PART 4

POWER IN A DIVERSE AND COMPLEX WORLD: LEARNING, EDUCATION AND GLOBAL MIGRATION
INTRODUCTION

Migration and refugee movements have become an important and highly charged topic of political and media discourse in many countries around the globe. Extreme right political positions and racist speech have turned out to be a formula for success in several national elections within Europe, where debate has been intensely focussed on the topic of forced migration over the past three years. Statistics on refugees reached a historically high level in 2016. Although most of the 65.6 million forcibly-displaced people around the world are actually being hosted in developing regions (UNHCR, 2017), the European Union has also recorded 2.5 million applications for asylum in 2015 and 2016. Germany, Sweden and Austria were amongst the countries with the highest number of newly arrived refugees (Eurostat, 2018). Restrictive policies and border controls have led to a significant decline in asylum applications since then; nonetheless, the host countries still have to deal with numerous challenges to do with the inclusion of newcomers (e.g. difficulties in labour market integration, discriminating practices in housing and educational programs, racist attitudes of the longer-established population, etc.).

As social change due to migration is probably one of the most important present and future challenges for the advancement of democracies and citizenship, it is timely to explore how people are learning to deal with these challenges in a critically reflective and peaceful way. Refugees have partly been met with hostile reactions. But we have also observed an impressive level of volunteer support for these migrants, which emerged in summer 2015. In this chapter, we will explore the potential of volunteering as an area of (mostly informal and incidental) political learning. We will discuss the relationship between solidarity, power structures and the learning of adults. This includes the specific power relations in the context of migration regimes and within humanitarian practices, particularly in refugee relief. Seeking out the critical potential of volunteering, we will also provide a few remarks on the system-stabilizing function of volunteering in neoliberal societies. The promotion and support of volunteering – for example through adult education – is often seen as a contribution to strengthening a sense of community. Nonetheless, we will also critically discuss how this is linked to the state divesting itself of responsibility. The main focus of the chapter will be the political learning of volunteers with regard
to their potential to question and overcome dominant power relations. As well as theoretical analysis, we will draw on current empirical findings from Germany and some selected outcomes from a qualitative study (‘Learning Solidarity?’), which we conducted in Austria in 2016.

In Austria the volunteer support for refugees was initially triggered by the deficient public management of the situation and by poignant reports and images of death and suffering on refugees’ routes in the summer of 2015. The volunteers worked in established relief organizations as well as in new groups that were spontaneously set up, often organized by means of social media. Volunteers were of different ages, genders, socio-economic or national backgrounds – but a study from Germany indicates there was an above-average proportion of highly educated, well-off and female (75–80%) helpers as well as people who were migrants themselves or descendants of migrants (Karakayali & Kleist, 2016).

Up to the present, some of the volunteer activity has developed into ongoing, long-term solidarity work including a wide range of activities, such as educational programs, counselling, cultural exchanges and (to a lesser extent) political activism around migration and asylum issues. The fact that many people have also ceased their engagement in the meantime can be partly explained by structural shifts within volunteering. Volunteering has changed historically from rather long-term oriented forms of working in established organizations (which of course still exists, too) to a more flexible, short-term and project-based pattern of engagement (Zimmer & Vilain, 2005). Other reasons which are specific to volunteer work with refugees and asylum seekers will be described later.

POWER RELATIONS IN MIGRATION SOCIETIES

Global migration nowadays is strongly connected to colonial experiences (Nghi Ha, 2007). Historically, European expansion and power are based on colonial occupation and subjection of Non-European countries. Since the 19th century, a portion of the national economic wealth of western societies have built on the labor of migrants and services and the exploitation of labour force can be seen as a continuation of colonial practices; thus, as postcolonial theorists argue current inequalities and discriminations are racialized. Unequal representation of migrants (on both an economic and a symbolic level) often mirror these hierarchies. Migrants are subject to a process of ‘othering’ (Hall, 1997), which means that the majority society uses its hegemonic position to construct migrants culturally as ‘others’. ‘Othering’ often leads to discriminatory practices, which are reflected not only through individual interactions but also in formal regulations, organizations, politics and law.

Member States of the European Union tend to react restrictively to the challenges arising from migration, as we can observe both in recent elections and policies. As to the former, right and extreme right-wing parties are gaining in importance all over Europe. For example, in both France and in Austria, politicians from the
far-right-wing parties the French Front National (FN), and the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) made it to the final round of the presidential elections in 2017. Since the extreme right became part of the coalition government in Austria in December 2018, there has been rapid tightening of immigration and asylum regulations and financial cuts to integration programs.

