

# BETWEEN PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS AND COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE

## Vernacular Humanitarianism in the Migration Movements of 2015

Ove Sutter, University of Bonn

The article discusses the civic engagement of humanitarian assistance to refugees during the migration movements of 2015. Drawing on an ethnographic case study of an event of voluntary aid for refugees, I examine how the activities can be understood as a civil society intervention in the political event of “the long summer of migration”. I argue that the voluntary refugee relief of 2015 should be conceived as “vernacular humanitarianism”. As such, the participants carried out activities of self-organized prefigurative politics, in which they experimented with the materialization and realization of their ideas about social relationships, community and the treatment of refugees, while they were simultaneously entangled in arrangements of collaborative governance, where they contributed to the local authorities’ migration management.

*Keywords:* refugee relief, borderwork, volunteerism, civil society, humanitarianism

When hundreds of thousands of migrants contested the European border regime in 2015, they were supported in various ways along the migration routes, in camps, at border crossings and railway stations by a multitude of civil society actors providing voluntary humanitarian aid (Feischmidt, Pries & Cantat 2019; Sutter & Youkhana 2017). In contrast to other European countries, the commitment in Germany was received positively in official politics and the media during the first few weeks. Federal chancellor Angela Merkel called for civic commitment and social cohesion in her famous appeal “We will manage it!” (“Wir schaffen das!”) of August 31, 2015 (Bundesregierung 2015). The media, above all the tabloid newspaper *BILD* with their campaign “We

are helping #refugees welcome” (Trauner & Turton 2017: 37), proclaimed a new German “welcome culture,” illustrating their reports with pictures of exhausted refugees and cheering volunteers at German railway stations. At the same time, right-wing extremist and anti-migration political forces grew stronger, not only in Germany but throughout Europe.

In the following, I will examine how the activities of voluntary refugee relief can be understood as a civil society intervention in the political event of “the long summer of migration” (Kasperek & Speer 2015).<sup>1</sup> I will argue that the voluntary refugee relief of 2015 can be conceived as a form of “vernacular humanitarianism” (Brković 2017; Dunn 2017), that

is, a commitment that is carried out by grassroots initiatives and draws fundamentally on local everyday practices and experiences of the actors involved, due to the constellation of actors, their world views, knowledge stock and practical skills employed. As such, the participants carried out activities which I propose to understand as practices of self-organized prefigurative politics, that is, activities by which they aimed to realize and materialize their ideas about social relationships, community and the treatment of refugees in an experimental way. They were simultaneously entangled in arrangements of collaborative governance in which they contributed to the local authorities' migration management.<sup>2</sup>

My argumentation draws on ethnographic research on a network of volunteers working at a railway station in a medium-sized German town near a border; I will call this place Middletown<sup>3</sup> in the following. Volunteers at Middletown station, together with the authorities and based on donations, provided food, clothing, information and accommodation to tens of thousands of refugees travelling through the town from late summer to winter 2015. The volunteers involved in this temporary event developed a comprehensive repertoire of actions regarding refugee relief and had a fundamental impact on how the refugees travelling on to the neighboring countries were treated in the following weeks and months.

### **Encounters with Consequences**

I happened to be caught up in the event in the autumn of 2015 when I arrived by train in Middletown station to visit a friend. At first sight, I was fascinated by the way volunteers had appropriated the building and how they had changed it for their purposes. On the one hand, their activities reminded me of the direct action repertoire of squatting, as I knew it from anarchist and autonomous political activists. On the other hand, not only the actors involved but also their activities seemed to differentiate substantially from those of social movements activism. I wanted to know how the aid activities at the station functioned as a civil society intervention<sup>4</sup> and how they related to the political debates arising around

the migration movements. Therefore, I returned a few weeks later to carry out some interviews with the volunteers.

