcast as part of the report, the mayor of Schwäbisch Gmünd claimed that such an accommodation scheme reduced local residents' fear of the new arrivals since it meant they could get to know them as "individuals" (3sat: 18/1/2016)²¹. This emphasis on the 'individual' and his or her integration into the harmonious local community, a recurring feature of the *Gmünder Weg*, conveyed a notion of personal immediacy in the town.

Academic works have emphasized the traces of *nostalgia* pertaining to such an image of local community based on personal immediacy and mutual support. Mayo (2017: 130), drawing on Sennett (1976), suggests that the idea of community serves as "nostalgic alternatives to the alienation of contemporary capitalism". Creed (2006a) and Bauman (2001) assert that the emphasis on personal immediacy pertaining to 'local community' paints a romanticized and nostalgic version of 'the local' and functions as an antidote to a world in which people are increasingly atomized and isolated from one another. Creed (2006c) criticizes this "fetishization" of an unreservedly positive image of community since it disregards and silences its problematic features.

In a similar vein, I would argue that the idea of the *Gmünder Weg* painted a one-sided and unreservedly positive picture of 'the local' while ignoring potentially problematic structural aspects and power asymmetries that shaped the living-together on the ground. For instance, the 'voluntary community work' conducted by asylum seekers in the town was romanticized as altruistic contribution to the public good. However, this explanation did not mention the possibility that many asylum seekers may have engaged in this unpaid work because, lacking work permits, they had no other alternative. The asylum seekers may also have engaged in unpaid voluntary work in the hope of influencing their asylum case or improving their chances of getting a 'real' job in the future, as one of my interlocutors suggested. Moreover, none of the positive accounts of the *Gmünder Weg* ever mentioned that the town's ability to provide decentralized accommodation was significantly shaped by a particular local circumstance: after a new initial reception centre opened in Ellwangen in early 2015 (see Chapter 2), the whole of the Ostalbkreis district including Schwäbisch Gmünd became legally exempt from taking in further asylum seekers and did so only on a voluntary basis. This may have reduced the pressure on the town in such a way that it was able to develop alternative housing

21 See: <https://www.3sat.de/wissen/nano/ein-buergermeister-packt-s-an-100.html> (last accessed 1/8/2020).

schemes, as one of my interlocutors suggested. Indeed, Hinger and Schäfer (2019) pointed to a similar tendency to move towards decentralised housing schemes in other cities across Germany in the early 2010s. Yet, they argue that, when the number of arriving asylum seekers increased sharply in 2014 and 2015, most local governments returned to a centralized housing scheme, accommodating the newcomers in mass accommodation centres (ibid.: 64). Due to its specific local context, Schwäbisch Gmünd might thus present a singular example of a town that was able to continue its approach to decentralized accommodation in the course of the long summer of migration.

Summing up, I would argue that this romanticized notion of community that was promoted by many practices of refugee support during the long summer of migration spoke to a void in contemporary society: it conveyed feelings of safety and dependability in a world regarded as increasingly insecure and atomized. The refugee activists, however, embedded their actions of protest in a rather different social imaginary, something I will illustrate in more detail in the following two subsections.

6.4.2. The Spatial Contingencies of Local Community: A Landscape of Unequal Rights

In the course of their protests, the activists of the Refugees Initiative Schwäbisch Gmünd painted a rather different picture of their immediate living situation in the town. In their version of the story, there was little mention of the warm feelings of togetherness, mutual support and personal immediacy that were promoted by the ostensibly so successful *Gmünder Weg*. By contrast, the activists emphasized their experiences of isolation from and discrimination within the 'local community' of Schwäbisch Gmünd. In the eyes of the refugee activists, the structures of discrimination extended far beyond the boundaries of the 'local community', with German and European asylum laws being a key factor in their marginalized position on the ground.

