6. BREAKING SOLIDARITY: Refugee Activism as a Conflicting Imaginary of Solidarity and Community

6.1. At the Frontlines of Solidarity and Community

"Never before has the district court witnessed such a hearing: on Monday, amidst intense security checks and police protection, the trial in a case of criminal coercion got underway, accompanied during the day by a group of refugees from Africa demonstrating noisily on the streets of Schwäbisch Gmünd and finally in front of the court building itself."[1] (Remszeitung: 11/5/2015)[2]

Shortly before the migration summer reached its climax in 2015, this story from a local newspaper came to my attention. It reported on a trial that marked the culmination of a long-running series of conflicts between a group of around twelve "refugee activists", as they called themselves, and several local actors involved in the reception of asylum seekers. The site of conflict was Schwäbisch Gmünd, a small town in the area of my field research. According to the newspaper article, the man facing charges was a Nigerian refugee, apparently the group's leader, who was accused of "yelling at people through

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[1]   Translation by LF. German original: "Eine solche Gerichtsverhandlung hat das Amts-
       gericht noch nicht gesehen: Mit äußerst strengen Sicherheitskontrollen der Justiz
       und unter Polizeischutz ging dort am Montag eine Verhandlung wegen des Vorwurfs
       gemeinschaftlicher Nötigung über die Bühne. Tagsüber begleitet von lautstarken
       Protestzügen einer Gruppe von Flüchtlingen aus Afrika durch Gmünd und schließlich
       auch vor dem Amtsgerichtsgebäude.".

[2]   See: https://remszeitung.de/2015/5/11/streit-um-noetigung-durch-einen-fluechtling-
       aus-afrika-und-um-muell-kamera-vor-dem-gmuender-amtsgericht/ (last accessed 1/8
       /2020).

a megaphone" and "appearing very aggressive and unresponsive to attempts to engage in conversation" (Remszeitung: 11/5/2015). This violent and escalating behaviour, the article asserted, led to "disturbances" at the local refugee accommodation centre in March 2014, incidents that included the forceful blocking of the facility's entrance and the harassment of social workers. After several hours of proceedings, during which various witnesses testified, the district court found the accused guilty of criminal coercion and assault and ordered him to pay a fine of 25 daily rates of five Euros, a total of 125 euros, to the court. In comparison to the costly legal action, this relatively insignificant sum points to the symbolic function of the trial, serving to condemn the entire activist group and signifying the breaking of all relationships of solidarity between local actors and protesters; something that I will investigate in more detail in the course of this chapter.

While the court proceedings were still ongoing, the remaining members of the "Refugees Initiative Schwäbisch Gmünd", as the activists called their group, staged another protest in order to call attention to their version of the story (see The Voice Refugee Forum: 18/6/2015)[3]. They accused the district council, which was responsible for their accommodation centre, the local press and the local citizens' initiative supporting refugees of false accusations and denounced their complicity in the repression and discrimination of refugees in the town. What local actors wrongly depicted as instances of criminal coercion and assault, they claimed, were actually peaceful protests calling for the immediate removal of a camera monitoring the entrance to their accommodation centre. According to the refugee activists, the district council had installed this camera in order to bully and control the refugees. The group thus regarded the trial as a symbol of the injustices it had been enduring in Schwäbisch Gmünd, as just one of many moments illustrating the discriminating behaviour of local actors, including volunteers supporting refugees.

The contrasting interpretations of the trial in May 2015 are emblematic of the conflicting notions of solidarity and community that unfolded between the refugee activists and local actors in Schwäbisch Gmünd from 2012 onwards. These steadily intensifying conflicts that ultimately resulted in the court trial strikingly illustrate the possibility for relationships of solidarity to eventually break down and dissolve. When the refugee activists started

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3   See: http://www.thevoiceforum.org/node/3949 (last accessed 1/8/2020).

protesting in late 2012, roughly three years prior to the court trial, they received support and understanding from several local actors, including the left-wing youth centre Esperanza, the citizens' initiative supporting refugees and the media. During their first protests, the activists also entered into dialogue with local governmental actors, something that resulted in a "Memorandum of Understanding" signed by the local mayor and the activists. As the protests continued, however, the relationships between them became increasingly conflictive. The citizens' initiative withdrew its offers of support and publicly voiced its unsympathetic stance towards the protest actions. The refugee activists, on the other hand, denounced the "deceptive solidarity" of local actors, including the citizens' initiative (Refugees Initiative Schwäbisch Gmünd: 12/6/2014)[4]. These disagreements, I would suggest, illustrate in a striking way how claims made in the name of solidarity are embedded into differing social imaginaries and are thus highly contested among different actors. As Agustín and Jørgensen (2019: 28) put it: "solidarity is itself a battlefield, concerning which type of solidarity should prevail and how, constituting the possibility of articulating and imagining alternatives".

