

5.4. Deterring 'Economic Migrants': The Intermediation of Migrant Protest in Offenburg

In April 2016, a group of asylum seekers collectively refused the food served at their new interim accommodation centre in Offenburg for several weeks. I found out about their protest via an article in the regional newspaper *Mittelbadische Presse* (9/4/2016)¹¹. According to the article, the asylum seekers were collectively refusing food because they were discontent with their transferral from one of the emergency reception facilities to a new interim accommodation centre, a so-called “container village” on the outskirts of town, set up to accommodate the asylum seekers for up to two years. While the asylum seekers had been able to cook for themselves at their previous reception centre, the new one offered no such facilities. Instead, an external caterer provided food to the asylum seekers three times per day. At first glance, this protest resembled what I had witnessed at the emergency reception centre in Bad Waldsee. In both cases, food served as an important means for asylum seekers to make themselves visible as claims-making subjects. The storying of events in Offenburg, however, turned out to differ strongly from the one in Bad Waldsee. While, in the latter, the protesters were recast as mute victims and passive recipients of help and support in the wake of their protests, this was clearly not the case in Offenburg, where the local district council recast the protesting asylum seekers as “bogus” asylum seekers or “economic migrants” who should be excluded from humanitarian protection, whose presence was deemed illegitimate and who were rendered deportable. And yet, this storying was highly contested by volunteers supporting refugees in town. In what follows, I scrutinize this contested storying by outlining how different actors responded to and made sense of the protests at the Offenburg container village. To start off, I illustrate how the district council deemed the protests illegitimate and stripped them of political meanings.

5.4.1. Depoliticizing Responses to the Protests

The article in the regional newspaper *Mittelbadische Presse* (9/4/2016) reporting on the incidents at the container village in Offenburg termed the asylum seekers' insubordinate acts not an instance of protest but a “food boycott”. The

11 See: <http://www.bo.de/lokales/offenburg/fluechtlinge-boykottieren-essen-im-containerdorf> (last accessed 1/8/2020).

group of around 60 protesters had refused the food at the facility, the article claimed, because they “wanted to receive more money”. Having meals provided affected the financial allowances asylum seekers received from the German state. Asylum seekers received 176 euros per month if they were catered for and, if they cooked for themselves, an additional amount of 144 euros. The article thus rated the protest as being ‘all about the money’. It built its estimation largely on comments by the spokesperson of the district council, who had denounced the protests as “incomprehensible” and “disappointing” and described the asylum seekers as “riding roughshod over others’ hospitality” (literally “Gastfreundschaft mit Füßen getreten”). Both the district council and the newspaper thus depicted the protests not as legitimate political action but as an illegitimate attempt to ‘extract’ more money from the German state. In consequence to their protests, the protesters thus became “ungrateful subjects” (Moulin 2012) who refused to silently accept whatever support is offered and not showing the gratitude expected of them.

No surprise then, the article on the Offenburg ‘food boycott’ caused an extraordinary wave of public resentment. Two days after the article was published, a second article entitled “Outrage on Facebook about Refugees’ Food Boycott” appeared. It asserted that:

“The report on the food boycott [...] has caused heated debate on the Facebook page of the *Mittelbadische Presse*. On Saturday morning, the online editors posted a summary and a link to the article. Reaction came thick and fast. As of Monday afternoon, the post had reached more than 37,000 Facebook users and triggered around 980 comments [...] Most voiced their outrage over the asylum seekers’ behaviour and expressed incomprehension.”¹² (*Mittelbadische Presse*: 11/4/2016)¹³

When I scanned the nearly 1,000 comments on the Facebook page, I was deeply shocked by the hatred I found, including various racist and xenopho-

12 Translation by LF. German original: “Der Bericht über den Essensboykott [...] hat auf der Facebook-Seite der Mittelbadischen Presse für heftige Debatten gesorgt. Die Onlineredaktion postete am Samstagvormittag einen Vorspann sowie einen Link zum Artikel. Die Reaktionen ließen nicht lang auf sich warten. Der Beitrag erreichte – Stand Montagnachmittag – mehr als 37 000 Facebook-Nutzer. Das Posting wurde rund 980 Mal kommentiert [...] Auf Facebook zeigte sich die Mehrheit der User empört über das Verhalten der Asylbewerber und äußerte Unverständnis.”