From the beginning, the Refugees Initiative thus called attention to the unjust German asylum laws that critically determined their living situation in Schwäbisch Gmünd. The activists repeatedly blamed such laws for their experiences of exclusion and discrimination on the ground. In doing so, I would argue, the refugee activists linked their immediate situation in Schwäbisch Gmünd to a wider landscape of unequal rights that, from their point of view, prevented them from becoming integrated into society. For instance, they criticized that they were unable to gain work permits, calling for equal ac-

cess to the labour market and a right to work. In July 2013, they published a post in their Facebook group that clearly expressed this perceived link between their structural exclusion from the labour market and their immediate situation in Schwäbisch Gmünd:

“Stop every form of exploitation of the oppressed refugees, asylum seekers are not welcome into the labour market in Germany but when it comes to working for 1€ per hour job then asylum seekers are automatically well integrated, even when there is no integration in the so called democracy of refugees [...] Refugees want to contribute to the society and also want to be useful to ourselves, the community we are living, to our own nations and to the whole world in general but not in form of modern day slavery and any form of furthermore exploitation. We demand the right to be accepted in the labour market without compromise” (Refugees Initiative Schwäbisch Gmünd: 25/7/13; English original)

With this post, the refugee activists raised awareness of the discriminating national asylum laws that prevented them from working and called for equal rights. They also related these structures of discrimination to the narrative of the *Gmünder Weg*, which they regarded as a ‘bad compromise’ and a symbol of their very discrimination. In the post above, for instance, they denounced the placement of asylum seekers in ‘voluntary community work’ for one euro per hour and criticized it for being not a means of integration but, in fact, a form of “modern day slavery”. To the activists, a ‘proper’ integration into the local community was thus based on having equal rights, a condition that could not be brought about locally, only via change at a national and European level.

The relationship between discriminatory asylum laws and the activists’ immediate living situation in Schwäbisch Gmünd was also addressed in their campaigns against the “Residence Obligation” (“Residenzpflicht”), which became a prominent feature of their protests between 2012 and 2016. This “German Apartheid Residence Obligation Law” (Refugees Initiative Schwäbisch Gmünd: 26/6/2014), as the activists often called it, represented a particularly critical example of their perceived legal discrimination and isolation within German society. Described in juridical terminology as “spatial confinement” (“Räumliche Beschränkung”), it forbids asylum seekers whose asylum case is pending, or those who have been granted temporary right to remain (“Duldung”), from leaving the district responsible for them without the local au-

thority's permission²². In the eyes of the refugee activists, this law presented a major infringement of their spatial mobility and fundamental human rights. For instance, a post in their Facebook group from March 2013 contained a striking "declaration" against the Residence Obligation. It recalled how, after travelling to a small town around 50 kilometres north of Schwäbisch Gmünd in order to visit friends, the refugee activists were charged with a fine for leaving their district without official permission. The Facebook post denounced this procedure as follows:

"WE WILL NOT PAY ONE CENT FOR THE RESIDENZPFLICHT! The Residenzpflicht forbids a refugee to leave the Landkreis/Lager where his/her living situation is repression from the administrations and leads to isolation from the society. We do not accept this regulation, because it offends our civil liberties (right of abode, general right of acting/Freizügigkeit, Allgemeine Handlungsfreiheit)" (Refugees Initiative Schwäbisch Gmünd: 23/3/2013, emphasis in English original)

This illustrates how the refugee activists blamed the Residence Obligation for contributing to their perceived "repression" by local authorities and their "isolation" from the local community.

Works in critical migration studies have outlined how the spatial confinement and detention of asylum seekers functions as a central technique to exert sovereign control and power (see for instance Mountz 2011; Fontanari 2015). Through their protests against the Residence Obligation, the activists called attention to how this law subjected them to governmental control and how it contributed to their marginalized position on the ground. Their protests against this law also illustrate how the Refugees Initiative Schwäbisch Gmünd formed part of a wider network of refugee groups across Germany. Several scholars have pointed out how the resistance against the Residence Obligation

22 Although the German government announced that it had significantly relaxed the Residence Obligation in December 2014, limiting it to the first three months after an asylum seeker's arrival, this was denounced as a "con" by many commentators (see <http://www.residenzpflicht.info/news/geplante-lockerungen-eine-farce>; last accessed 9/7/2018). Several non-governmental organizations supporting refugees criticized the Residence Obligation's apparent reform, as did self-organized refugee initiatives such as the Refugees Initiative Schwäbisch Gmünd. Others criticized that the Residence Obligation has simply been repackaged as the "Wohnsitzauflage". Introduced in 2016, this law regulates the place of residence for accepted refugees across Germany and puts even greater constraints on their spatial mobility.

had been a major focus of the actions of a Germany-wide refugee movement since at least 2012 (see Sasse et al. 2014; Kasparek & Schmidt 2016).

