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Into the Interstices: Everyday Practices of Refugees and Their Supporters in Europe's Migration 'Crisis'

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Abstract

This article investigates the interconnections between migration to Europe for asylum and the multiple 'crises' of the border regime that have occurred in recent decades. Drawing on 22 months of ethnographic research with refugees in Italy and Germany, the article highlights the tensions between migration policy and legislation at the structural level and the agency of refugees. The case study focuses on a protest staged by refugees in Berlin and the active involvement of its civil-society supporters. The everyday practices of refugees, including building relationships with local residents, cross-border mobility within Europe and 'inhabiting' the grey zones where different national jurisdictions intersect, generate frictions that open up spaces of autonomy: the 'interstices'. Territorial, social and judicial interstices develop out of the power relations in Europe's migration 'battleground'.

Keywords

Border struggles, civil society, crisis, Europe, everyday practices, refugees

Introduction

In the past decade, the concept of 'crisis' has pervaded public and political discourse in Europe, justifying the development of restrictive policy and framing the interpretation of other complex social processes. In particular, since 2011 the word 'crisis' has been

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widely applied to the phenomenon of migration to Europe. The ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings in the Mediterranean area in 2011 were considered a turning point in the political relations between Europe and Africa regarding migratory routes. The increase in migrants landing on Italy’s shores after these uprisings was interpreted by Italian institutions as an exceptional phenomenon. The consequent deployment of a regime of emergency provisions to cope with migrant arrivals illustrates how European and national governments framed such events as ‘crises’: exceptional rather than structural phenomena. Similarly, the European Union reacted to the dramatic shipwreck on 3 October 2013 by declaring a ‘humanitarian crisis’, following this with the ‘Mare Nostrum’ rescue operation of 2014 (Tazzioli, 2016). Subsequently, events during the ‘long summer of migration’ of 2015 (Hess and Kasperek, 2017), when the Balkan route became the principal passage towards Europe for people fleeing the Syrian war, generated the ‘migrant crisis’ or ‘refugee crisis’. This has also been depicted as the ‘crisis of the asylum system’ and ‘European border crisis’. These specific events signalled turning points in public discourse and in the migration policies adopted by the European Union and its member states, which used the concept of ‘crisis’ to justify the adoption of new methods of border control and emergency measures¹ to manage migrant mobility (Dijstelbloem and Broeders, 2015).

In this article we investigate the interconnections between the phenomenon of migration to Europe for asylum and the multiple and overlapping crises (New Keywords Collective, 2016) that have occurred since 2007. We provide an in-depth analysis of one ‘crisis’ event in order to illustrate how such phenomena result from a complex dynamic of power relations between social structures and personal agency. We look beyond the concepts of ‘refugee crisis’, ‘humanitarian crisis’ and ‘economic crisis’, highlighting the dynamic processes that affect the structures and processes of social control that govern migrant mobility towards and within Europe.

Europe’s Formal Borders and Spaces of Autonomy

Research has highlighted how the interplay between migration and globalisation has led to the proliferation of borders and hierarchies of mobility worldwide. In the literature of ‘Critical Border Studies’, ‘border’ is understood as a dynamic process of power relations rather than a fixed and material entity (Agier, 2014; Balibar, 2012; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Rumford, 2006). Several authors have explored the role of borders as mechanisms for regulating migrant mobility and instruments deployed to order populations and organise them into hierarchies (De Genova, 2013; Green, 2013). Accordingly, a ‘European border regime’ (Hess and Kasperek, 2010) emerges as a complex set of actors, laws, policies, devices and discourses that govern migration towards and within Europe. The regulation of human mobility appears to be the principal concern requiring resolution by national and supranational institutions. The latter have to address the contradictory forces that coexist in the global age: the tension between attempts to create an open global society, through the human rights system and global networks and flows, and efforts to maintain and reinforce the existing structures such as national sovereign states. This tension is apparent in the complex regime of migration management and ‘(im)mobility’ (Faist, 2013; Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013) which combines policies of ‘crimmigration’ (Coutin, 2011; Stumpf, 2013) with the responsibilities of reception