These recent developments are grounded in long-standing inequalities between certain groups of migrants or refugees and members of the host societies in Europe. We name just a few examples here: Many migrants face discrimination in different areas of life, mainly when seeking employment, across all EU Member States (FRA, 2017). They often work in low-paid jobs with poor working conditions, and the deskilling of migrants is a big problem. Even though qualifications do influence labour market position, we can see that there are also a lot of skilled or highly skilled persons who do not find appropriate jobs. For example, 39% of foreign-born people work below their qualifications, while only 19% of native Austrians do so. The problem of deskilling of migrants in Austria is rather pronounced compared to other OECD countries (Sadjed, Sprung, & Kukovetz, 2015).

National origin is also crucial for getting proper access to the health system or various social services (EMN, 2014). Asylum seekers face particular challenges. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) reports many human rights-related problems concerning access to territory, reception conditions, asylum procedures, education, family and asylum rights of unaccompanied children, and immigration detention within the EU (FRA, 2018). FRA (2016) also points out various forms of violence and harassment towards asylum seekers and migrants. Increasingly, too, activists and politicians perceived as ‘pro-refugee’ are victims of hate crime (FRA, 2016). Later, we shall address how much this influences the volunteers’ decisions to stay active.

POWER RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF VOLUNTEERING

The State and Civil Society

Although the enormous engagement of volunteers within this situation described can be understood as a strong and vital demonstration of acting in solidarity and thus being an example of active, inclusive citizenship (Kleinschmidt & Lange, 2018), we would also like to reflect critically on a specific function of volunteering, namely that volunteers’ engagement is, more and more, compensating for tasks for which the state no longer takes responsibility (van Dyk & Misbach, 2016). This is true not only for refugee relief but also for other fields like care work, education, social services and others. Many volunteers took part in 2015 because they noticed that the public authorities were not able to handle the situation concerning refugees, and they felt affected by the human harm that was occurring directly on their doorsteps. The allocation of public responsibilities is part of neoliberal governance or, in other words, part of a governing technology that uses the ‘community’ and
therefore unpaid work (beyond families) as a resource. The idea of achieving a balance between the spheres of government, market and civil society is found in many current political concepts and theories. A strong civil society is seen as an important part of saving social cohesion (Bröckling, 2005) and is therefore a target of political interventions. Neoliberal ‘governing by market’ will be controlled and compensated by a ‘governing by community’ (Rose, 1999). We can see these keywords and this type political discourse in the idea of ‘caring communities’ or ‘The Big Society’, as promoted by the former UK prime minister David Cameron (van Dyk, 2017).

The mobilization of numerous citizens in 2015 was framed by a rhetoric of crisis and emergency, which seemed to confirm the fact that the authorities were not able to manage the situation by themselves. It may be wrong to conclude that the state is simply withdrawing from tasks associated with social welfare; moreover, it is in the process of establishing a new logic of governance, as it conceives citizens as being obliged to take responsibility for themselves (van Dyk & Misbach, 2016). Governmentality theorists argue that if there is an interest in governing and influencing the sphere of civil society, the community and its potential has to be defined, professionalized and analyzed (Bröckling, 2005). Looking at the individuals through this analytical lens, we can identify specific processes of subjectivation. Bröckling (2005) has pointed out that neoliberal systems need appropriate types of subjects such as the ‘entrepreneurial self’, but also the ‘engaged member of the civil society’. He states that there is an imperative of participation in our times, which is promoted by diverse educational activities. A “community-boom” (van Dyk, 2017) can be observed as a consequence of top-down policy of the so-called activating welfare state, but also as a trend in alternative bottom-up groups and left movements. Thus support (such as through adult education) and recognition for volunteers entails certain ambiguities; on the one hand, they are certainly legitimate claims, but they also promote problematical developments. Consequently, an evaluation of volunteering in terms of its potential for political criticism and effecting power relations has to consider the diverse functions of volunteering within present societies.

**Paternalism in Humanitarian Aid**

The dynamics of humanitarian aid also create other distinct power relationships. One of the strongest motives for volunteering in summer 2015 was the media reports about the suffering of the refugees (Karakyali & Kleist, 2016), that is, the situation in the war zones, the conditions of their flight, their inadequate resources and their extreme hunger and exhaustion on arrival. Numerous adversities almost inevitably lead to a perception of refugees as victims, which often goes along with attributions such as passive, helpless and speechless (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017). On this basis, paternalistic and discriminatory practices are easily reproduced...
(Barnett, 2017). These practices mainly concern the self-determination of refugees and their representation in support activities, structures and decisions. Even if volunteers try to build up participatory projects and avoid paternalism, an asymmetry in power relations between volunteers and refugees arises from political and socio-economic preconditions. These can be, for example, differences in legal status, unequal social recognition, different socio-economic resources and/or knowledge about bureaucratic structures in the host countries (see Strotmann, 2018).