13 See: <http://www.bo.de/lokales/offenburg/empoerung-auf-facebook-ueber-essensboykott-der-fluechtlinge> (last accessed 1/8/2020).

bic attacks on the protesting asylum seekers. Almost all of the commenters deemed the acts of protests illegitimate and voiced neither sympathy for nor compassion with the protesting asylum seekers. Various posters even called for the asylum seekers' immediate deportation. Although most of the newspaper accounts on protesting asylum seekers in the area of my field research were met with similarly negative comments online, the extent of public outrage in Offenburg was extraordinary. The district council's storying, I would suggest, contributed significantly to this lack of public understanding.

Indeed, the district council seemed to have no understanding whatsoever for the actions of the protesters. Shortly before I travelled to Offenburg, I scheduled a telephone interview with Beate Gerber, the head of the local migration department, in order to find out about her take on the protests. She also emphasized that the collective refusal of the food provided was "all about money" and should be seen in light of the fact that the protesters were 'bogus' asylum seekers. This clearly came across in the following lines from our interview:

LF: So you believe that the reason for the asylum seekers' protest was not a demand to cook for themselves but rather financial reasons?

BG: Both. The financial aspect is definitely the main reason. We have a lot of young single men, especially in these bigger facilities. These young men are from countries that mean they have basically no chance of recognition, such as Gambia. We have many Gambians and the protection rate lies at 0.9%. So these are clearly ... and they also say this to our social workers, these are economic migrants who come here, who are under pressure from their families at home, from the people smugglers who want their money and if the neighbour's son sends home more money than him, the family is under pressure, he is under pressure. But this is clearly not what our asylum system is for.¹⁴ (Interview with Beate Gerber: 14/4/2016)

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- 14 Translation by LF. German original: "LF: Also Sie meinen, es geht den Flüchtlingen jetzt auch gar nicht mal darum, dass die selber kochen wollen, sondern es ist wirklich einfach der finanzielle Aspekt, der da im Vordergrund steht? BG: Sowohl als auch. Der finanzielle Aspekt steht auf jeden Fall im Vordergrund. Wir haben gerade in diesen größeren Anlagen viele alleinstehende junge Männer. Diese jungen Männer kommen aus Ländern aus denen sie so gut wie gar keine Anerkennungschancen haben, wie zum Beispiel Gambia haben wir sehr viele und da liegt die Schutzquote bei 0,9%. Also sind ganz klar ... also das sagen die auch unseren Sozialarbeitern gegenüber, das sind ganz klar Wirtschaftsflüchtlinge, die hierherkommen, die unter Druck stehen natürlich von den Familien zu Hause, von den Schleppern, die ihr Geld haben möchten und wenn

She thus explained the asylum seekers' protests mainly in terms of financial reasons. They protested not because they wanted to be able to cook their own food, but because they were "single young men" from Gambia, a country in western Africa with little chance of being accepted as refugees. These 'bogus' asylum seekers were protesting in order to pressure the district council into dispensing with the outside catering and, in turn, increasing their monthly financial allowances. In this storying, the protest thus became a symbol of the asylum seekers' illegitimate presence on German soil and their exploitation of the German asylum system. This contrasts sharply with the storying of events in Bad Waldsee, where local governmental actors embedded the collective refusal of food in a humanitarian imaginary that reconstituted the protesters as suffering victims and recipients of help.

Despite these differing storyings, governmental representatives in Offenburg, like their Bad Waldsee counterparts, also used food as a means to depoliticize the protests and strip them of political meanings. This is clear from my interlocutor's description of the district council's response to the protests:

"The day before yesterday, our chief administrative officer was there, we all were there, we had lunch there, together with the press, in order to show that the food is okay, and it actually tasted great. Nothing like our own canteen here [giggles]. We were also able to persuade one or two of them to eat with us [...] But we made it clear to them that nothing was going to change. The system in this facility is that there is catering, and that's not going to change."¹⁵ (Interview with Beate Gerber: 14/4/2016)

As in Bad Waldsee, the district council thus staged a 'food test' by sending several representatives to the interim reception centre to have lunch with the asylum seekers and invited members of the local press. According to my interlocutor, who tried the food herself, the food "tasted wonderful", better than

dann der Nachbarssohn mehr Geld nach Hause schickt, wie er, dann bekommt die Familie Druck, er bekommt Druck. Aber das ist natürlich nicht Sinn und Zweck unseres Asylsystems."