associated with the Geneva Convention, human rights principles and the manifold internal interests that favour the entry and settlement of migrant workers, including irregular ones (Ambrosini, 2016). These contrasting pressures inherent in European and national migration policies are further complicated by the multiple levels of policy implementation: the local, national and supranational (Scholten and Penninx, 2016; Spencer, 2017). Furthermore, a range of private and public actors are involved in the management of migration, and their diverse interests (Lahav and Guiraudon, 2000) engender an even more complex process in which migrant aspirations and lives interact with various power structures. We therefore use the concept of a migration ‘battleground’ to evoke the tensions between the different actors. This concept highlights how the migration process is managed not only by political authorities and legislation, but it is an outcome of power relations between other actors such as migrants themselves and several parts of the civil society. For example, democratic values enshrined in international conventions and national constitutions hamper the implementation of harsh policies. Despite broad international consensus on the selection of authorised migrants and the firm rejection of irregular migrants (De Haas et al., 2016), different national frameworks can be in contradiction, or leave ‘grey’ spaces of uncertainty (Bommes and Sciortino, 2011). Local and national policies may differ over tolerance and protection for irregular migrants (Oomen et al., 2016), or in terms of closure to entry and bordering practices (Lebuhn, 2013; Vaquera et al., 2014; Varsanyi, 2008). By means of these uncertainties and ambiguities, migrants find ways of remaining in particular national territories (Bloch et al., 2014), resist removal (Ellermann, 2010) and find support with the process of settlement from various civil society actors (Garkisch et al., 2017). These are signs of the migration issue as a ‘battleground’ where power relations supporting different interests are deployed.

Given the complexities of this field, a processual perspective (Ortner, 2006) has proved the best way of exploring the dynamics of the power relations that condition the experiences of migrants in Europe. In this article, we examine the tensions between migration policy and legislation at the structural level and the agency of migrants leading their lives. On the one hand, we investigate the practical management of migration aside from public declarations and formal regulation. On the other, we analyse how migrants react to this management with attempts to cross borders and settle in the country they have chosen for building a new life. According to theories of practice (Ortner, 2006), to understand the migrant experience we need to look at the dialectical relationship between society’s structural constraints and the everyday practices of migrants as social actors, in which migrants are governed by systems and structures but also have the capacity to transform them. Our case study in fact illustrates the dialectical, rather than oppositional, nature of this relationship, highlighting the agency of migrants, civil society and institutional actors in the development of a migration battleground. This particular case had its origins in the ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011 but also offers insights into the migrant or refugee ‘crisis’ of 2015, as the restriction of refugee mobility within Europe is central to the social and political conflict discussed. From a processual perspective, the ‘crisis’ is seen as not just the temporary interruption of a stable and continuing normality, but a dynamic process with historical roots which can have unexpected outcomes, such as the autonomous ‘interstices’ that we discuss.

Divide and Rule? How the Authorities Managed the Oranienplatz Protest in Berlin

The empirical case study² narrates the everyday lives of a heterogeneous group of migrants who arrived in Italy in 2011, and after obtaining humanitarian protection decided to re-migrate towards northern Europe. Their stories have their origins in the ‘fracture’ of the year 2011, when because of the war in Libya they decided or were forced to escape to Italy. They came from various sub-Saharan countries, but had lived in Libya for many years. After landing in Lampedusa they were channelled into the asylum system by the Italian government, which created an ‘emergency’ regime³ in order to cope with the ‘Arab Spring’ crisis. The ‘emergency’ was treated by the authorities as an exceptional period rather than the norm, and after 18 months the Italian government decided that the emergency was over and issued one-year humanitarian documents⁴ to all those who had fled the Libyan war. The residential facilities were therefore closed, and the refugees were ejected. They started to move around Italy looking for work and somewhere to settle, but experienced high levels of unemployment and homelessness; the majority were thus pushed into marginality. Many decided to leave for the imagined riches of northern Europe, pursuing their desires for better lives elsewhere. They thus exercised the right to freedom of movement, although this was not permitted to them under European law: the ‘Dublin III Regulation’, the EU law on asylum, determines that the member state where an asylum-seeker first arrives is exclusively responsible for examining their asylum application. Furthermore, if this person obtains refugee status they may only move within the Schengen area as a tourist, and cannot settle outside their EU state of arrival. The refugees with humanitarian protection who left Italy for northern Europe were therefore challenging the established asylum system as well as revealing the porosity of European internal borders.

