# Activist citizens beyond dichotomies: Migrant rights activism in Hamburg

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## 1. Introduction

Border, migration, and asylum policies have, over the last years, continued to tighten dramatically (Ataç et al. 2015: 3; Lister 1997: 44; Nicholls/Uitermark 2017: 2f.; Schwenken/Ruß-Sattar 2014: 15f.). At the same time, refugees and migrants are organizing themselves, protesting, and claiming rights on broader scales (Johnson 2015: 5f.; McGuaran/Hudig 2014: 28; Nyers/Rygiel 2014: 204f.). While citizenship is often merely addressed as a legal status, critical citizenship perspectives underline that citizenship is fundamentally about who can be and who is framed as political (Rygiel et al. 2015: 4). These perspectives propose a decoupling of citizenship from the nation-state which, however, does not mean that they ignore that the nation-state remains the dominant empirical reality shaping citizenship (Brubaker 2015: 7). Instead, they reveal that this link is not natural and can, therefore, be conceptually questioned (Lazar/Nuijten 2013: 3). Critical citizenship approaches often explicitly focus on non-citizens' struggles over citizenship and, thereby, shift attention to transformations and appropriations of this concept.

In this chapter, I follow this direction by taking a closer look at migrant rights groups in Hamburg. My empirical data show that these groups engage in more than just publicly visible protest actions and that they are more heterogeneous than the often-formulated focus on non-citizens suggests.[1] I will conceptually develop these two observations with regards to citizenship: exploring the relation between what is considered political and citizenship, thereby further challenging the public/private dichotomy, and looking at how

1 In fact, this is why I refer to migrant rights as the more inclusive term beyond formal categorizations.

groups deal with multiple internal differences, moving beyond the simplifying German/refugee dichotomy. Subsequently, I will also link these observations to existing literature dealing with similar dynamics, namely (Black and post – colonial) feminist perspectives. Such theories have so far not been broadly linked to critical citizenship studies and, even though my contribution can only be a first step, it points out a direction that should be further explored.

## 2. Critical citizenship studies

Migration currently dominates public and academic debates. Even before recent polarizations, particularly after the long summer of migration 2015, it has often mainly been discussed as a problem that democratic nation-states face (Rother 2016: 3). The focus has often been on how migration could be limited (Earnest 2008; Hammar 1990), or on how (democratic) home and receiving countries could handle its consequences (Benhabib 2004; Schulte 2009). Simultaneously, globalization and migration have been constructing different realities. Hammar introduced the notable concept of the »denizen« showing one of such dilemmas in long-term residents not having basic political rights (1990: 13). Perspectives, such as autonomy of migration, have been central in criticizing such limiting views, based on the currently dominant restrictive border regimes of the global North. Methodological nationalism is one central critique: »As a result of methodological nationalism and the ethnic lens, researchers often approach the terrain of the nation-state as a single homogeneous national culture, while defining a migrant population as a community of culture, interest and identity« (Glick/Schiller 2012: 29). The supposedly inherent linkage of territory, cultural, and political community assumes nation-states to be »bounded, autonomous and decontextualizable units« (Calhoun 1999: 218), thus, leaving it unquestioned as unit of analysis and defining empirical frame (Castles/Davidson 2001: 15; Cohen 1999: 249). This is relevant for the study of citizenship because such lenses take its linkage to the nation-state for granted and conceptualize actors solely through their positioning in this setting. Therefore, Mikuszies et al. summarize the resulting need to develop alternative perspectives raised by critical citizenship studies:

»The consensus of this debate is that a link of citizenship and ethnically-founded nationality, going hand in hand with modern statehood, contributes to migrants being excluded. This results in the need to develop new forms

of citizenship to do justice in more inclusive ways to this changed situation« (Mikuszies et al. 2010: 99 [Translated by the author]).