The refugee activists in Schwäbisch Gmünd thus remind us that the idea of an isolated and homogenous local community, imagined as an antidote to the world 'out there', can never be more than an illusion. 'The local' always forms part of a wider spatial landscape that is shaped by national and supranational laws and policies. These spatial contingencies, however, were largely ignored by the narrative of the *Gmünder Weg*. It promoted the notion of a homogenous and harmonious 'local community' while silencing how national laws and policies grant its members different rights and possibilities. This connects to what scholars such as Amit (2010) have outlined: a romanticized imaginary of 'local community', depicting all of its members as equals, can never be more than a wishful illusion. Mayo (2017: 126) argues that 'community' is always deeply heterogeneous and characterized by internal power imbalances. Creed proposes to analyse 'community' as a close relationship between inclusion and exclusion:

"Collectivity and exclusion are two sides of the same coin, and to understand either, we need to look at them together – community is the coinage." (Creed 2006b: 4)

He goes on to argue that 'community' might even function as a source of power for those who are already 'better off'. He explains these ambivalent dimensions of 'community' as follows:

"In fact, the same positive valence that makes community attractive may provoke discontent and dissatisfaction when such ideals are not realized. The same sentiments that generate community attachments clearly authorize exclusivity on the parts of community [...] The fascination with, and desire for, community may be inadvertently generating disappointment, alienation, fragmentation, and segregation." (Creed 2006b: 13)

The refugee activists in Schwäbisch Gmünd, I would argue, drew attention to these ambivalences of 'community' by pointing to the power relations that determined their situation on the ground. With their protests, they shed light on the national and supranational landscape of unequal rights that critically shaped their marginalized and excluded position in the 'local community' of Schwäbisch Gmünd.

The activists not only highlighted this wider spatial context of unequal rights, they also pointed to the *temporal contingencies* that determined their

situation in the Swabian town. In the following subsection, I thus investigate how the activists also called attention to a landscape of (post)colonial injustice in the course of their protests.

6.4.3. The Temporal Contingencies of Local Community: A Landscape of (Post)Colonial Injustice

Out of a sudden, in summer 2013, Schwäbisch Gmünd stood in the spotlight of national media attention. Almost all major daily newspapers and news magazines reported on the situation of asylum seekers in the town, accusing local actors of racism and colonialism. For instance, an article in *Die Tageszeitung* was entitled “Greetings from Colonial Times” (TAZ: 25/7/2013)²³. The news magazine *Stern* asked the question “Colonialism, Enslavement – or Integration?” (Stern: 25/7/2013)²⁴ and even the conservative daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* identified “postcolonial times” in the Swabian town (FAZ: 26/7/2013)²⁵. Most of these reports featured photographs of a bizarre scene at the station of Schwäbisch Gmünd: black asylum seekers, wearing red shirts printed with the word ‘SERVICE’ and straw hats to protect against the summer heat, lugged suitcases for rail passengers. To make matters worse, the reports criticized, the asylum seekers were given an allowance of 1.05 euros per hour for their exhausting work.

This employment of asylum seekers as ‘voluntary’ porters came about when construction work at the train station put the elevator out of service. Subsequently, the mayor and the local citizens’ initiative supporting refugees hit upon the idea of using asylum seekers to assist passengers across the bridge to the other side of the tracks. They sold this as another successful example of the ‘voluntary community work’ with which the town sought to integrate asylum seekers into the local community. Since the asylum seekers did not have work permits, the rail operator could only pay them an allowance of 1.05 euros per hour. According to the newspaper coverage, however, this situation was not a means of integrating asylum seekers but an echo of colonial times.

23 See: <http://www.taz.de/!5062498/> (last accessed 1/8/2020).

24 See: <https://www.stern.de/panorama/gesellschaft/asylbewerber-als-koffertraeger-kolonialismus--sklaverei---oder-integration--3365412.html> (last accessed 1/8/2020).