Many of these refugees ended up in Germany. From the autumn of 2012, people seeking asylum there had been staging protests in Berlin against the restrictive asylum system and deportations. Various civil society actors – church organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), left-wing activists and private citizens – had rapidly organised a network of supporters. Oranienplatz, in central Berlin, was occupied by a protest camp of tents where those claiming asylum slept. From the beginning of 2013, refugees with Italian documents were arriving in different German locations and quickly joined the Oranienplatz protest. They created a sub-group called ‘Lampedusa in Berlin’ to distinguish themselves as the people who had arrived on Lampedusa, escaping the Libya war, and were subsequently abandoned on the streets by the Italian authorities. They demanded the rights to move freely and settle in other European countries, challenging the Dublin III Regulation and the Schengen Agreement. The name they chose highlights the fact that Europe’s borders are not just the external ones crossed on arrival on Lampedusa, but also internal ones marked by mobility restrictions and prohibitions on working anywhere except in the country of arrival.

Oranienplatz was not only a political space but also a social one, where displaced people found a ‘home’ through both their shared political protest and the social relations established with the many members of the supporter network (Fontanari, 2017), which played a crucial role in the power dynamics of Berlin’s refugee protest. Supporters are an

element within the wider category of ‘intermediaries’ (Ambrosini, 2017; Triandafyllidou, 2017): people or institutions who favour the entry of migrants into the host society, provide accommodation, respond to their social needs and possibly arrange regularisation. They may break the law and operate in the shadows, but they may also work legally, and are often well established within the receiving society:

In the face of governmental border enforcement [...] they have become guardians of migrant rights and dignity, a role they maintain in part through migration counseling, and are part of the ever-expansive and complex social infrastructure that supports migrants in their travels. (Hagan, 2008: 84)

This description of religious actors also applies to others who play a part in migrant journeys, and in our specific case in local receiving societies. Supporters can be divided into four main categories: organised actors, including trade unions, churches and associations, which often combine practical support with political and cultural pressure; social movements, which place the defence of immigrant rights alongside other battles against the state and the capitalist system; support groups that spontaneously coalesce around refugees settled in particular localities; and individuals who offer specific assistance with food, money and accommodation.

The political protest continued for about 18 months, from the autumn of 2012 until an agreement was reached with the Berlin city senate in April 2014, after months of negotiation. Berlin’s local administration treated the Oranienplatz protest as a public order issue, because for months this city-centre square resounded with the voices of unauthorised migrants. They wanted to avoid setting any precedent that involved allowing the ‘Lampedusa people’ to access the German labour market and hence settle, contrary to European legislation. By 2013 and 2014 the ‘Syrian refugee crisis’ was under way with thousands of Syrian people crossing the Central Mediterranean route towards Italy and upwards into Germany (Hess and Kasperek, 2017). The German authorities already had a presence on Italy’s border with Austria in order to impede the transit of Syrians towards Germany. The problems for German officialdom were compounded by the ambiguous legal status of the ‘Lampedusa people’: they were in part regular because of their Italian humanitarian protection, but in part irregular because they had been on German territory for more than three months and were demanding access to the labour market. Another issue was the collective nature of the phenomenon, and its high visibility in public space. When unauthorised migrants are invisible and individual, local and national institutions are more inclined to tolerate their presence (Leerkes, 2016). Furthermore, public authorities pursue policies of control while simultaneously exercising a silent tolerance of the irregular migrants regarded as ‘deserving’: those who legitimise their presence by work in the service of the majority, avoiding forms of social conflict or rebellion (Chauvin and Garcés-Masareñas, 2014). The ‘Lampedusa in Berlin’ people were exactly the opposite, constituting a visible political collective that challenged the German welfare system and sparked conflict within the wider EU asylum system. The Berlin authorities therefore first attempted to divide and fragment the Oranienplatz protest group. In the agreement reached, the Berliner Senate avoided a collective solution by promising to examine each person’s specific case, to determine whether any individual refugee should be granted

access to the labour market. For their part, the ‘Lampedusa people’ were to abandon Oranienplatz and accept relocation to various asylum-seeker reception centres scattered around the city. The account by Willy, a man from Burkina Faso with an Italian document, shows how these measures fragmented the refugees and rendered them invisible, and how they affected their everyday lives:

Now that there’s no Oranienplatz any more, it’s difficult to meet: we all live in different places now. I live way away, believe me! It’s close to *Marienfelde*, but even further south. Maybe an hour by bus and train to get to the school. I can’t go by bicycle, I’d get lost! [...] It’s maybe a month or two since we all met, because now we’re separate. But before, when we were in Oranienplatz, we went there and there were lots of us, every time! We could sit together, and talk. (Participant observation with Willy, Berlin, November 2014)