- 15 Translation by LF. German original: "Also vorgestern war unser Landrat dann eben dort, wir waren alle dort, haben mitsamt der Presse dort gegessen, um eben auch zu zeigen, dass das essen in Ordnung ist, hat auch wunderbar geschmeckt. Also das ist wirklich kein Vergleich zu unserer eigenen Kantine im Haus [kichert] Wir konnten auch den ein oder anderen überreden bzw. überzeugen, dass er halt mitisst. [...] Aber ihnen halt eben auch nochmal klargemacht, dass sich da nichts ändern wird. Also das System in dieser Anlage ist so, da gibt es Catering und da wird es auch keine Änderung geben."

in the canteen of her own workplace. A newspaper article on the ‘food test’ further underlined the notion that the food served was tasty, thus claiming that the protest was “inappropriate” and “incomprehensible” (see *Mittelbadische Presse*: 13/4/2016)¹⁶. With this response, the district council discredited the asylum seekers’ collective refusal of food while legitimizing an uncompromising stance in relation to the facility’s catering. In the remainder of our interview, my interlocutor added that a tough position was necessary in order to demonstrate that local authorities could not be “blackmailed” by asylum seekers.

Through such means, I would argue, the district council presented itself as the legitimate authority in charge of the conditions of reception while depoliticizing the asylum seekers’ demonstrations of agency. This connects strikingly to what Nyers (2010a) outlines in his writings on instances of protest by non-citizens. He argues that such protests challenge the governmental prerogative to decide upon inclusion and exclusion in the nation-state. In response, governmental actors seek to regain control and power by delegitimizing the protesters. I would suggest that the district council in Offenburg also discredited the protesting asylum seekers and disputed their reasons for protesting in order to regain control over the terms of their reception. Through their delegitimizing responses, local actors relegated the asylum seekers to a non-political space while substantially limiting their scope of political agency.

In the following subsection, I illustrate how this depoliticizing storying of the Offenburg protests served wider aims in the local governance of migration. It presented a means for governmental actors to demonstrate sovereign power by reinforcing the distinction between those who should be offered protection and those who should not.

5.4.2. Food Provision as a “Strategy of Deterrence”

The asylum seekers’ protest was still ongoing when I travelled to Offenburg in mid-April 2016. My aim was to visit the protest site myself in order to secure an interview with one of the protesting asylum seekers. Their protests occurred in one of the two newly established ‘container villages’ on the southern outskirts of the town. These interim facilities were designed to host the

16 See: <http://www.bo.de/lokales/offenburg/landrat-scherer-besuchte-streikende-fluechtlinge> (last accessed 1/8/2020).

increased number of asylum seekers and consisted of small, stacked containers of the kind conventionally used as site huts in construction. As I walked around the southern outskirts of Offenburg expecting to find the container village of the protesting asylum seekers, I caught sight of dozens of stacked containers on a disused airfield. I approached them, confident of having reached the place I was looking for. I entered the compound of the facility unchecked and found a group of men chatting outside a container block. I approached them and asked about the protests that had occurred during the past days. The men, though, looked puzzled and exchanged some words in Arabic. Eventually, they turned to me again and informed me in English that this was not the place I was looking for. In their “camp”, they were allowed to cook for themselves in kitchen facilities set up in separate containers. Apparently, I had mistakenly entered the wrong container village. The asylum seekers thus gave me directions to the second container village, which was located just a few hundred metres down the road. When I eventually arrived at the place where the asylum seekers were protesting, I was struck by the sense that this interim reception centre was clearly different from the one I had just visited, having the appearance of a high-security complex. An intimidating fence surrounded the site, which was monitored by several surveillance cameras. There was only one entrance, at which several security guards checked those entering and leaving the facility. While observing the scene, I noticed another striking difference between the two container villages: the first appeared to host mainly people from Arabic countries, whereas a majority of these inhabitants were people of colour. When I arrived at the gate, I addressed the two guards and asked them whether I could enter the facilities in order to speak to one of the protesting asylum seekers. They flatly refused and explained that they were not allowed to let anyone pass without permission from the district council. They did, though, offer to call Jens Riess, the head of the facility’s management staff. Some minutes later, a middle-aged man approached the gate and introduced himself as an employee of a private company. This company was subcontracted by the district council to manage the facility and supply food to the asylum seekers. Although Jens Riess refused to allow me in, he chatted quite openly about his perspective on the ongoing acts of protest. He asserted that the residents in this facility were nothing but “economic refugees” with little chances of being recognized as refugees and a poor “perspective of staying” (“schlechte Bleibeperspektive”) (Field notes: 25/4/2016). The container village I had entered earlier, on the other hand, hosted “genuine” asylum seekers from Syria or Iraq who had