I felt that I had to react quickly due to the temporal limitations of the events at the station, as I assumed that this situation, which at that time was often portrayed by the media and politicians as a state of emergency, would not last long. At the same time, I had to fulfil my ongoing professional obligations as university teacher and the everyday routines associated with this. Thus, my research took on a form that Gisela Welz, in reference to Michael Burawoy, has called the reflexive sequential approach (Welz 2013: 48). Phases of short field research stays and analysis alternated in this temporalized form of research, whereby the research question constantly evolved with insights gained. During my stays at the station, I took part in the various activities, especially in the kitchen and at the information counter, or I simply hung around and chatted with the volunteers present. Eventually, I conducted 49 semi-structured individual and 2 group interviews, about 30 of them with volunteers, a few with refugees, and the others with the staff and heads of authorities, such as the city administration, the federal police and the fire brigade (who was assigned by the administration for civil protection), left-wing activists and local politicians. I conducted many of the interviews with the volunteers directly at the station in rest and retreat rooms that the building management or the railway mission had made available to them. Against the background of my more comprehensive analysis of the interviews with the qualitative data analysis program MAXQDA, for the present article I selected primarily interviews with actors who had articulated views in a rather ideal-typical way and had carried out actions that shaped or dominated engagement in general. My data also includes excerpts of the media coverage of the event, the volunteers' public Facebook page and excerpts from policy documents of local authorities. Moreover, I spent about six weeks at the train station and other refugee aid facilities in the city during several stays between October 2015 and September 2016.

During one of my stays at the station shortly before Christmas 2015 I was sitting next to Silke on a bench at the edge of the entrance hall of Middletown station. Silke was in her late thirties and worked in a cultural institution in the city that was part of the rather left-wing and alternative cultural scene. Even before the events at the station began, she had founded a welcome initiative together with friends and colleagues. One of the aims of this initiative was to create a counter-public to right-wing extremist anti-migration currents through a jointly operated Facebook page. She had spent most of the days at the station for several weeks now, mostly sitting behind a makeshift information counter wearing a colorful vest. She had been the contact person for arriving refugees, donors or even employees of the municipal fire brigade and the federal police.

While Silke and I were chatting, I watched how two volunteers, Nadine and her husband Gerhard, were playing in front of the ticket machines with the approximately two-year-old daughter of a young couple who were obviously travelling through the station. Although Nadine and Gerhard had just met the family for the first time, the little girl seemed very trusting and let Gerhard take her in his arms. Gerhard and Nadine were visibly pleased and emotionally touched by the situation. They laughed and I had the feeling that Gerhard did not want to give the child back at all. The child's parents also smiled and seemed to agree with the situation. While the woman sat on one of the benches and watched Gerhard and the daughter play, the man talked to other men in front of the ticket machine. At some point he joined them and took a photo with a smartphone of his daughter on Gerhard's arm. It was a situation I had observed before at the train station in Middletown. Because I perceived and noted it only very superficially, I had to reconstruct it afterwards with Nadine's help, just like the following explanations.

It became clear only a short time later that this volatile situation would have longer-term consequences for all involved. A few days after the meeting, the father tried in vain to reach Gerhard on his mobile phone from the neighboring country. Gerhard had given his phone number to the family before they

left, because he was emotionally touched by the encounter with their daughter. However, he had forgotten to add the country code. In the meantime, the family had decided to return to Middletown and apply for asylum in Germany. Back at the station, they met a federal police officer. They showed him a picture of Gerhard and Nadine on their smartphone and told him that they were looking for Gerhard. As the police officer knew Gerhard through the daily encounters at the station, he decided to call him. Gerhard then went to the station, packed the family into his car and drove them to the region's initial reception center in a nearby town. Once there, they arranged with the administrator in charge that the family would stay at Gerhard and Nadine's home for the first few weeks. In fact, the family lived with them for several months before they could move into their own apartment in Middletown.

### **Voluntary Refugee Assistance as Vernacular Humanitarianism**

How are such momentous encounters to be placed in the repertoire of action of civil society refugee aid in 2015 and how can they be comprehended as civil society intervention in the politically charged event of the migration movements of 2015? The research that has been carried out on this topic in recent years can be roughly sorted into three major trends. Firstly, scholars have shown how anti-racist social movements responded to the political mobilizations of refugees by showing solidarity with their demands for political and social rights (Della Porta 2018; Rosenberger et al. 2018; Rygiel 2011; Ataç, Rygiel & Stierl 2016; Gauditz 2017). This research focuses explicitly on those actors and action repertoires of solidarity movements that had already existed before 2015, with refugees particularly coming into focus as important new political activists. Secondly, a lot of the research has shown how volunteers took over a large part of the humanitarian aid for refugees in many European countries (Feischmidt, Pries & Cantat 2019). In this vein, scholars examined the ways in which voluntary refugee relief was shaped by humanitarian ideas and practices, for example, by the key imperative of humanitarianism