In parallel with the spatial dispersal, the refugees were made invisible as a group by the bureaucratic procedures of the case-by-case scrutiny. Every single ‘Lampedusa’ case was rejected, on grounds of judicial competence: their possession of Italian humanitarian documents made them the legal responsibility of Italy, not Germany. The paradox is that this judicial problem had been the very starting point for the negotiations with the Berlin authorities, which were supposed to have been resolved by a political solution. Some months later, it thus became clear that the Oranienplatz agreement was actually spurious, since all the ‘Lampedusa people’ had their cases rejected and were consequently thrown out of the reception centres, finding themselves on the street once again. As Amal explained:

The problem is that a lot of people already had an Italian document; Italy is a European country, isn’t it?! So, we wanted the right to work here in Germany with our Italian documents. What’s more, if you do the interview again, after six months they deport you back to Italy. So, we objected. They told us, ‘OK, those who don’t want to do the interview must leave the house.’ [...] But if you do the interview, they send you back to Italy. Some of my friends had the interview, and after two months they said: ‘you’ve got an Italian document, so you have to return to Italy’. I stayed with the supporters, in the *solizimmer* [solidarity rooms]. The first time, just for one night. Then I went somewhere else, and stayed for three days. And then somewhere else again, for two weeks. Some of us live like this: today here, tomorrow there, three days like this, two days like that. (Interview with Amal, Berlin, October 2014)

The rejection letters were issued at different times to smaller groups, or even to individuals, to avoid a collective reaction and resurgence of the political protest. Nevertheless, some refugees organised themselves, and when made to leave the reception centres they staged roof-top protests, supported by activists or church organisations. The main consequence of these measures of abandonment and denial of responsibility was that the German local authorities effectively shifted responsibility for the provision of services and survival relief onto the supporter networks. As Amal explained, most of his friends found somewhere to sleep in the *solizimmer* set up by activists or private individuals. Some churches provided many beds, and also the basic financial means for survival:

Astrid arrives at my home at around 3 p.m. She needs legal advice for two people from Oranienplatz whom she and her church are trying to help. We sit around the kitchen table and

start to talk about the situation. [...] She tells me that church members are still supporting 100 people, both financially and with somewhere to live. 'You know, there are 15 or 16 people sleeping in one room with 10 beds', Astrid explains. She says that the church has told the Senate that it can provide the rooms and financial support until 30 April, but of course they cannot throw 100 people out onto the street. They are therefore considering what to do, and are planning a protest against the Senate, because they are sure that the Senate is deliberately ignoring and neglecting the situation, and doesn't want to take any responsibility. (Field note, Berlin, April 2015)

This ethnographic note highlights the fact that in the late spring of 2015 the issue of the 'Lampedusa people' was still being ignored, shortly before Chancellor Angela Merkel opened Germany's doors to another category: the 'good' refugees from Syria. This illustrates the selectivity of border controls (Bonizzoni, 2017; Chand and Schreckhise, 2015; Leerkes, 2016), whereby some categories are given preferential treatment. Syrians were treated as 'genuine refugees', while Africans were often quickly categorised as 'economic migrants' and 'fake refugees'. Moreover, a cohesive refugee group demanding their rights could no longer be recognised by the local authorities; by contrast, scattered silent individuals who attempted to integrate themselves with the support of NGOs were quietly tolerated despite national and European legislation. The 'Lampedusa in Berlin' case illustrates the general tendency among European societies to offer various forms of poor relief and pauperism control when faced with indistinct groups of migrants who cannot support themselves (Leerkes, 2016). Governmental bodies usually turn a blind eye to the presence of unauthorised migrants (Ambrosini, 2015) on condition that they remain invisible and that their employers or NGOs assume responsibility for their welfare.

In our story, the measure of abandonment was accompanied by control mechanisms, because the 'Italian' refugees who received a rejection letter thus became 'semi-irregular' and unwanted in Germany. The district around Oranienplatz in fact became a sort of battleground, with the police conducting random checks in public places using racial profiling:

I meet Ingrid, who has just returned from the prison where Jawara is being held. 'They'll let him leave soon. We were there with the lawyer, and they've no reason to keep him inside!' The evening before, the police had arrived in Oranienplatz and arrested Jawara without reason. They started to beat him on the street. He was sitting alone on the street in front of the tent camp, and yesterday evening there weren't many people in Oranienplatz. (Field note, Berlin, March 2014)

We enter Görlitzer Park and are surprised not to see anybody at the end of the entrance walk, where several Africans usually gather. We cross the park. It is very dark and quiet, but at the gates we see lots of police. Bright lights are shone at us, making it difficult to see. Around 10 African men are lined up near the park wall, and policemen are checking their documents. Just outside the exit gate there are four large police vans, with Africans inside and Germans urging the police to set them free. 'They've got no documents', says one policeman. I'm close to a police van and try to speak to an African sitting inside, who says he has an Italian document. (Field note, Berlin, May 2015)