In fact, citizenship research has been engaged in exploring supranational (Beck/Grande 2006; Borja 2000; Kochenov 2012; Shaw 2003), sub-national (Hess/Lebuhn 2014; Kewes 2016; Purcell 2003; Smith/McQuarrie 2012), or multi-layered models of citizenship (Nicholls 2013). Such foci open fruitful debates on more inclusive models of citizenship and are explored in other contributions in this edited volume. However, while these research strands start to decouple citizenship from the nation, they mainly differentiate between different or shift the debate to other policy levels. Critical citizenship studies stand for questioning state-centered perspectives as such (Holston 1999b: 157; Köster-Eiserfunke et al. 2014). They move beyond citizenship as a legal status by shifting the attention to migrants as political agents and, therefore, to their practices of citizenship (Holston 1999a: 1f.; Lazar/Nuijten 2013: 3; Nyers 2015: 34).

As discussed in the introduction to this volume, Engin Isin distinguishes between three forms of citizenship. Citizenship as a *status* refers to formal citizenship and constructs exclusive categories of (non-)citizens (Isin 2008: 17). Citizenship as *habitus* presupposes the legal definition but focuses on traditional political participation. According to Isin, habitus is the long-term making of citizens and, therefore, a passive »[acting] out already written scripts« (2009: 381; 2008: 17). As opposed to this, *acts* of citizenship »create a scene« (Isin 2009: 381). They »[transform] subjects into claimants of rights over a relatively short period of time« (Isin 2008: 17) and »break routines, understandings and practices« (Isin 2009: 379). Through such a conceptualization, formal »non-citizens« can actually enact and transform citizenship because it acknowledges that, just as the nation-state, citizenship is not a neutral concept: »we think it is important to insist that the political and juridical inscriptions of citizenship are the products of social, cultural, political and institutional conflicts and struggles« (Clarke et al. 2014: 104). So while it is, of course, essential that there is research engaging in current regulatory systems, it is as important not to ignore less institutionalized forms and imaginaries of citizenship. Nyers claims that rather than being about »expanding or widening […] the space of citizenship and belonging […], [migrant citizenships] indicate that a significant, if uncertain, transformation has already occurred with this basic political category« (2015: 34).

Increasingly, research on migrant rights struggles all over the world captures a political agency and relations mostly ignored by traditional views on

citizenship, emphasizing citizenship as an unfinished transformative process (Clarke et al. 2014: 177). Given that this is already a considerable step, I argue that dynamics dealing with differences within these movements have received little attention so far and still lack conceptualization. My aim is to contribute to current critical citizenship debates by starting to link empirical observations of this to insights from (Black and post-colonial) feminist theories. These insights are often not explicitly integrated in current discussions on citizenship because they are not focusing on migration. However, they address similar dynamics of inequalities like the ones migrant rights groups are facing so they can help to advance conceptualizations of citizenship in this context as well.

## 3. Activism by, with, and for migrants

### 3.1. Methodology

This chapter is based on my dissertation research for which I follow a constructivist grounded theory methodology (GTM) after Charmaz (2014) and Bryant (2017). Their constructivist approach emphasizes an interpretive philosophical background, understanding data and analysis as socially constructed and context-specific (Hildenbrand 2011: 556). Constructivist GTM is understood as a systematic, abductive, and comparative methodology aimed at building middle-range theory (Bryant 2017: 89ff.; Peters 2014: 6). The abductive logic stands for a constant shifting between data and theory, making the approach neither purely inductive nor deductive (Bryant 2017: 278). Applying this logic to my research, this means that I developed sensitizing concepts based on a preliminary literature review which I used as starting points for generating data. These data were analyzed through different coding techniques which eventually involved their confrontation with existing literature. Constant comparison, therefore, means that data generation and analysis inform each other (Bryant 2017: 200): Data are confronted with other data and with theory, developing the analytical conceptualization. As a consequence, in GTM, the conceptual and the empirical dimension are closely intertwined: »in some sense, the researcher is simultaneously puzzling over empirical materials and theoretical literatures« (Schwartz-Shea/Yanow 2012: 27). In this chapter, I develop two empirical and conceptual aspects from my doctoral research and link them to existing literature.

## 3.2. Field and case selection

My research focuses on activist groups engaged for migrant rights in Hamburg, Northern Germany. Hamburg has the second-biggest European port, making it an important center of economic power and historically also one of migration. Despite its partly very rich society, Hamburg has traditionally been a social-democratic city but is also known for its radical left neighborhoods. With its about 1.8 million inhabitants it is a relevant urban metropolis which »spatially concentrates« the resources and relations which movements draw on (Nicholls/Uitermark 2017: 8).