to provide relief and to alleviate or reduce suffering (Wilson & Brown 2009: 11) rather than consider structural causes, demand political rights or criticize governments (Vandevoordt & Verschraegen 2019: 120). From this perspective, volunteer commitment has also been confronted with the criticism of depoliticizing and dehistoricizing human suffering and, thus, to be involved in the reproduction of the power relations responsible for it (ibid.: 104).

My research, however, follows a third strand of research, which has pointed to the dissolution of the boundary between the political activism of solidarity movements, on the one hand, and often self-proclaimed apolitical voluntary humanitarian aid, on the other (cf. Karakayali & Kleist 2016; Karakayali 2019; Rozakou 2016; Vandevoordt 2019). Regarding Germany, some scholars, such as Serhat Karakayali (2017) and Werner Schiffauer (2017), have argued that one should apprehend voluntary refugee aid engagement as a new form of civil society movement or civic movement. According to Karakayali, in contrast to social movements, it draws on a different social constellation of participants and does not follow an explicit and long-term political agenda. It is based, instead, on the lowest common denominator of a humanistic attitude, whose participants often understand their activities as a symbolic activity against right-wing politics. Werner Schiffauer has argued that it can be grasped as a political movement if one defines the political more in line with Hannah Arendt, among others, according to which the political is to be understood less as a struggle for power and domination and more as the building of a community (*Gemeinwesen*) (ibid.: 15).

The arguments of Karakayali and Schiffauer may allow one to speak of the welcome initiatives of 2015 as a “movement” which aimed at or even expressed broader social transformation. Alternatively, and from a more ethnographic point of view, one may argue that the analytical concept of “movement” has only limited explanatory power in the case of the civil society commitment of 2015. One can ask critically, for example, to what extent the actors and initiatives involved even saw themselves as part of a movement and, accordingly, exceeded the local

horizon both organizationally and in terms of their collective identity. In addition, one might ask to what extent the commitment can be understood as contentious at all. Robin Vandevoordt and Gert Verschraegen (2019), for example, have spoken of a “subversive humanitarianism” that rather implicitly and practically contradicted hegemonic sociopolitical currents.

It seems to me more productive to look at the concrete repertoires of action in order to understand how the commitment actually worked and what activities it comprised. Therefore, in the following I will examine how the actors involved employed certain elements of the action repertoire of social movements but linked it to other repertoires of action which might even sometimes have contradicted the former. Instead of conceiving the commitment as part of a movement, I especially propose to comprehend it as a more heterogeneous form of “vernacular humanitarianism.” Following Čarna Brković (2017), it can be comprehended as “local, grassroots forms of helping others” carried out by collective grassroots initiatives or individuals. According to Elisa Sandri (2018), members of grassroots organizations providing humanitarian aid are “not initially motivated by political considerations or mobilised by political activism but by humanitarian concerns,” nor are they “supervised or funded by international aid agencies or governments.” Nevertheless, and as I have already argued above, their activities have to be understood as political as they intervene in politically charged fields and are structured by asymmetrical power relations.

Since volunteers in grassroots initiatives have not been trained before their engagement and are often inexperienced in working with refugees and humanitarian emergencies, their activities are mainly characterized by improvisation (Sandri 2018: 2). According to Anke Schwittay and Anne-Meike Fechter (2019), humanitarian activities, such as vernacular humanitarianism, that draw on everyday practices and experiences are often exercised spontaneously, have an informal and improvised makeshift character and respond “to needs as they arise” (Fechter & Schwittay 2019: 1772; see also Richey 2018).