The category in society most frequently identified as dangerous and undeserving is that of young single migrant men, who are particularly liable to suspicion of involvement in criminal activities and are often unemployed; they tend to gather in public spaces and are therefore more visible (Leerkes, 2016). This category, especially, generates moral panic in European societies. The ‘Lampedusa people’ were vulnerable to this stereotyping, not least because many of them spent time with friends in Görlitzer Park, where cannabis dealing took place. Despite these widespread prejudices, however, the ‘Lampedusa people’ were warmly welcomed by the supporter networks. Their public image as refugees making collective demands conformed to the German political tradition of solidarity in support of refugees, and gave them higher status than other unregularised young men; consequently, they were suitable beneficiaries of the ‘*Willkommenskultur*’ that was developing in the period of 2014–2015 before its declaration during the 2015 summer of migration. The next section examines how refugees respond to measures that divide them and label them as ‘unauthorised’.

Interstices: Spaces Opened up by Everyday Practices

Once it emerged that the ‘Lampedusa people’ could not be given formal authorisation to remain in Germany, they pursued individual trajectories towards informal settlement there, both outside and between the laws. The everyday practices developed by the refugees and their supporters attempted to address the restrictive measures, and to circumvent structural constraints.

The first problem for the refugees was finding somewhere to sleep, which had already been partially solved during the Oranienplatz protest by the ‘*solizimmer*’. Asad, a young man from Mali with an Italian document, explained the situation:

I met Asad in Kottbussertor, and he said, ‘Hey, now I have a room!’, smiling. ‘Fantastic, where?’, I ask him. ‘In Kreuzberg, with other people [...] it’s fine, they all speak French so we don’t have communication problems! But they’re all Germans!’ I ask how he found the room, and he says: ‘Eh, those people there, in Oranienplatz. There’s a very long list with many names [...] and you go there and you say that you don’t have anywhere to sleep. And they found a room for us, African people [...] what do you call that system?’. ‘*Solizimmer?*’ I reply, and Asad says, ‘Yes, exactly! It’s fine [...] now I have my room and they said that I can stay there until I find a better solution.’ (Field note with Asad, Berlin, June 2014)

Some churches, besides providing sleeping places, were still pursuing cases against the Berliner Senate a year after the Oranienplatz eviction, as an ethnographic note illustrates:

I go to the Evangelical Church because I know that Obasi, Harun, Amal and others from Oranienplatz are there, building a wooden boat for a demonstration against Berlin’s Senate. The Evangelical Church is still actively supporting people from Oranienplatz: 100 people are still sleeping in their dormitories, and they are seeking a legal solution for every individual. But of course it’s very difficult, because there are too many of them and they don’t have much money or many beds. They have therefore decided to organise a demonstration, to put pressure on the Berliner Senate. (Field note, Berlin, May 2015)

The churches were also used to hold meetings after the Oranienplatz eviction. The ‘Lampedusa in Berlin’ group occupied the *Sankt Thomas Kirche* in Kreuzberg for several days in the autumn of 2014, as a protest over rejection letters issued by the Foreigners Office. The role of churches in supporting migrant protests in Germany has a long tradition, beginning in 1983 with campaigning by the *Kirchenasyl* (church asylum) movement: this drew its inspiration from the custom of seeking asylum in churches that dates from the fifth century. During the 1990s there were 50 participating parishes across 20 German cities (Castañeda, 2010).

As well as sleeping facilities, the supporter network provided other basic services such as medical support, legal advice and access to training courses that were potentially a ‘back door’ to the German labour market, entry to which was officially blocked. A sort of ‘welfare from below’ (Belloni, 2016) emerged as the supporters stepped up to undertake activities that ranged from advocacy to meeting the migrants’ essential needs. These activities included political pressure, practical support and provision of basic services; they also linked migrants with job opportunities, accommodation, information and social contact.