The refugees often perceive themselves as powerless (Reimers, 2018). They want to take autonomous decisions, but for volunteers, it can be difficult to support them in these needs. One key factor may be that many volunteers do not have an experience of flight or marginalization and have a middle-class background, which may limit their capacity to understand refugees’ experiences and their need for autonomy (Hamann & Karakayali, 2016).

It can be assumed that the risk of asymmetries and dependencies between supporters and those who are in need of help is increased, when aspects of social security are no longer provided by the state and therefore are not guaranteed as an individual right but left to charity engagement (van Dyk & Misbach, 2016). Barbara Harrel-Bond (2002), who analyzed humanitarian work with refugees in United Nations programs and camps in various countries, points out that there are many possible reasons behind paternalistic and often inhuman or violent behavior in such activity. A deeply asymmetric relationship does not only emerge from unequal resources but also from the dominant ethos of humanitarianism (‘charity’) with its symbolic disempowerment of those who receive help and the organizational culture of certain humanitarian organizations. Didier Fassin (2017, p. 78) talks about humanitarism as international paternalism:

> It entails moral obligation rather than coercion, that is, a relation between the obliging and the obliged, epitomized through the general principle of an exchange in which the gift has no counter-gift. This domination, which we can call soft paternalism because it is benevolent and accepted, is historically inscribed in asymmetrical international relations – between colonizers and colonized, the North and the South, the West and the rest.

Furthermore, the distinction between deserving and non-deserving refugees has been prevalent in the media discourse around current refugee movements to the EU (Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018). Asylum seekers in Austria in 2015 and 2016 predominantly came from Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq (Statistik Austria, 2016, 2017). In 2016 only 33% of asylum seekers were women, in 2015 only 27.7%. (Statistik Austria. 2017) A vast majority of refugees in Austria are Muslim (over 85%) (Buber-Ennser et al., 2016). In the public discourse, the male Muslim migrants have been put at the bottom of the deserving-hierarchy. Additionally, reasons for paternalistic behavior can be found in a lack of appropriate skills in the supporters and in psychological phenomena, which lead to certain reactions by individuals in
the face of suffering and distress. Harrel-Bond (2002, p. 52) pleas for a “right-based humanitarism” beyond private charity:

This approach is not about discretionary assistance when the mood for benevolence takes us. It is about defending, advocating and securing enjoyment of human rights.

This also implies a shift in the view of refugees as victims to a recognition of their strength, autonomy and dignity.

**Questioning and Resisting Asymmetric Power Relations**

In practice, we see that asymmetric power relationships between volunteers and refugees do not always entail a paternalistic approach on the part of the volunteers. Many search for alternative options. Some try to encourage (former) refugees supporting other newcomers (Hamann et al., 2017). Others try to develop shared strategies to question migration policies and power structures within the state. These volunteers fighting for refugees’ rights often condemn the non-political approach of other volunteers as contributing to keeping people in a position of inferiority (Castro Varela & Heinemann, 2016). Within the politically-engaged groups of activists, it is quite common to address explicitly the problem of asymmetric power relations between volunteers and refugees. Nevertheless, within common political and other volunteer activities, hegemonic logic is often reproduced – such as the public representation of refugees by volunteers (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017). At the same time, in the attempt to avoid paternalism with regard to refugees, other power relations can persist too, like gender relations, as for example Nadiye Ünsal (2015) has shown by an analysis of patriarchal practices within the refugee movement in Berlin.