good chances of being recognized as refugees, he explained. The protesting asylum seekers at this facility had not fled war and persecution, he told me, they were simply out to send as much money as possible back to their families in Africa while they were in Germany. However, he explained, their relocation from the emergency reception centre to the container village a few days ago had entailed a major drop in their cash allowances. According to my interlocutor, this change from self-catering to outside catering formed part of a deliberate “*strategy of deterrence*” with which the district council aimed to prevent further “economic migrants” from coming and to break the “vicious cycle of people smuggling” (ibid.).

My observations and conversations at the two container villages clearly illustrate how the district council deliberately denied the asylum seekers the ability to cook for themselves as part of a wider “strategy of deterrence” directed at those depicted as economic migrants. Through a subsequent reduction in their monthly allowances, governmental actors sought to prevent “economic migrants” from saving money and sending remittances back home, as the manager of the facility told me. The contrasting designs of the container villages also reflected strikingly how the district council established a clear segregation between those deemed ‘genuine’ refugees and those deemed ‘illegitimate economic migrants’ based on their nationality and skin colour and even before their asylum case had been processed. While those with good chances of staying were accommodated in a container village where they could cook for themselves and thus received higher cash allowances, asylum seekers from sub-Saharan African countries were put up in a similar container village that did not feature kitchen facilities. Moreover, while the first facility I visited allowed the asylum seekers to move around freely, the second resembled a high-security complex and thus contributed to the criminalization and stigmatization of its inhabitants. This connects to what Welander (2019: no page number) calls “politics of exhaustion”, understood as “a complex deterrence approach with the objective of exhausting asylum seekers, mentally and physically, with the ultimate goal of deterring them from [...] European asylum systems”. In a similar vein, Ambrosini (2020: 198) observes the implementation of “local policies of exclusion”, which he defines as “those measures, adopted by local authorities, that aim to exclude migrants, to separate them from the native component of the population by establishing specific, albeit implicit, prohibitions against them and which may be indirect or hidden”. Ambrosini witnesses a sharp increase in such ‘local policies of exclusion’ since

the so-called ‘refugee crisis’. And yet, he also acknowledges that they do not go unchallenged (ibid.).

With their protests, I would suggest, the asylum seekers in Offenburg were thus actively challenging their local exclusions, demanding nothing more than equal conditions of reception – a possible explanation that, however, went largely unheard in the wake of the protests. The protesting asylum seekers were probably well aware of their discriminating treatment since they most likely knew about the cooking facilities at the other container village up the road. Governmental actors in Offenburg, however, constituted the protesters as illegitimate asylum seekers even before they began protesting against their transferral. The protests then served as a welcome means for local governmental actors to recast this discrimination between ‘genuine’ and ‘bogus’ refugees and, thus, to reinforce sovereign power over the management of asylum seekers.

This connects with academic works in the field of critical migration studies that have outlined how processes of abjection exclude certain groups of migrants from the realm of humanitarian protection and render them vulnerable to the arbitrary operations of government (see Papastergiadis 2006; Nyers 2010a; Tyler 2013; Laziridis 2015). Migrants thus become “human waste” (Bauman 2003) or “abject bodies” (Kristeva 1982; Butler 1993), beings that are stripped of any rights and to be discharged to the exterior. Others have argued that the distinction between those who are included and those who are excluded from governmental protection forms the essence of sovereign power. For instance, Nyers (2006b: 48) asserts that sovereign power “gets played out through the state’s decision to provide protection – or not”, while Scheel and Ratfisch (2014) argue that the distinction between “villains and victims” forms a central technique in the governance and management of migration movements.

A similar tendency is illustrated in the case of Offenburg. The local government recast the protesters as abject beings and thus reproduced its power over the governance of migration. And yet, this dominant storying of the protests in Offenburg was highly contested. In the course of my field research, I realized that volunteers who supported refugees in town (*re*)politicized the asylum seekers’ scope of political agency by putting forward a rather different albeit marginalized storying of events.