The establishment of social relations, including friendships and romantic liaisons between refugees and local supporters, also played an important part, as it had the potential to breach the invisible walls of German society. As other research has shown (Belloni, 2016), emotional and social support is a typical by-product of circumstances in which political demands and attempts to find homes coincide. Protest camps usually operate as ‘convergence spaces’: places where diverse people and ideas come together, which then function as sites of transformative encounters in which emotions move people towards and away from each other (Brown et al., 2017). Romantic relationships, resulting in partnerships or the birth of children, often became crucial elements in refugee decisions to remain in Berlin despite their uncertain and contested status. This confirms that emotions, notably love and affection, can be central to migrant decision making and behaviour, and need to be included in the analysis of migration mobility (Mai and King, 2009). Oranienplatz was experienced as a sort of magical small island in the middle of Berlin, where the absence of borders generated strong relationships between people.

Social relations were also established through various cultural activities offered by art groups and some Berlin theatres. Art workshops and theatre projects had the dual purpose of building social contacts and providing potential routes towards employment, as accounts illustrate:

My doorbell rings: it’s Amal. He enters the flat, and says, ‘I am going to the *Berlinale*, the film festival! The film in which I acted is being presented!!’ I’m surprised, as I didn’t know that Amal had acted in a short film. He continues: ‘Yes, I’m the only actor! It’s a film about my story, but also about Oranienplatz. I’ve got tickets for you, if you want to come!’ (Field note with Amal, Berlin, February 2015)

Wembe explains his situation in Berlin to me. ‘At the start it was difficult here in Berlin – you know the story – because of our Italian document. But now I’ve found my way [...] and now it’s OK. [...] I mean, it’s still a precarious situation, of course, but at least I’m doing something now. I’m playing football in a team here in Kreuzberg. I’m good at football!’, and he smiles. (Field note, Berlin, February 2015)

These examples show how refugees, with their supporters, struggled in their daily lives against the constraints of social structures, and how their everyday social practices produced frictions that could open up spaces free from the power relations of subjection. An autonomous space like this can be termed an 'interstice' (Fontanari, 2016), which is an in-between and blurry space within the city. According to Mubi Brighenti (2013: xvi),

to speak of an in-between or interstitial space clearly means to go beyond the centre/periphery dichotomy, the core/margin dichotomy [...] The interstice is a 'small space': far from being a merely extensive notion, such smallness inherently signifies a power issue.

The concept of an interstice, characterised by this issue of power, helps us to understand the active role that refugees could play in Berlin. Indeed, 'rather than a mere gap in the urban fabric, the interstice is in fact an active component' and 'interstitial territorialities can only be appreciated by taking into account the dynamics of power and resistance' (Mubi Brighenti, 2013: xvi). The active nature of the interstice relates to the agency of the social actors, in this case refugees and their supporters: their actions generate fractures, which open up spaces of autonomy within the structural constraints. Mubi Brighenti and his colleagues portray the interstice as a 'space of struggle', which can be a 'rupture' or an 'opening up'. Looking at the daily lives of refugees in Berlin, we identified several social practices by which they partially broke through Europe's internal borders, creating fractures in the judicial and political systems. We see these individual everyday practices as silent expressions of the resistance that refugees offer to restrictive policies. Refugees in Berlin manage to act autonomously from the structural constraints of border control, and also create autonomous social forms. According to the literature on protest camps (Brown et al., 2017), the drive for 'autonomy from' is connected to the desire for 'autonomy to': the wish to create new spaces and forms of social organisation. Drawing on ideas from the field of urban studies, we can develop the concept of an interstice beyond its *territorial* aspect. The interstices opened up by the everyday practices of refugees in Berlin took various forms.

Love and friendship relationships, together with those generated by the art workshops, were *social* interstices in which supporters and refugees indirectly broke through the barriers imposed by the border regime. To understand these social interstices, we need to understand protest camps as 'not simply [...] accidental tactics of specific movements', but instead as places that 'respond to the desires of protesters to move beyond "demands" and towards a constituent politics of claiming space, building affective ties and forming autonomous polities' (Frenzel et al., 2014: 471).

A third form of interstice is the *judicial*, in which some refugees inserted themselves by crossing different national and supranational jurisdictions. Accounts by Amal and Nadhim illustrate this process well:

Amal is a bit frustrated because everything is going slowly in Berlin. He is doing a carpentry internship in Berlin for asylum-seekers, since he is registered as a German asylum-seeker. But he is worried about his Italian document, because he has been waiting for its renewal for many months, and it has still not arrived. (Participant observation with Amal, Berlin, May 2015)

'Now I'm doing an internship as a gardener. I've worked there for three months, but they haven't paid me. It's a problem for me, because how can I earn money? [...] The Italian

document is still important to me, even if I've got the *Duldung*!⁵ Because the Italian document allows me to travel around, you know? It's very important.' (Field note with Nadhim, Berlin, May 2015)