**LEARNING PROCESSES IN VOLUNTEERING**

To explore the political learning processes in volunteering against the described backdrop, we conducted a qualitative pre-study in Austria in 2016. The analysis was based on seven semi-structured interviews with volunteers who had engaged in refugee relief (some of them in a coordinating or supervising role). We chose individuals who had become actively engaged for the first time as well as others who already had previous experiences in volunteering. We conducted interviews with men and women of different ages, amongst them also migrants or descendants of former refugees. Furthermore, we tried to find interviewees who worked in different areas of support (such as education, distribution of basic necessities, language assistance, political campaigning, supervision of volunteers, etc.). We were mainly interested in the motivations, biographical aspects, experiences and finally the learning of volunteers – and how these aspects interact with structural conditions and the public discourse.
Learning in Social Groups

Studies about learning in social movements – which often takes place in a tacit, incidental way – have shown that various organisational, personal and social skills are acquired in volunteering (Foley, 1999; Duguid et al., 2013). Our interviewees learned how to deal with bureaucracies, about migration policies and the asylum system and about different cultures and lifeworlds. Collaborative learning in activist groups can lead to the widening of perspectives and agency in terms of democratic participation (Truman, 2013). Our interviewees described, for example, how they had become familiar with participatory procedures in groups that had often been spontaneously created. They acquired these competencies in meetings or via the use of social media. Key persons often used (project) management skills, which they had acquired in their working life or education. They imparted this knowledge with their fellow volunteers and thus played an important role in the learning processes of the group. Besides negotiating roles and responsibilities, they learned how to lead teams, deal with conflicts and set up communication strategies.

Learning can also include finding out that it may be easier for someone to work by themselves than directly being involved in a group. However, the reasons for this withdrawal from the group, as given in one of our interviews, can also be interpreted in terms of power. In this case, the interviewee, whose own family had flight experience, had apparently different (and more empowering) conceptions of the right of self-determination of refugees than the other group members. As these ideas were not recognized within the group of volunteers, the interviewee decided to pursue her engagement in her own way. This is not the only possible way to resolve diverging opinions of what is adequate refugee aid. Katherine Braun (2017) who conducted research in a German village observed that volunteers with a migrant biography were able to intervene in paternalistic situations of refugee aid and even to initiate processes of reflection within the group of refugees. Thus, volunteers with a privileged background learned from migrant volunteers, and previous hierarchies within the group of volunteers and the organization of the activities were transformed (Braun, 2017).

Dealing with Power Relations within Migration Regimes

Other learning processes of volunteers participating in our research involved the topics of culture, migration, and migration policies. Volunteers mentioned that they had learned about foreign cultures or different ways of thinking (see also results in Jungk & Morrin, 2017). They had improved their knowledge about asylum regulations and developed strategies for dealing with authorities in this context. Being confronted with the often precarious and desperate situation of the refugees, they had learned how the structural framework around asylum and migration policies shapes the lives and opportunities of refugees. Moreover, they also experienced how this affected their own engagement in terms of being hindered in giving efficient support but also by not feeling recognized by the state for taking over community
tasks. Some volunteers thus developed a critical understanding of a formerly often unknown social reality and power relations in migration regimes through reflection and action (Foley, 1999; Jungk & Morrin, 2017; Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017). Many people were critically aware that they were compensating for state failure but nevertheless felt a need to provide concrete support in this specific situation.

Volunteers also tried to analyze and understand *global* interdependencies around migration. Some respondents had already reflected on questions of self-representation and power relations in earlier engagements, such as in development policies, but for others, the topic was quite new. They pointed out that the engagement had made them more conscious and content with their own privileged lives in Austria and motivated them to take responsibility for less advantaged people. The specified experiences encouraged some volunteers to expand their original engagement of individual help to activities like organizing consciousness-raising (anti-racist) events for the local population or supporting public protests against asylum policies. As Truman (2013) has pointed out, members of civic groups mostly work on their concrete problems first and improve their knowledge step by step. During the learning processes, they often place their insights and interests into a wider social and political context and thus begin to expand their agenda.

*Influences of the Social Environment and Public Discourse*

Finally, many interviewees reported that they were challenged to justify their positions in discussions with families and friends; this seemed to be a very intense experience because the public discourse became very negative towards refugees and their supporters from the end of 2015, which also influenced debates within families. Therefore, volunteers were searching for reliable information and had to analyze these issues critically, but were also forced to reflect intensely on their own values to be able to explain their engagement in their social environment.

Further empirical work will analyze if this can be regarded as a process of critical reflection as defined by Jack Mezirow (1998). But what we can identify is the development of a critical understanding of migration regimes and the related power aspects in some cases, but also a sort of positioning as a political subject. Our study does not provide representative results but allows a closer look at the potential of volunteering in this respect. To understand different developments within volunteering, we also looked at what interviewees reported about colleagues who had withdrawn from their engagement after a while. Many people simply felt tired, exhausted or overstressed by the difficulties that were connected with the precarious situation of refugees and by the lack of governmental support and recognition. Besides that, several volunteers seemed to be disappointed by refugees who had not behaved in line with their helpers’ expectations. This points to the phenomenon of a charity approach to refugee relief as described above, where spontaneous compassion is a primary motivation (triggered strongly by public discourse). If the idea of refugees having a right to be supported is not a leading concept, and
volunteers do not critically reflect on paternalism, but maybe act according to a distinction between ‘deserving’ and ‘non-deserving’ refugees, volunteers often react in a very disappointed way when they are not shown deference.