5.4.3. Politicizing Responses to the Protests

During my field stay in Offenburg, I scheduled interviews with two leading members of local citizens' initiatives supporting refugees. Their storying of events clearly differed from the district council's depiction of the protests as being "all about the money". Both took a clear stand against the district councils' portrayal of the protesters as illegitimate economic migrants who should be excluded from humanitarian protection. With their storying and reactions, the volunteers thus recast the protesting asylum seekers as subjects in relationships of solidarity, while blurring the dividing line between 'genuine' and 'bogus' asylum seekers.

When I visited Offenburg in April 2016, I met Angelika Berg, a Protestant pastor and head of the "Ökumenischer Arbeitskreis Asyl e.V." ("Ecumenical Working Circle on Asylum") for an interview. As we talked, I could clearly sense that she was thoroughly upset about the council's reactions. She repeatedly denounced its tough stance while voicing her sympathy and empathy with the protesting asylum seekers. She told me that it was a "false insinuation" to assert, as the district council had, that the asylum seekers were protesting in order to illegitimately extract as much money as possible from the German welfare state. From the additional allowance of 144 euros per month provided to self-caterers, she claimed, there would not be much left to send back home to their poor families in Africa. And even if the asylum seekers did send money home, she couldn't really understand why that constituted a problem. After all, the private companies providing food to the asylum seekers were also trying to make a profit and often charged the German government prohibitive fees for their services. Moreover, Angelika Berg acknowledged that cooking had important social meanings for the asylum seekers. Being provided with food for a prospective duration of two years, in contrast, represented a significant diminution of human dignity and self-determination for the asylum seekers. These reasons for protesting, my interlocutor complained, went unacknowledged in the district council's responses. She therefore criticized the council for being "two-faced" and questioned its credibility in the following terms:

"You can't treat people like that. Behind closed doors they talk about economic refugees and making their lives uncomfortable and, in public, they claim they are providing for them and demonstrating great hospitality and

the asylum seekers are rejecting it. I find that really two-faced.”¹⁷ (Interview with Angelika Berg: 14/4/2016)

This clearly shows my interlocutor’s critical view of the district council’s inhumane treatment of those termed ‘bogus’ asylum seekers. She claimed that the local authority was deliberately trying to make their lives more uncomfortable while publicly putting the blame on the asylum seekers.

During our interview, the pastor not only voiced her dissent towards local governmental actors but also emphasized that she was not prepared to silently accept their discrimination of those deemed ‘bogus’ asylum seekers. This was particularly evident when she compared the situation to her experiences at another interim accommodation centre in Lahr, a town close to Offenburg, which she recounted as follows:

“On the first of February, when it became clear that the asylum seekers were going to be relocated to Lahr, I talked to the head of the migration department, Mister Heinz [...] and he said to me on the phone that it’s also about making things more uncomfortable for the asylum seekers who have no chance of staying and mentioned the centralized catering at the camp in Lahr. That’s when it became clear to me that, for the authorities, centralized catering means we make it more uncomfortable for the refugees. That was a very tense situation because we then obstructed the relocation.”¹⁸ (Interview with Angelika Berg: 14/4/2016)

Angelika Berg thus perceived the district council’s course of action as discriminatory and unacceptable. Therefore, she and the fellow volunteers in her initiative had directly intervened in order to obstruct the relocation of asylum

17 Translation by LF. German original: “[...] dass man so nicht mit Menschen umgeht. Also hinter den Kulissen wird über Wirtschaftsflüchtlinge und wir machen denen das Leben ungemütlich gesprochen und vorne herum heißt es dann, wir machen denen Angebote und unsere Gastfreundschaft ist ja so groß und das nehmen die nicht an. Also, ich empfinde das wirklich als doppel-züngig.”

18 Translation by LF. German original: “Ich hatte am ersten Februar, als das war, dass die nach Lahr verlegt wurden, noch mit dem Migrationsdezernenten gesprochen, Herr Heinz heißt der hier. [...] dann hat er mir am Telefon gesagt, es geht jetzt auch darum, dass es jetzt für die Flüchtlinge ohne Bleibeperspektive ungemütlicher wird und das halt eben auch mit der Zentralversorgung im Lager in Lahr dann ... also da war für mich klar, für die Behörden heißt Zentralversorgung, wir machen es den Flüchtlingen ungemütlicher. Das war eine angespannte Situation, weil wir diesen Transport aufgehalten haben.”