This chapter investigates the conflicting imaginaries of solidarity and community in Schwäbisch Gmünd. While I scrutinized how actors mobilized and forged solidarities with refugees in the second chapter of this book, my aim in this final chapter is to take into consideration how the *breaking of solidarities* occurred. This outline of the book attests to the elusive nature of solidarity with refugees, which I interpret not as a static condition but as a volatile social relationship. As Bauder (2019: 3) argues: "solidarity is a never-finished practice that prevents political closure and preserves plurality, while acknowledging the complex, fragmented and multifaceted relations between people and groups in different circumstances". The 'proper' conduct of solidarity and refugee support is thus open for interpretation and embedded in varying social imaginaries that respond to the needs and interests of different actors involved. As the case of Schwäbisch Gmünd illustrates strikingly, these social imaginaries can be so contrasting and conflicting that it becomes impossible to find a common denominator. While academic works on solidarity have intensively discussed how individuals are mobilized to act and drawn into supportive relationships (see for instance Featherstone

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4   All citations of "Refugees Initiative Schwäbisch Gmünd" throughout this chapter refer to posts in the activists' Facebook group, which can be accessed at https://www.facebook.com/refugeesinitiative/ (last accessed 1/8/2020).

2012; Johnson 2012; Karakayali 2017; Agustín & Jørgensen 2019), less attention has been paid to the processes that lead such relationships to disintegrate or be deliberately broken. In what follows, I thus investigate how relationships of solidarity can also materialize in contrasting claims, practices, discourses and, ultimately, in conflicts. This highlights the conflicting understandings of and demands on collectivity and togetherness in migration societies.

In contrast to the asylum seeker protests I investigated in Chapter 5, the actions of the Refugees Initiative Schwäbisch Gmünd were more long-term and organized. Over a period of roughly three years, its members repeatedly took a public stand, organizing several protests in the town and in other localities across Germany. Most of the activists were rejected asylum seekers from Sub-Saharan African countries who remained in Germany due to "obstacles to deportation". They often had to cope with years of "Kettenduldungen" (literally "chains of toleration"), an insecure and precarious residence status in which the right to remain is renewed every few months and no work permit is granted. These activists were well organized, with a Facebook group that had more than 500 members and functioned as a platform for sharing information on their protests and demands. Form the very beginning, their actions were embedded in a German-wide network of left-wing activists campaigning for refugee rights (see Ataç et al. 2015; Bhimji 2016). From late summer 2012 on, similar, loosely connected protests occurred in several German cities, such as Berlin, Hannover and Munich, the most emblematic of which was the 'protest camp' at Oranienplatz in Berlin, a public square that was squatted from October 2012 until April 2014 by a group of around 100 refugee activists and their German supporters (see Landry 2015; Wilcke & Lambert 2015). The following investigation will shed light on how this German-wide movement for the rights of refugees materialized in a small town in the area of my field research.

This chapter builds on field research in Schwäbisch Gmünd, to which I travelled several times in order to talk to various parties involved in the conflicts. I held interviews with the refugee activists themselves, with two leading members of a local citizens' initiative supporting refugees and with a representative of the district council. I also draw on statements and declarations published by the refugee activists in their Facebook group as well as on newspaper articles reporting on their protests. I should note, however, that it is not my intention to offer a complete and objective account of the complex history of these protests. I myself was not present at the refugee activists' protests,

which means that I draw on second-hand interpretations and fragmentary reconstructions in order to make sense of the events.

The following chapter consists of four parts. To start with, I briefly sketch out the history of the protests in Schwäbisch Gmünd, arguing that the so-called "camera conflict" presented an important turning point that substantially altered the relationships of solidarity between the refugee activists and various local actors. In section three, I then examine the reasoning that led both the refugee activists and members of the local citizens' initiative supporting refugees to end all relationships of solidarity with the other side. In section four, I investigate the contrasting imaginaries of 'local community' that came to light in the course of these conflicts. Finally, I conclude by looking at the intimate relationship between solidarity and community.

6.2.   A Short History of Refugee Activism in Schwäbisch Gmünd

The story of the Refugees Initiative Schwäbisch Gmünd began in summer 2012 when the refugees returned from the "Break Isolation camp" in Jena (see The Voice Refugee Forum: 29/3/2012)[5]. This workshop gathered refugees, their supporters and left-wing activist groups from across the country. Together, they discussed the discrimination and exclusion refugees faced on the ground and elaborated ways of taking a stand against them. Back at their accommodation centre, the asylum seekers in Schwäbisch Gmünd translated words into action. Supported by the local left-wing youth centre Esperanza, they squatted the central market square of town and erected a protest camp for several days in order to raise awareness of the unacceptable conditions at their accommodation centre. Over the following three years, they repeatedly took a public stand in the town in order to voice their discontent over various issues. In these protests, they directed complaints against local authorities, the police department, the employees at their accommodation centre, the local population, the local media and members of the local citizens' initiative supporting refugees. Their accusations included *"police brutality"* (Refugees Initiative Schwäbisch Gmünd: 15/4/2014), *"criminalization* and *persecution* of refugees" (ibid. 8/5/2015), *"repression* from the Ostalb district authorities" (ibid. 11/6/2014), *"violation* of refugees right" (ibid. 10/3/2014) and *"colonial injustice"* (ibid. 17/4/2013), to name just a few. Local actors in Schwäbisch

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5   See: http://www.thevoiceforum.org/node/2488 (last accessed 1/8/2020).