For my research, I regularly accompanied three activist groups (and a few more on an occasional basis) in their meetings and activities for two years (2017-2019). My data consist of field notes from this participant observation and twelve in-depth interviews with activists.[2] Groups and interview partners were selected purposively, based on the sensitizing concepts and my own political involvement. The size of the groups cannot be determined with precision. For regular meetings, there were usually between five and fifteen people. The groups differ in their concrete topical focus and forms of organizing[3] but they all engage for migrant rights, are or aim at being mixed with regards to the legal status of the people involved, and explicitly consider themselves political. The actual composition varies: one group focuses on women; another one is predominantly white German, most groups involve multiple kinds of migrants. Both in regard to the activists involved in the groups and those interviewed, there is a balanced range of legal status, age, race, and gender.[4]

2 When referencing my data, the systematization works as follows: »IDI« stands for in-depth interview, followed by the participant (e.g. »IDI_P02«); »PO« means participant observation, followed by group and fieldnote (e.g. »PO_G03_12«).

3 The majority of the groups is self-organized, i.e. they are no legal entity and run through political engagement. One is a registered association including two part-time paid positions.

4 Following Bakewell and Brubaker, I try to move »beyond categories« because often by sorting people by categories, e.g. nationality, they are reduced to only one ascribed identity (Bakewell 2008: 445; Brubaker 2013: 6). According to Holston, indeed, citizenship has been established as one dominant categorization (1999a: 1f.). Here I mostly address people as »activist citizens« or »activists« in order to not reduce them to their legal status. As this chapter is centrally about differences, that does not mean, however, that I ignore the existence or significance of these categories. When using them, I rather try to take a critical view on them.

### 3.3. Positionality

Constructivist GTM is very apt for exploratory research of marginalized activism. Ethical reflections about positionality, privilege, and relations between researcher and participants are central to my research. Given the limited extent of this chapter, I leave it at saying that I am trying to conduct my research as critically self-reflexive as possible. I have gained many insights from interpretive research, activist scholarship, participatory and ethnographic approaches, post-colonial and feminist theories but also, and particularly, from conversations and discussions with and within the groups themselves. I am constantly reflecting and negotiating my position in and vis-à-vis these groups as a white academic holding a German passport and an involved activist.

## 4. Activist citizens re-negotiating citizenship

As previously discussed, critical citizenship studies have led to an increasing awareness of how important it is to involve the perspectives of those excluded from citizenship. Most conceptual advances have been made by observing the actual struggles over citizenship in societies, for instance by women and Black civil rights activists. The latest focus on migrants builds on these conceptual advancements but also brings new perspectives which still need further exploration. In 2007 Lister observed that citizenship debates tend to be very conceptual, identifying an »empirical void« (2007: 58). I would argue that empirical engagement with the lived realities and struggles of migrants has been constantly growing in the recent past. However, migrants are a group that is often externally and internally excluded from citizenship, raising further challenges, and their political struggle is much more diverse than often depicted. In the following, I discuss how variety in activities and activists impacts on our conceptual view of citizenship and how such a perspective can be advanced by involving (post-colonial and Black) feminist theories.

### 4.1. Variety in activities: How everyday politics enable citizenship

When observing the activities of the migrant rights groups, it quickly becomes clear that these go beyond classically »political« and partly blur with what might be referred to as »social« ones. Groups engage in the traditional politi-

cal dimension of the public. »Going outside«, »[making] the situation public, […] [giving] an awareness about the situation« are central concerns which are classically aimed at through demonstrations, public events, or conferences (IDI_P08, l. 113-131; IDI_P01, l. 474-479). Activists want to »[hold] up a mirror to society« (IDI_P04, l. 596-604), »[transport] things publicly« (IDI_P06, l. 496-508) but also mobilize people (PO_G06_05, l. 25-32). Through these societal goals, activists engage in a reciprocal relationship with the state. They make direct demands to politicians, such as the closure of a certain camp, stopping racist police controls, or obtaining freedom of movement (PO_G01_06, p.76; PO_G01_17, p.99).