seekers to another facility with “centralized catering”. My interlocutor also recalled how the citizens’ initiative generally struggled with such discrimination between ‘genuine’ and ‘bogus’ asylum seekers in the governance of migration, declaring:

“I would say that refugees, in general, have long since been treated not first class but second class people. But then there are also people who are third and fourth class. And we really struggle with this”.¹⁹ (Interview with Angelika Berg: 14/4/2016)

I would argue that this is a clear example of how volunteers challenged the district council’s “strategy of deterrence” while recasting those deemed ‘bogus’ asylum seekers as subjects of relationships of solidarity. Another came in my interview with Klaus Böhlen, the head of a citizens’ initiative supporting refugees in a suburb of Offenburg. Like Angelika Berg, he repeatedly criticized the district council for its inadequate response. In his eyes, the council did not take the asylum seekers’ requests seriously and, instead, treated the protesters as “public scapegoats”. This behaviour “poured oil” on the flames of right-wing attitudes in society, he complained. He thus criticized the district council for stirring up hatred and resentment among the public instead of encouraging understanding of the protesting asylum seekers. During our conversation, he also linked the protests directly to the question of whether those deemed economic migrants constituted rightful recipients of help and support. He acknowledged that, for the members of his citizens’ initiative, it was a question to which there was no easy or straightforward answer. He explained this as follows:

“This also relates to the question of whether we, as a refugee help initiative, should get involved at this container village. We discussed this last time [...] It was interesting because there were totally different opinions. As a businessman, I would say, I want to work where it will be efficient [...] So there was that one line of argument and there was this other line of argument that said ‘hey hey hey, these are human beings and they have their ... that’s their right as human beings and we should not see them as refugees who will probably be deported but as human beings who also have the right to

19 Translation by LF. German original: “Also ich meine die Flüchtlinge sind ja sowieso schon lange nicht erste Klasse, sondern zweite, aber da gibt es dann auch noch welche dritte und vierte Klasse. Und das hat uns hier richtig zugesetzt.”

be taken seriously and to receive what is possible,”²⁰ (Interview with Klaus Böhlen: 25/4/2016)

Maestri and Monforte (2020) argue that volunteers supporting refugees are often guided by notions of deservingness. Yet, they observe that the boundaries between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ refugees are challenged when volunteers experience the effects of governmental processes of exclusion. As they go on to argue, “in these situations, volunteers are faced with moral and emotional dilemmas related to how lines are being drawn between who is included or excluded, accepted or not, deserving of their compassion or undeserving” (ibid.: 2). In a similar vein, the question of whether ostensibly ‘bogus’ asylum seekers with ‘little chance of staying’ should also benefit from their help and intervention caused dilemmas among the volunteers in my interlocutors’ initiative. While Klaus Böhlen suggested he would not offer support to those who were likely to be deported due to considerations of “efficiency”, he highlighted another line of argument that recast those deemed economic migrants as equal human beings and deserving recipients of help. My interlocutor recalled how the volunteers found a compromise that was deemed acceptable to all: if they had spare capacity, the volunteers would include asylum seekers with little chance of staying in their practices of solidarity. Rather than uncritically accepting the distinction between ‘genuine’ and ‘bogus’ asylum seekers, a central component in the governance of migration, the initiative’s members thus recast and contested this dividing line in response to the asylum seekers’ protests.

The two volunteers I interviewed not only contested the storying of protests put forward by the district council but also intervened in order to actively demonstrate their dissent with the council’s responses to the protests. Both Angelika Berg and Klaus Böhlen recalled that the council had invited them to join the “food test” and have lunch together with the press

20 Translation by LF. German original: “Das betrifft jetzt auch die Frage, ob wir als Flüchtlingshilfe Rebland jetzt in diesem Containerdorf was machen. Das haben wir beim letzten Mal diskutiert [...] Das war interessant, weil es da ganz unterschiedliche Meinungen gab. Als Kaufmann sage ich da, ich möchte gern dort arbeiten, wo es effizient ist [...] Also es gab diese eine Linie und es gab die andere Linie, die gesagt hat: ‚Hey Hey Hey, das sind Menschen und die haben ihr ... das ist ganz legitim als Mensch und wir müssen nicht den Flüchtling drin sehen, der wahrscheinlich abgeschoben wird, sondern ein Mensch, der auch Anspruch drauf hat, dass er ernst genommen wird und dass man ihm das zukommen lässt, was möglich ist.’”

