

6.5. Concluding Remarks: The Intimate Relationship between Community and Solidarity

This chapter investigated the breaking of refugee solidarity by focussing on an intriguing case I encountered during my field research: the conflicts between local actors and a group of refugee activists who repeatedly staged protests in order to call attention to the perceived exclusions, discriminations and inequalities that characterized their immediate living situation. Over the course of their protests, the relationships between the activists and local actors, including the citizens' initiative supporting refugees, became ever more conflictive until all ties between the two sides were irrevocably broken.

The findings presented in this chapter demonstrate that solidarity is a highly volatile and elusive relationship. While the previous chapters of this book shed light on how various actors mobilized, governed, politicized and recast the relationships of solidarity that emerged around the long summer of migration, this chapter showed that they might also eventually break down again. Solidarity, in other words, is not a static condition 'out there' waiting to be discovered. Instead, it is subject to constant intervention and contestation, and thus continuously adapting to new circumstances. In the case of Schwäbisch Gmünd, the adverse effects of one small object – a newly installed surveillance camera – substantially and irrevocably altered relationships of solidarity, bringing to the fore conflicting social imaginaries that eventually proved incompatible.

The social imaginaries pertaining to relationships of solidarity can thus be so contrasting and conflicting that it becomes impossible to find a common denominator among the different actors involved. On the one hand, the refugee activists accused local actors, including the citizens' initiative supporting refugees, of "deceptive solidarity" that contributed to the very oppression and discrimination they were fighting against. On the other hand, committed volunteers deliberately withdrew help and support from the activists and collectively distanced themselves from their continuing protests. Although there had previously been times when their relationships were characterized by mutual understanding and compassion, the situation eventually proved irreconcilable.

This breaking of solidarities corresponded with the activists' view of themselves as part of something 'greater', something that extended beyond the small town of Schwäbisch Gmünd. From the very beginning of their protests, the activists positioned themselves within a Germany-wide network

of left-wing activists and self-organized refugee groups. In the course of their protests, the refugee activists used their Facebook group to deliberately forge solidarities beyond the boundaries of the town in which they found themselves. In doing so, they established themselves as part of a wider community of interest that was based on similar experiences of exclusion and discrimination and transcended individual situations on the ground. The break with local actors may thus have represented a necessary step in the activists' fight against structures of discrimination, a struggle that went beyond the confines of 'the local'.

This illustrates that *solidarity* and *community* are closely related, that conceptions of solidarity and ideas of collectivity in migration societies are co-produced and interdependent. The conflicts in Schwäbisch Gmünd are therefore also telling in regards to contrasting imaginaries of 'community' pertaining to the practices of refugee support that emerged around the long summer of migration. Helping practices that were embedded in humanitarian parameters often drew on romanticized notions of a spatially embedded local community, an idea that responded to the longing for safety in an uncertain world. The refugee activists, however, remind us that such a notion can never be more than a wishful illusion. Local communities are always embedded in a spatial and temporal context that is determined by a situation of unequal rights and a history of racial discrimination and suppression. Practices of refugee support cannot and should not be dissociated from these more uncomfortable realities regarding the local reception of asylum seekers.