Amal and Nadhim had opened up interstices at the intersection of European, national and local legislation, generating frictions by their everyday negotiating practices. Because the protagonists of this study had moved across national borders, they were subject to different legal systems, rendering their legal status uncertain and ambiguous so that they lived in the shadow of the law. As they possessed Italian documents they were sometimes viewed in law as 'regular', but because they were living in Berlin without formal authorisation their position was sometimes unclear and they were pushed towards precarious semi-irregularity:

Nadhim shows me the letter he has received from the small German village where his asylum-seeker residential accommodation is located: it is a 'Dublin' measure. Nadhim says he's afraid they will send him back to Italy, which he doesn't want. Consequently, he doesn't want to go back to the small German village again, because he's afraid that, if he does, they will send him directly to Italy. The problem is that he will forfeit his asylum-seeker status if he doesn't return there, according to the German law of *Residenzpflicht*. (Field note with Nadhim, Berlin, June 2014)

Nadhim was simultaneously covered by Italian law (humanitarian protection), German law (asylum-seeker status) and European law (as a 'Dublin case'). He was therefore included rather than excluded by these jurisdictions, but pushed to their margins because his mobile life did not fit the static and fixed category of 'refugee' linked to national state borders. Nadhim dwelt in a grey zone, living in between and attempting to circumvent the European borders as he tried to pursue his life within the structural constraints that sometimes pushed him in a particular direction, but sometimes were obstructed by his everyday practices.

Interstices can also be *territorial*, as well illustrated by Oranienplatz: a small space in the middle of Berlin where wandering refugees found a home, albeit temporary, while pursuing a political struggle. Further territorial interstices emerge through the movement of refugees from one EU state to another. The cross-border journeys customarily undertaken for renewal of the Italian humanitarian document can also be understood as everyday practices that opened up 'spaces of struggle'. This document linked the research protagonists to Italy, and hence very probably, in a time of economic crisis, to a life of homelessness and unemployment. They tried to escape this by moving back towards northern Europe, despite the legal constraints:

I'm young, you know! I can do everything in my future! I'm young and I can [...] I must do everything in my life! [...] In Italy the situation was very bad, so I decided to move further and I came to Berlin. I knew about it, because some people I met in Italy and in Libya were already here and they told me about Oranienplatz. (Interview with Obasi, Berlin, November 2014)

The repeated journeys across borders were also based on personal aspirations. They became a routine practice for the 'Lampedusa people' especially after the Oranienplatz

protest had ended and the Italian document remained the only protection against falling into irregularity. 'Commuter movements' (Borri and Fontanari, 2015) between Berlin and Italy were reliant on personal and supporter networks across Europe; through these mobility practices, territorial interstices were created in the European landscape. This population on the move used abandoned or squatted houses (Borri, 2016), train stations and public parks as rest and transit places when documents had to be renewed. The experiences of Rashid, Jamel and Nuru show how refugees in transit were passing through and living in places such as Milan's central train station. They transformed the nature of such spaces through the resistance that characterised their mobility:

I meet Rashid and Jamel and ask them where they are sleeping now. 'Now we're in a dormitory! Oh, so much better! There, in the *Centrale* train station [...] it was crazy! Nuru is still there. We were sleeping in the underground [...] my God! They put so many mattresses there! And so many people were sleeping there! But it smelt so bad! So, after three weeks we were almost dead!' Rashid shakes his head, and Jamel continues: 'And you have to get up around 5 in the morning! Nuru has decided to remain in *Centrale*, partly because from there it's easier to orient yourself within the city. Our dormitory is now a long way away; because of this, at the beginning we wanted to stay in *Centrale*, because *Centrale* is the centre for all of us. (Field note with Rashid and Jamel, Milan, February 2014)

Milan's central train station, a focal point for refugee mobility within Europe, was transformed into an urban interstice. At the time when Nuru, Rashid and Jamel were there, Syrians and Eritreans who had just landed in Italy and were resisting the Dublin Regulation by heading for northern European countries, were passing through it daily. The station therefore needs to be understood not just as a transit site where mobile migrants were living temporarily, but as a place of constant struggle for mobility. The European migration battleground is characterised by a multiplicity of fractures and tensions, which are produced by the dialectical relationship between the structural constraints of the European border regime and refugees on the move and their supporters. Tensions and frictions open up interstices of autonomy, although these are unstable and temporary.