Simultaneously, groups and individuals are addressed by the state in multiple ways, making the relationality reciprocal: isolation (IDI_P15, l. 453-462), criminalization (IDI_P03, l. 1244ff.), deportation (IDI_P01, l. 136-139; IDI_P06, l. 745-749), or tightening of migration laws (IDI_P03, l. 901-905; IDI_P04, l. 428-441). Many activists distinguish this confrontational relationship to the state from pure *humanitarian* work of other societal actors, which according to them is unpolitical, uncritical (IDI_P06, l. 136-144; IDI_P08, l. 689-697; PO_G06_01, p.73) and »moves within the limits of the law« (IDI_P03, l. 999-1001). This statement underlines that migrants are often criminalized, pointing out that what is termed *social* or *humanitarian support* adheres to given rules and laws without questioning them. In this sense, some activists make a clear distinction between what is political and what is not.

However, many activists simultaneously distinguish between social and political work within their own group contexts. Social work, then, are activities dealing with individual problems, i.e. support and care practices (IDI_P03, l. 1017-1022; IDI_P08, l. 676-688). The difference some activists make is that their own social practices consciously undermine the current state of things. Many activists clearly articulate that they see the conditions in which migrants have to live as a purposefully imposed isolation by the state (PO_G05_05, p.51). They live in camps from various months to years, which not only impedes them to live a normal life due to lack of privacy and self-determined routines, but also makes it unlikely to properly arrive in Hamburg through working, meeting locals, or learning German. So providing housing, legal support, or language courses to (illegalized) people becomes a direct challenge to the state (IDI_P01, l. 312-316; IDI_P03, 594-598;

IDI_P04, l. 299-302). Most of the urgencies addressed like this are so basic that addressing them becomes political in itself.[5]

Additionally, through spending time together, creating spaces to cook or relax, the migrants' structurally imposed isolation is undermined as well (IDI_P11, l. 313-316; IDI_P14, l. 732-742; IDI_P15, l. 144-158; PO_G01_3, p. 18; PO_G06_04, p. 17; PO_G09_02, l. 42-49). In that sense, giving people without perspective some hope can be political: »It [our activities] cannot change anythings. But … […] the people's mood is become good and the people is become […] hopeful« (IDI_P01, l. 279-284). One activist names these activities »micro politics« (IDI_P14, l. 507). This underlines that the political action in these contexts takes place on an everyday level that might often not be identified as such. The classically vertical relationality of citizenship between the state and the individual appears to be more complex when accepting this.

The empirical reality of a complex mixture of activities shows that it is not enough to focus discussions about citizenship on legal rights claims. This is also reflected in some publications which observe this dimension of everyday politics as resisting or even undermining state (b)orders, defining them as »invisible practices« (Ataç et al. 2015: 7), »imperceptible politics« (Köster-Eiserfunke et al. 2014: 191f.), or »a wider collective practice that is transformative and underpinned by a logic of resistance« (Piacentini 2014: 177). Such observations point out that a broader conceptual link of the political and citizenship is needed.

The employed vocabulary already emphasizes the proximity to feminist struggles and theories of citizenship. Ruth Lister's notion of a feminist perspective on inclusive citizenship is illuminating in this context: »A key tenet of feminist citizenship theory is that understanding lived citizenship involves a challenge to the public-private dichotomy that underpinned the traditional association of citizenship with the public sphere« (2007: 55). She emphasizes that feminist fights cannot take place without the ground-work of everyday politics for satisfying »human needs« and, thereby, »[promoting] autonomy« (Lister 1997: 16). Similarly, Martin et al. call for paying more attention to the »social basis of political action, and to recognize otherwise-overlooked actions that create social change« (2007: 91). Kabeer argues that we should generally take a more multi-dimensional view on rights. Especially concerning

5 Nevertheless, it is also important to underline that, especially for people in such conditions, joining a group is not necessarily a political choice but one in search of concrete support (IDI_P07, l. 257-266; IDI_P07, l. 312-317; IDI_P15, l. 209-220).

citizenship debates, rights are often reduced to political and civil ones, as opposed to social, economic, and cultural rights. Kabeer claims: »When they [people] protest, their protests are not confined to one or the other of these spheres, but tend to staddle them both« (2005: 15). These feminist perspectives on citizenship can easily be linked back to observations from my field where one activist describes very vividly:

»We were very political but the people realized that we also need humanitarian support to sustain our fight. And you can see people try to open their doors, you know, […] because they know that we need at least [a place] to sleep. So […] in this sense you can say that the humanitarian support motivated our political struggle« (IDI_P08, l. 680-685).