Vernacular humanitarianism is closely linked to the local lifeworlds of the actors involved; it is embedded in “particular local frameworks of morality and sociality” and linked to “local ideas on humaneness, personhood, and how one ought to behave towards others” (Brković 2017). Elizabeth Dunn has pointed out the problematic implications of vernacular humanitarianism from a critical perspective. According to her, the activities often revolve around the volunteers themselves as people in need and aim to “constitute themselves as ethical and socially connected persons” (Dunn 2017). Among other things, this self-centeredness leads to the fact that the recipients of aid “remain nothing more than shadowy projections of the volunteers’ imaginations” (Dunn 2017). The strong link between the aid activities and the needs of the donors also means that the aid delivery is left “uneven and unstable in both space and time” (Dunn 2017).

Many of these characteristics also applied to the volunteers from Middletown station. According to their own reports, most of the volunteers had spontaneously made their way to the station after seeing pictures and reports of arriving refugees on social media, especially Facebook. They were mobilized by the disturbing images of the mediatized “border spectacle” (De Genova 2002) and a visual framing of the migration movements as a “refugee crisis,” that is, a sudden and unexpected “event out of history” (Tosić 2017). Many of the volunteers had only got to know each other at the station and only formed their organizational structure in the course of the events. Moreover, they comprised people of different political attitudes and social backgrounds. Gerhard and Nadine, for example, were both in their mid-forties, married, had several children and worked as a craftsman and a salesperson, respectively. Before their engagement at the station, they had already worked for some time together with friends as volunteers in a charitable initiative. Similar to most of the other volunteers, however, they had had no experience of providing aid to refugees. In contrast to Silke, they had also no previous contact with solidarity activism. In fact, they did not know any of the other volunteers at the station at the beginning of their engagement.

In addition to volunteers like Silke, Gerhard and Nadine, local politicians from various parties were also involved at the station, from the Left Party, the Green Party and the Social Democrats to the Conservative Party. For the most part, however, these participants did not appear at the station as political representatives but rather as committed individual citizens. Additionally, another large group of volunteers consisted of some people who had a precarious residence status themselves and were confronted with social and political marginalization.

In addition to these features, the action repertoire of the volunteers at Middletown station comprised mostly practices, competencies and experiences that the actors brought with them from their everyday life: For example craftsmanship and organizational skills, such as those Gerhard and Nadine brought with them due to their professional activities. Many of the volunteers, especially the numerically predominant female ones, also contributed skills that they had acquired in family and professional care, and service work, for example, as nurses or flight attendants. Nadine, for example, argued that her abilities as mother of a large family would help her to do the job at the station. In addition, volunteers also contributed their social capital in terms of influential social networks that they had built up as a result of their profession or other cultural, social or political commitments. Moreover, many volunteers were able to contribute linguistic skills as native speakers of Arabic and Farsi, which were of great value at the station.

The links between the activities and the participants’ everyday lives also become clear regarding the world views and motivations they articulated to make sense of their actions. Most of those involved had not come to the station as political activists or members of humanitarian organizations following a political agenda or a professional humanitarian mission. Instead, they had rather followed a spontaneous and often emotional impulse. Following Jane Freedman (2011), their activities can also be understood as “a form of individualised collective action resulting from individual citizen’s emotional and moral self-reflexive sentiments” (ibid.: 613). In addition

to emotional impulses, they articulated world views and ideas that seemed less to be elements of a coherent ideological framework and stem more from their everyday and “commonsense” knowledge. In the sense of a hegemonic theoretical understanding of commonsense following Antonio Gramsci (Hoare & Nowell Smith 1971) and Kate Crehan (2002, 2011), the participants’ views on their engagement and conceptions of the social world had the form of a rather spontaneous and incoherent, sometimes even contradictory philosophy. Most of the volunteers I interviewed justified their commitment primarily with humanitarian ideas and their main concern seemed to be to alleviate the suffering of the refugees and ease their situation. Gerhard, for example, argued that it was simply natural for him to help refugees from a war zone and that he would expect the same from others if he were in such a situation. Nadine said that for her, the station had become a “place of humanity,” a notion also used by other volunteers. The term seemed to have a universalistic claim in its ideological underpinnings, insofar as it included theoretically “all members of human race” (Brković 2017). While some volunteers associated their commitment exclusively with a humanitarian thought, others combined it with different ideas and perspectives. Some said that the commitment at the station was an inspiration for Middletown and that they wanted to express an attitude of welcome. Others positioned their commitment against right-wing extremism.