Final Remarks

The episode of the 'Lampedusa in Berlin' people's participation in the Oranienplatz protest was one particular manifestation of the active role of migrants in the manifold and interconnected 'crises' described in our introduction. The 'Arab Spring' crisis represented a fracture in the lives of the 'Lampedusa refugees', who were living and working in Libya and were suddenly forced to escape because of the war. Furthermore, Italy's economic crisis was used by the Italian reception system to explain the marginality experienced by the refugees, who were thus indirectly forced to move towards Germany. Agency was apparent in the everyday practices of refugees, as they pursued their desires, aspirations and emotions: these generated fractures within the European border regime, and contributed to the migrant or refugee 'crisis' of 2015.

This case study sheds light on the complex dynamic of power relations generated by the battleground of migration for asylum within Europe, which in turn overlaps with the

issue of the EU integration process. The research shows how the practical management of migration operates by using selective mechanisms of partial and temporary inclusion and partial exclusion, based on the dynamics of power relations at the local, national and supranational level. Using the term ‘battleground’ helps to highlight how the migration process is not only managed by political authorities, market forces and legislation: it is also an outcome of the interplay between different actors and their interests, including migrants themselves and their supporters.

The supporter network in Berlin was crucial, acting as a web of social relations that prevented the ‘Lampedusa people’ from falling into the holes of the control network that isolates every single story and person. As research on irregular migrants has found, intermediaries play a crucial role in the management of migration at both local and national levels by building bridges between migrants and receiving societies, and sometimes also by battling with public institutions. Their activities show that irregular or contested migration is not just a parallel and hidden world, but interweaves with various interests, institutions, social activities and interpersonal relations in receiving societies. By contrast, a concerted and systematic battle against irregular migration compromises some important values of democratic societies: the free market, of course, but also human rights, civil society activism, freedom of religion and the right to choose partners in love. We can thus look beyond the concept of a migrant or refugee ‘crisis’, and point to the complex dynamics of power in European societies and western neoliberal democracies.

This study also shows that refugees are not passive victims in need of help and welfare relief; rather, they are autonomous beings who try to build their lives by negotiating with or challenging structural constraints. Their everyday practices, such as building social relations (friendship and love) with Berlin residents, cross-border mobility within Europe and inhabiting the grey zones where different jurisdictions intersect, generate frictions that open up autonomous spaces: ‘interstices’. The territorial, social and judicial interstices created by the interaction of supporters and refugees with socio-economic and legal constraints are a constituent element of the ‘crises’ that we continue to witness.

Using a processual perspective led to the consideration of social phenomena as ongoing dynamic processes set in fields of power relations, and discussion of a dynamic and dialectical ‘battleground’. This means that the story is open to different outcomes, despite attempts by states to reaffirm their sovereignty over the settlement of unwanted migrants. The concept of ‘crisis’ as a temporary fracture of the linear course of historical development may be unhelpful to a full understanding of the complex social reality of migration in Europe. The example of ‘Lampedusa in Berlin’ and the Oranienplatz protest, like other unsettling social episodes such as the ‘Calais Jungle’ and attempts to cross the border in Ventimiglia, offers insights into more complex social processes, in which various actors are protagonists in the everyday struggles that contribute to the non-linear history of humanity.

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Notes

1. These measures included the ‘EU–Turkey deal’ of March 2016, establishment of ‘hotspots’ on Greek and Italian coasts and islands and reinforcement of controls at national borders within Schengen, notably at the German/Danish border, Italian/Austrian border (Brenner) and Italian/French border (Ventimiglia), and at the French/UK border (Calais).
2. The empirical research, conducted in the cities of Milan and Berlin from October 2013 to September 2015, contributed to the PhD thesis *Subjectivities en transit: Fragmented everyday lives of temporary refugees (im)mobile between European borders* by Elena Fontanari. The methodological approach included multi-site ethnography, participant observation, shadowing and in-depth interviews. Interview extracts are presented here in English, although other languages were also used.
3. The emergency programme, ‘Emergenza Nord Africa’, comprised a set of emergency reception measures and structures operating in parallel to the normal Italian system. See Campesi (2011); Marchetti (2012).
4. The one-year humanitarian document grants a temporary status dependent on Italian legislation rather than the Geneva Convention and international law. This makes it difficult to categorise holders of this document, who while not clear-cut ‘refugees’ are not ‘illegal migrants’ either.
5. The *Duldung* derives from sections 53 and 55 of the Ausländerrecht (German Foreigners Law); rather than a temporary residence permit, it is a temporary suspension of deportation for asylum-seekers who have been denied residence but for various reasons cannot immediately be deported.

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