In the case of feminist fights, women were formally included but actually excluded so that we can speak about an *internal* exclusion. This exclusion has been famously revealed by the claim »the personal is political« (Hanisch 2006), which broadens notions of the political: individual problems are structural. When discussing citizenship in the context of migration, in addition to internal, there very obviously is also *external*, exclusion. People are excluded from the categorization citizenship, or even more basically residency, and thereby lack basic rights. The realization that individual problems actually have structural roots and are, thus, public in nature is one that explains the insistence of activists to frame their social support activities as political as well (IDI_P06, l. 483-491; IDI_P11, l. 476-479; IDI_P15, l. 592-602).

This does not mean that the political and citizenship should be conflated. Indeed, Lister argues that citizenship is enacted publicly: »not all politics necessarily counts as citizenship, for the latter, in its political sense, implies active political participation, albeit broadly defined« (1997: 28). However, the acts in less visible settings are still central to conceptions of citizenship as they enable the political fight in the first place and question the status quo. Again, it is Lister who observes that it might be less about the place where somebody is acting and more about what the action is about and which consequences it has (2007: 57). This fits to the notion that groups are doing more and less visible work simultaneously, meaning that for them, even though not the same, a broad understanding of the political cannot be disentangled from citizenship: »It's that the human being is complex … and composed by all these things. And [Name 76] also said that […] cooking is politics too. […] The human being eats …, it needs friendships, relationships … and the human being has to realize itself, right? So all of this comes in. All of this makes politics« (IDI_P17_1, l. 879-887 [Translated by the author]).

Migrant rights activists engage in a wide range of activities, moving beyond a dichotomy between public and private, which calls for a broadening of the understanding of the political and results in being able to consider what Isin terms *acts of citizenship* as citizenship at all. It should be explored further how the different dimensions of political action interact and can constitute citizenship.

## 4.2. Intersection of differences: How inequalities shape citizenship

The migrant rights groups I have accompanied are composed of activists with a variety of legal statuses (IDI_P06, l. 897-911; IDI_P11, l. 309-313; PO_G06_02, p.15). This is the most visible and often defining of various differences in the activist groups: It is not merely about distinguishing between Germans and migrants, as there is a variety of migrants involved. These include so-called »regular migrants«, refugees formally granted asylum, and several illegalized groups, to name just a few. This variety in statuses also results in very real differences between these groups and their access to language classes, job market, or other kinds of rights (IDI_P01, l. 556-571; IDI_P05, l. 1366-1382). Supporting this notion, one activist underlines in a meeting: »It's important that it's the system that is dividing people through different treatments and statuses« (PO_G02_06, p.68).

Similarly, some German activists are read as migrants, based on their physical appearance, and thereby, experience racism and discrimination as well. Moving beyond legal status, the activist groups are still highly diverse. Classical systems of oppression, such as race, gender, and class intersect with each other, and are complemented by further differences in the context of these activist groups. Next to having different legal statuses, socio-economic, cultural, and political backgrounds, activists also differ in their aims, interests, and necessities. Some activists point out how women are basically excluded from activist groups because there is no childcare or due to the choice of meeting places and times (IDI_P05, l. 818-825; IDI_P07, l. 49-55; PO_G06_02, p.14). Language also emerges as a challenge because, even when interpretation is organized, people depend on others, can only participate indirectly and time-lagged (IDI_P06, 1021-1030; IDI_P14, l. 875-885; PO_G02_9, p.109). It occurs that those in need of interpretation are seated in a corner in order not to disturb the rest of the group, a practice which has been framed as »a symbolic mechanism of exclusion« (PO_G02_9, p.110). Finally, local knowledge and experience centrally determine how much someone depends on others:

»[U]sually these meetings are pretty much … ›oh, we have these problems‹. And then [how] can we fix it, and usually [it is] the Kartoffel[6] or the … […] so-called supporters, activists, that have their contacts. And it's really important that they do … but I would like to get to a point where, as [Name 9] said […], I don't need to ask [Name 7] […] to write the [finance] application for me« (IDI_P05, l. 867-874).