Interestingly, these more explicit political concerns were hardly articulated symbolically and discursively at the station. No explicit political symbols, for example, were to be seen that referred to such a political attitude. Only one wall had a poster with the slogan “Refugees Welcome” and the symbol of a family on the run, which derived from the symbolic-discursive repertoire of anti-racist movements. Some of the volunteers who had connections to political or cultural left-wing networks and understood their involvement at the station as political commitment explained this appearance of the station in a way that can be understood as “strategic humanitarianism,” following Helge Schwartz

and Elias Steinhilper (2020). By this, Schwartz and Steinhilper mean a deliberate “depoliticization” of engagement for strategic reasons of broader mobilization. Silke, for example, who was actually one of the few volunteers with personal links to the rather left-leaning and alternative cultural scene, also stressed in the interview that it was important that “no politics are made at the station” and that this was the highest rule. She justified this rule, above all, by saying that the political positions of the participants involved were simply too different. Instead, some of those volunteers who framed their engagement with reference to ideas of left-wing and anti-racist politics used the volunteers’ official Facebook page to link their commitment to political demands, such as a general right of residence for all refugees, political criticism of state migration policy or to oppose right-wing extremist policies (see Sutter 2017).

Due to the social and political heterogeneity of the actors involved and the simultaneous dominance of humanitarian ideas of good aid for refugees, a heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory repertoire of actions developed at the station, which, for most of the time, abstained from explicit political articulation. Instead, a pragmatic attitude dominated here that was repeatedly brought to the point by the volunteers with variations of the formulation: “Don’t talk, do!” It was not so much what was said that counted but that one contributed personally and practically to the commitment.

### **Prefigurative Politics of Vernacular Humanitarianism**

Significant encounters took place at Middletown station in this diverse assemblage of social actors and ideas about good aid to refugees, such as those between Gerhard, Nadine and the travelling family. Considering this, I will argue in the following that the practices of vernacular humanitarianism in their political dimensions initially can be understood as “prefigurative politics.” This term, which can be traced back to Carl Boggs (1977), among others, has been used primarily to understand repertoires of action of the “New Left Social Movements” from the 1960s onwards, especially anarchist

and direct-action activism (Lightsey 2017). Moreover, the alterglobalization movements of the 2000s were comprehended in their forms of organization and action as prefigurative politics (Maekelbergh 2011). More recently, the protest cycles of 2011, from Occupy Wall Street to the protests in Tahrir Square, have also been considered from the perspective of prefigurative politics (Schaffzin 2011; Van de Sande 2013). The term refers to practices by which political activists aim to realize forms of decision-making or even experiences that they envision as the goal of future social transformation in the present social relations (Boggs 1977; Cornish et al. 2018). According to Darcy K. Leach, the political goals pursued in the case of prefigurative politics cannot be separated from the means employed (Leach 2013). In addition, and as Luke Yates has argued, prefigurative politics can produce larger “counter-institutions,” but they are especially realized in the form of everyday micropolitics (Yates 2015). They contain experimental components, intervene in material environments and social orders, develop ideas and frames of meaning, and aim to establish collective norms (ibid.: 13f.). In the following, I will employ the concept to understand the activities of voluntary refugee relief in the migration movements of 2015. However, in contrast to the definition of prefigurative politics in social movement theory, the volunteers did not aim to realize radical and counter-hegemonic ideas of an alternative future society or goals of future social transformation. On the other hand, their commitment was not limited to the supply of food, information and clothing. Instead, for a limited time during their engagement at the station, they developed and realized the vague vision or idea of a local and welcoming community through their practical activities and experiences.

### *Creating Spaces of Encounter*

Civil society commitment, in the sense of prefigurative politics, was first realized at Middletown station in the self-organized appropriation of the building, which, at times, took on radical features. The volunteers initially refurnished the station substantially without the explicit approval of the owner,

the German railway company Deutsche Bahn. They built a kitchen with a serving counter in which they prepared donated food into a large variety of meals and distributed them to refugees. They furnished the room with cribs and a play corner for children, as well as foldable wooden tables and beer benches. Silke mostly sat at the improvised information counter, where she and her team provided information not only to refugees but also to officials, donors and passersby. In another room, Nadine and Gerhard, together with other volunteers, had set up a large clothing store where refugees could equip themselves with not only donated second-hand clothes but also baby buggies and furniture. In addition, the volunteers also decorated the walls with posters reading “Refugees Welcome” or “Welcome to Middletown” in order to convey their welcoming attitude to the refugees and mark the building as a place of welcome for refugees to other users of the station.