and the asylum seekers. However, they had deliberately boycotted the event. I could sense that they were both deeply upset about the council responding to the protests in this way. As Klaus Böhlen put it:

“I think the impression that we were needed so that the head of the district council wouldn’t be there on his own, so he’d have others with him, is right, or at least hasn’t been refuted. It’s always very useful when people helping the refugees support the position of the head of the district council and say: ‘Yes, we as helpers also believe that it was an inappropriate reaction on their part’ [...] Basically, there was a danger – and the newspaper coverage reflects this – that we would be used as material for press photos. And when the head of the district council then says: ‘Yes, but this is a good meal’ ... that doesn’t completely do justice to the problem situation.”²¹ (Interview with Klaus Böhlen: 25/4/2016)

According to Klaus Böhlen, the district council invited the volunteers to bolster the council’s position in relation to the protests and concentrate blame on the protesters. He therefore refused to take part in what he termed an “image event”. Similarly, Angelika Berg phoned those responsible in the council in order to voice her dissent towards this ‘food test’ and to explicitly decline to take part, thus deliberately refusing to side with the council and to legitimize its responses to the protests. Through these means, I would argue, the volunteers contested the government’s actions and (re)politicized the asylum seekers’ demonstrations of political agency.

As a result, the staged ‘food test’ intensified an already conflictive relationship between the local authority and the two citizens’ initiatives in town. Both volunteers told me that governmental representatives had repeatedly tried to exploit volunteers for their own ends. Drawing parallels to other experiences with the district council, they voiced their deep frustration and dissatisfaction with this attitude towards volunteers. Angelika Berg, for example, apologized

21 Translation by LF. German original: “Also ich glaube, der Eindruck stimmt, zumindest ist er nicht widerlegt, dass wir eigentlich gebraucht wurden, damit der Landrat da nicht alleine steht, sondern auch andere. Und das ist immer sehr gut, wenn die Leute, die den Flüchtlingen helfen dann die Position des Landrats unterstützen und sagen, ja also wir als Flüchtlingshelfer finden auch, dass das unangemessen ist als Reaktion von den Leuten dort [...] Im Prinzip bestand die Gefahr, und die Zeitungsartikel geben das eigentlich auch wieder, dass wir als Fotomaterial für die Pressebilder da benutzt werden, und wenn der Landrat dann sagt, ja, aber das ist doch eigentlich ein gutes Essen ... aber es wird halt der Problemlage insgesamt nicht zu hundert Prozent gerecht.”.

for her angry tone, saying that I had caught her in a week in which “people like her” were “really frustrated” with the district council, while Klaus Böhlen explained his dissent towards the council as follows:

“They say: ‘As the district council, we decide. All those volunteers, that’s great and we can also invite them to events and shower them with praise, but we’re not letting them influence us in our decisions. Where would that lead?’”²²
(Interview with Klaus Böhlen: 25/4/2016)

My interlocutor thus felt that the district council did not take them seriously and would not include them in their decision-making processes. Our conversations also shed light on a longer history of conflict between volunteers and the local authority. Keen to voice their increasing discontent with this situation, my interlocutors told me, their initiatives had recently joined forces to request a meeting with council representatives in order to discuss their conflictive relationship.

Summing up, I would argue that the acts of protest in Offenburg did indeed come with political outcomes. Although the asylum seekers’ request to cook for themselves went unaddressed, their protests nevertheless contested the conditions of reception and recast the relationships of solidarity in the town. They brought about contrasting storyings and intensified already existing conflicts between volunteers and governmental actors. In response to the protests, the volunteers challenged the governments’ prerogative to decide upon those included and those excluded from humanitarian protection. This is another clear example of how relationships of solidarity that build on a humanitarian imaginary can come with political meanings and effects.

5.5. Concluding Remarks: The Agency of Asylum Seekers in the Contestation of Solidarity

This chapter investigated how actors involved in the reception of asylum seekers made sense of and responded to protests in emergency reception facilities in the wake of the long summer of migration. I illustrated that the political

22 Translation by LF. German original: “[...] sie sagen: wir entscheiden, wir als Landratsamt entscheiden. Das mit den Ehrenamtlichen ist super und die kann man dann auch zu den Empfängern einladen und so und vielfältig loben, aber wir lassen uns doch in unserer Entscheidung nicht reinreden, wo kommen wir denn da hin?”.