It is an expressed aim of the groups to work together on equal terms (IDI_P06, l. 897-911; IDI_P08, l. 439-443; IDI_P11, l. 309-313; PO_G06_02, p.15). This is most explicitly voiced concerning the interaction between Germans and refugees but, as the previous examples have shown, it is not limited to it. On the other side, legal status often concurs with many of these differences so inequalities are constantly present in the groups.[7] Actually challenging them is difficult because dependencies constantly reproduce power gaps and hierarchies: »[T]hey [supporters] want to contribute and their contribution in some ways might not be in the interest of the self-organized group, of the refugees group« (IDI_P08, l. 355-369). To be able to challenge such dynamics, intersectional differences have to be recognized: »we are all activists, but at the same time we need to recognize certain things« (IDI_P05, l. 150-159).

My data show that some of these activist groups realize that they are reproducing inequalities, for instance when not organizing interpretation or childcare. Of course, in most cases they cannot undo the inequalities themselves but they can openly engage with the existing power structures and develop strategies of alleviating them. Self-organization of refugees and migrants, sometimes through settings which are exclusive to them, is one step sometimes mentioned as empowering (IDI_P03, l. 317-325; IDI_P05, l. 1360-1366; IDI_P08, l. 90-99; PO_G01_05, p. 49; PO_G02_5, p.51). One group started to experiment with technical devices making interpretation a less excluding process within the group conversation (PO_G01_33, l. 27-50). Another one decided to buy speakers and an amplifier so that they were not dependent anymore on other (German) groups providing them (PO_G02_07, p. 79). However, such reflections are often »swallowed« by the emerging everyday urgencies.

6 Potato, used to refer to white Germans.

7 Nevertheless, there are examples to demonstrate that legal status is not the one and only factor: It is often the migrants themselves who provide interpretation, local knowledge has to be acquired by everyone moving to Hamburg, Black people are not necessarily migrants, and a lack of childcare can also exclude German (single) parents.

My empirical observations underline that there is a plurality of differences within activist groups which intersect with each other, resulting in power imbalances and challenges these groups are constantly struggling with. Acknowledging but challenging the differences, one can say, captures the ways these activist groups in Hamburg deal with their positionalities. Some to a higher, some to a lesser extent, they engage in a continuous process of (re-)negotiating possibilities and necessities. Some publications in studies of social movements and critical citizenship raise similar issues. Weldon argues that internal politics are over-representing privileged instead of marginalized groups in many movements (2011: 5). This is particularly central in struggles over citizenship because migrants are externally and internally excluded and work in highly heterogeneous constellations. Glöde and Böhlo acknowledge the difficulty which inequalities pose to joint political action (2015: 79), Fadaee critically reflects the dominance of European activists' priorities (2015: 734). Kewes, Ataç, and Steinhilper emphasize problematic dependencies and patronization (Ataç 2016: 642; Kewes 2016: 264; Steinhilper 2017: 81f.).

Black and post-colonial feminist perspectives offer valuable insights into such complex constellations of intersecting inequalities. The Combahee River collective strongly shows the differences within feminist but also Black struggles by stating that »we have in many ways gone beyond white women's revelations because we are dealing with the implications of race and class as well as sex« and by referring to negative reactions of Black men to Black feminism (Combahee River Collective 1977). Ell Ooks argues similarly, showing that it had first to be pointed out how »racism had shaped and informed feminist theory and practice« (2000: 16). Today, intersectionality is an established concept which captures the interaction of multiple power systems. It also emerged from this increasing awareness for segmented life and movement realities that imposing homogeneity to all people supposedly included in a certain category or movement reproduces privileges and inequalities:

»[T]his interdependency between individual and group rights can often serve to undermine the capacity of subordinated members of subordinated groups to press for their individual rights when to do so appears to divide the collective struggle for recognition or to play into hegemonic discourses which denigrate such groups« (Kabeer 2005: 14).