While refurnishing the station, the volunteers developed and realized their own ideas of good aid for and desirable treatment of refugees. The makeshift furniture can be comprehended as objectified forms of knowledge in which the humanitarian world views and the welcoming attitude of the volunteers materialized. By employing the objects and symbols, the volunteers staged an alternative space to those border places which they associated with violence against and suffering of refugees – conveyed through media reports or stories and sometimes smartphone camera shots of the refugees themselves. Middletown station, as such an alternative space, corresponded to those experimental socio-spatial formations of refugee assistance in the migration movements of 2015 which others have described as “spaces of encounter” (De Jong & Ataç 2017; Gauditz 2017; Fleischmann & Steinhilper 2017). New social relationships in these spaces developed, temporarily or for a longer period of time, which were rather unlikely to unfold outside the station due to socio-spatial hierarchies and separations in everyday life. In these socio-spatial formations, the volunteers also experimented with alternative forms of decision-making and social organization. Not all, but some of the volunteer teams created



grassroots decision-making structures to organize their engagement. They emphasized in conversations and interviews how important it was to them not to introduce hierarchies as they saw them in traditional volunteer organizations or in government authorities.

As a space of encounter, the converted station afforded relationships and encounters, such as those between Nadine, Gerhard and the family in transit. The station contained, to a certain extent, offers of participation in social life that were less dependent on the participants' own residence status. The space made it temporarily possible to overcome social isolation and state-organized disintegration and segregation, as was also argued regarding other places of voluntary refugee assistance in 2015 (Jong & Ataç 2017). At the station, helpful residents who had previously had no contact with migrants and who were socially and spatially separated from them in everyday life were now confronted with their stories and experiences. Individual volunteers, such as Nadine, Gerhard and Silke, even entered into longer-term relationships with refugees who had arrived in Middletown via the station or different routes during the migration movements of 2015. In addition, relationships arose between volunteers who were long-term residents and those who had had migration experience and had a precarious residence status themselves. In contrast to their social and political marginalization in everyday life, some of the latter were able to not only gain temporarily access to material resources but also social networks and emotional support. Some of those volunteers with precarious residence status benefited from these relationships, as they helped refugees to find accommodation or to deal with the authorities. In the sense of this different approach to access to resources, the station, as a space of encounter, was also part of those temporary "politics of care" that Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013) have called the "mobile commons" of migration.

### *Creating an Idea of the Volunteers as a Collective*

The volunteers formed a "community of practice" (Lave & Wenger 1991) in the course of their engage-

ment: building objects, decorating the interior of the station, sorting and labeling, donating and accepting clothing and food, or even preparing meals together. In doing so, they also developed an emotionally charged image of themselves as a collective which also comprised ideas of how society should respond to people in need and how people should take care of each other. The volunteers worked on this idea employing various symbolic-discursive and ritual practices: when they solemnly celebrated the Christmas season or birthdays of individual volunteers in the station's entrance hall, for example, when they attached a large sign at the front of the information counter saying "We are the cool ones," or when they posed together for the numerous photos they took with their smartphones and published online. The volunteers' social media activities played an important role in building shared perspectives of themselves as a collective. They mainly used their Facebook page during the time of the activities to gain more visibility in order to generate donations and to create public acceptance for their activities. They especially created a "collective action frame" (Snow & Benford 1992, 2000) on their online platform, which, in the sense of a scheme of interpretation, suggested certain perspectives on their engagement. They presented their activities in self-written reports, descriptions and narratives of the station and by publishing a large number of photos of people involved in the events.