Apart from disappointing experiences within the actual work, the deteriorating public discourse on refugees seemed to have had a negative impact on volunteers. This shows how the cultural and socio-political context influences the extent and the kind of actions the volunteers carry out and in what way their activities change. Whereas in 2015 initially, the media spread a very positive atmosphere towards supporters in Germany and Austria within the first weeks (so-called ‘welcome culture’), the public and media discourse turned more negative towards the end of 2015 initially. Many volunteers reported feeling under pressure from the worsened atmosphere; furthermore, they sometimes suffered from criticism on the part of their own families and friends. In some cases, volunteers even had to face violent attacks by groups from the extreme right. In many reports on people withdrawing from their engagement, a certain incident was mentioned: On New Year’s Eve in 2015, dozens of women were sexually harassed by men from Arabic and northern African countries in the streets of the German city of Cologne. This incident shocked the public and marked a turning point for numerous supporters of and sympathisers with refugees. Criminal acts and terrorism were associated with all refugees or (male) Muslim migrants. These negative discourses on mainly Muslim migrants led to reflections and doubts about who ‘deserves’ support and who does not (Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018). Thus some of the volunteers reduced or withdrew from their engagement.

However, other volunteers who were harassed due to their social engagement looked for allies and engaged in new networks for sharing their experiences and/or made the assaults public, e.g., in the local press – and went on with their activities. Negative reactions from the social environment and dismissive reports in the media also led some volunteers to broaden their activities and to organize anti-racist workshops with the aim of sensitizing the population. This was observed in Germany as well, where a study showed that negative media discourse also led to resistance and therefore even more anti-racist engagement in some cities (Hamann et al., 2017).

In the present situation, we have the impression that there is not much ongoing anti-racist work taking place. Many volunteers have established continuous structures of support, whilst we also observe a tendency for volunteers to withdraw. This is partly due to frustration, as the refugees, whom they have supported for months or years, have been deported to their countries of origin. We started a research project in March 2018 to take a closer look at present developments in volunteering, with a focus on interviewing individuals who have resigned from their engagement.

**CONCLUSION**

Various studies conducted on volunteering in refugee relief in Germany and Austria since 2016 show that the motives and concepts behind volunteering are very diverse.
Part of the engagement arises from a mainly ‘humanitarian’ impulse to alleviate the suffering of newcomers; others are framed by a clearer political idea of refugees’ rights and a universal concept of solidarity. Acting in solidarity is connected with various informal and incidental learning processes. For one thing, they lead to the acquisition of concrete knowledge and competencies; for another, transformative processes can be initiated by volunteers’ reflection on themselves and the surrounding conditions.

We contend that spontaneous compassion and empathy as the only motivation for volunteering can be a rather fragile base for engagement and be easily unsettled by negative discourses, pressure from others or by burdensome individual experiences. Nonetheless, volunteers with a humanitarian approach can – potentially – develop new and critical understandings of the situation and their own role within this system over time. We have pointed out several learning processes and outcomes in terms of active citizenship and a critical understanding of migration regimes in our data. In the context of refugee relief, many different power structures are in place. These concern the economic, social and political inequalities within migration regimes, governance through fostering volunteers’ engagement and, more concretely, the different hierarchies within the groups of volunteers and the power gap between volunteers and refugees. Learning processes include the problematization of these power relations and the reflection on paternalistic practices of volunteers.

The social context or concrete inputs which people get, for example via supervision or adult education, could be influential to enable them to develop various interpretations of their experiences and support them to develop strategies to cope with these challenges. Some educational offers for volunteers already exist, but they mainly focus on skills around management, legal issues, dealing with financial aspects, communication and so forth. From our perspective, adult education could engage even more intensively in this field by focussing on political learning, and thus create spaces for critical reflection and action and foster volunteering as a vital learning space for inclusive citizenship and the further development of democracy.

NOTES

1 Another critical aspect of volunteering can be seen in the de-professionalization and de-standardization of social services, but we will not go deeper into this dimension here.

2 Based on this pre-study, we are currently working on a more extended research project entitled ‘Learning solidarity? The potential of volunteering for political learning in migration societies’ (3/2018–12/2019).

REFERENCES


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