Ünsal explicitly refers to migrant rights activism when she criticizes that we mostly engage with the supporter/refugee distinction, ignoring intersectional power structures: »We should respect the different realities and recognize the discriminations in the movement« (2015: 15). Indeed, according to

Lister, pretending unity without acknowledging differences »[reinforces] the very exclusion against which these groups are fighting« (1997: 30). Overlooking that the migrant rights struggle is composed by a variety of differently categorized people means marginalizing those suffering from essentializing categories anyhow. These insights from different struggles call for a conceptualization of citizenship not only in its relationality between state and individual (Lister 1997: 3). Kabeer emphasizes a horizontal view of citizenship as follows: »one which stresses that the relationship between citizens is at least as important as the more traditional ›vertical‹ view of citizenship as the relationship between the state and the individual« (2005: 23). What the focus on migrant rights groups adds is that this relationality expands beyond the formal citizen. In all their diversity, the groups try to constructively deal with inequalities and resulting hierarchies. Johnson describes this as mutual recognition and solidarity: »It enables a relationship of mutual support and protection that uses the security of the citizen, but does not reduce or subordinate the power of the migrant« (2015: 16f.). This element of mutual solidarity is also reflected in a field note from a meeting: »Then [Name 9] said […]: Everybody is giving and supporting with different things so in the end it becomes working together for a common goal« (PO_G06_02, p.12).

In aiming at this, it is central to recognize the intersectionality of different positions. It is not about a dichotomy that should be brought together but about engaging with complex relationalities among individuals that act together. While some positions might be specific to these migrant rights groups, I argue that citizenship studies pay too little attention to groups' internal complexities and the resulting excluding dynamics. Feminist, Black, and post-colonial perspectives have long emphasized the diverse nature of activist struggles and intersectional identities and are, thus, a promising point of reference that should be explored further in the current debates on citizenship.

## 5. Conclusion

Approaching discussions on citizenship through migrant rights groups clearly has conceptual implications. As I have shown, critical perspectives have long argued for less state-centered models and explicitly criticized the taken-for-granted linkage between political agency and formal citizenship. What I hope to have added through this contribution is, firstly, that looking at the everyday reality of these activist struggles leads to a broader conceptualization of the

political which enables us to better capture the range of activities discussed as »acts of citizenship«. The vertical relationality between state and individual becomes more complex from such a perspective. To frame individual support politically means acknowledging personal situations as structural and, thus, questioning current citizenship regimes further. Secondly, these struggles are intersectionally heterogeneous contexts which are shaped by externally imposed, essentializing categorizations that are reproduced in internal dynamics of inequalities and exclusion. Exploring the ways through which groups deal with this introduces a horizontal dimension of citizenship. By linking these context-specific insights to existing literature from (Black and post-colonial) feminist perspectives, we can start to intersectionally explore conceptualizations of citizenship beyond dichotomous distinctions of inclusion or exclusion.

Therefore, I argue that it is reasonable to relate such perspectives more systematically to migrant rights activism. Nevertheless, linking this to the lived realities of activists is challenging because especially on an individual level they are simultaneously fighting for – if not citizenship, then certainly formal rights – and against citizenship in terms of current policies constituting it (Erensu 2016: 665). Therefore, I want to mention that conceptualizing such struggles as citizenship does not help migrant activists: their *real* status does not change. While they are addressed as activist citizens and conceptualized as political actors, their precarious realities remain: people are transferred, deported, discriminated. One could, then, question whether citizenship constitutes the right frame of analysis for researching these struggles. However, acknowledging the transformations of citizenship that feminist and Black activists have already reached, adds an important corrective in that it reinforces the observation that no concept of citizenship is ever fixed or neutral. Every concept evolves over time and builds on others that are equally constructed. So ultimately, I would argue that a conceptualization of these struggles through citizenship, on the one hand, does justice to the truly inspiring agency these people enact and, on the other hand, calls into question a dominant but constructed paradigm which completely shapes their lives. Stretching the concept of citizenship in this way is essential for taking a critical stance on the dominant supposedly neutral views underlying it.

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