25 See: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/fluechtlinge-als-koffertraeger-arbeitslos-im-postkolonialismus-12307152.html> (last accessed 1/8/2020).

During my interview with the members of the Refugees Initiative Schwäbisch Gmünd, around two years after the newspaper stories of “post-colonial times” in the town, they repeatedly referred to this case of asylum seekers working as voluntary porters in their criticisms of local actors. To them, this incident demonstrated the extent of racism and (post)colonial injustice they had faced in Schwäbisch Gmünd. On the one hand, they accused local actors, including the local citizens’ initiative supporting refugees, of racist attitudes towards asylum seekers. On the other hand, they depicted discriminating asylum laws as a continuity of (post)colonial oppression. I had the impression that the refugee activists regarded themselves also as ‘(post)colonial freedom fighters’ calling attention to the ongoing history of colonialism and racial subordination. This echoes a claim long made by scholars in the field of postcolonial studies, namely that colonialism is far from over and, instead, lives on in similar ways (cf. Hall 1996; Gregory 2004).

How the activists embedded their precarious situation in Schwäbisch Gmünd in a wider context of (post)colonial injustices became particularly evident in their protests against the Residence Obligation. In August 2014, the group published a Facebook post entitled “The city of Schwäbisch Gmünd threatens refugee activists with detainment due to the infringement of the Residence Obligation”. They explained their dissent towards the Residence Obligation in the following words:

“With the Residence Obligation in Germany a law of the German colonial history continues – during the German colonialism in Cameroon and Togo, the occupiers had invented this law, which forbid the native population to leave their place of living or district without an application at the colonial white administrations”²⁶ (Refugees Initiative Schwäbisch Gmünd: 21/8/14)

The refugee activists thus depicted the Residence Obligation as a continuation of the colonial humiliation and subordination of African peoples. In doing so, they called attention to the German colonial history in Africa and illustrated how forms of spatial confinement then and now function as a means

26 Translation by LF. German original: “Mit der Residenzpflicht in Deutschland wird ein Gesetz aus der deutschen Kolonialzeit weitergeführt – während der deutschen Kolonialzeit in Kamerun und Togo hatten sich die Besatzer dieses Gesetz ausgedacht, welchem zufolge die einheimische Bevölkerung ihren jeweiligen Lebensort oder festgelegten Distrikt nicht ohne Antrag bei den kolonialen Weißen Gouvernementsverwaltungen verlassen durften.”

of domination and power (cf. Bernault 2003). As the title of the post indicates, they implicitly blamed the town of Schwäbisch Gmünd for being complicit in these (post)colonial injustices through its enforcement of the Residence Obligation. The refugee activists also repeatedly termed the Residence Obligation an “Apartheid law” (see Refugees Initiative Schwäbisch Gmünd: 26/6/2014). By using such a vocabulary, they drew parallels to the South African Apartheid regime, under which the mobility of people of colour was systematically restricted in order to exert control and power. The activists thus highlighted the continuing history of suppression and racism against people of colour.

In the course of their protests, the refugee activists not only highlighted such forms of legal discrimination but also denounced instances of everyday and institutional racism to which they were subjected to in their day-to-day lives. For instance, they published a post in their Facebook group that recalled how they had suffered from “racial profiling”, explaining that, on a train journey to a town in eastern Germany, they had their papers checked by police officers, a selective check, they claimed, due to their skin colour. In the eyes of the activists, this check was symbolic of the continuing racial discrimination and suppression they faced on the ground (Refugees Initiative Schwäbisch Gmünd: 26/6/2014).

Summing up, this section showed that the conflictive relationships of solidarity between refugee activists and local actors in Schwäbisch Gmünd are telling in regards to contrasting imaginaries of ‘local community’. On the one hand, those who sought to help refugees around the long summer of migration often reproduced romanticized notions of ‘the local’ and ‘local community’, with the narrative of the *Gmünder Weg* offering a particularly striking example. On the other hand, the refugee activists embedded their immediate situation in Schwäbisch Gmünd in a wider landscape of unequal rights and (post)colonial injustices. I would thus argue that the refugee activists shed a different light on the romanticized imaginaries of ‘local community’ that pertained to many of the helping practices I witnessed around the long summer of migration, illustrating how they silenced the unequal power relations at play.