Firstly, the volunteers staged themselves on their website as self-organized, self-responsible actors, who participated in refugee relief voluntarily and on their own initiative and "not because we have to." Linked to this, they presented themselves as actors who sacrificed their free time for the cause of refugee aid and, in doing so, also reached their physical and psychological-emotional limits. Secondly, the volunteers often presented themselves in a very emotional way on their Facebook page (cf. Sutter 2018). Reading the timeline, the events sometimes appear like an emotionally intense happening, forging a "family" of volunteers as they repeatedly called themselves. They also published pictures showing volunteers playing with children in the station, to



which, in turn, other users of the Facebook page responded with emotional comments. Thirdly, the volunteers drew on the symbolic-discursive repertoire of local and regional identities to underline the exemplary nature of their commitment. They defined their local origins along positive characteristics such as “cosmopolitan,” “friendly,” “welcoming” or even “most hospitable city.” In addition, the volunteers staged themselves along their local origins by creating slogans in the local dialect to promote their commitment. They designed the slogan “Middletown says hello,” for example, whereby the “Hello” was written in the local dialect, thus, adapting a widespread local-patriotic form of greeting. At the same time, the volunteers repeatedly emphasized the heterogeneity of their group and their solidarity in diversity in their Facebook postings. According to this self-image, cultural, religious and social differences did not play a role at the station and this was exactly what was positive about their community.

In summary, on the website the volunteers portrayed themselves as a local, caring and compassionate community of normal and hardworking people who had come to the station voluntarily and created an exemplary infrastructure of good humanitarian aid for refugees. In addition and as described above, some of the more left-wing volunteers turned to the Facebook page to position more explicitly the group’s self-image of a caring and inclusive community of ordinary locals in opposition to social tendencies of exclusion, right-wing extremist policies and anti-migration state policy.

### **Arrangements of Collaborative Governance and Governmental Figurations of the Compassionate Volunteers**

#### *Arrangements of Collaborative Governance*

Despite these transformations of Middletown station and due to the volunteers’ heterogeneous social constellation, for most of them, their activities were not meant to create a “free space” (Daphi 2014: 168) that was beyond the state’s control of migration. Although the state control and monitoring of migration was temporarily reduced in the period of the migration movements in 2015, the railway station

in Middletown remained a “border space” (Burrell 2008) and, thus, a spatial manifestation of governmental power. Marie Sandberg (2018), for example, has argued regarding voluntary initiatives at central stations in Denmark and Germany that the volunteers contributed simultaneously to stabilizing and destabilizing the border regime.

This also became clear in Gerhard and Nadine’s encounter with the travelling family when the latter returned to the station and first met a federal police officer, and subsequently when they had to deal with the local authorities at the reception center. At the same time, the example illustrates that interactions and relationships between volunteers and local authorities had formed in the course of the events at the station. From a perspective of the anthropology of the state on the “micropolitics of state work” (Sharma & Gupta 2006: 11f.; see also Thelen, Veters & Benda-Beckmann 2017) it can also be argued that the relationship between civil society actors and state governance was practically negotiated in the events at Middletown station. I argue that a temporary arrangement of “collaborative governance” developed in the everyday encounters and interactions between volunteers and local authorities. Following Larruina, Boersma and Ponzoni, collaborative governance arises from a process of informal negotiation and “allows different organizations to work together and agree on solutions while assisting policymakers and practitioners in targeting problems and delivering action more effectively” (Larruina, Boersma & Ponzoni 2019: 55).

Some of the volunteers’ activities in the temporary and improvised arrangement at the station helped the authorities to manage the refugees’ transit through the station in a smoother manner. Moreover, the volunteers assumed regulatory and humanitarian duties that would otherwise have been performed by state actors, such as the federal police or the municipal fire department. Some of the volunteers in this collaboration developed closer relationships with individual and local authority employees and involved them in their self-image and self-portrayal as “family” and as a caring and compassionate community.

The volunteers contributed to the provision of the refugees by mobilizing local and everyday community networks to which the state actors had no access. These networks included, for example, those of cultural and social workers, party-political networks, sports clubs and networks of local entrepreneurs. Through their access to these local networks, the volunteers were able to acquire large quantities of food and clothing, procure furnishings and organize additional accommodation for the refugees. To this end, they had posted a list of needs at the launch of their Facebook website to mobilize more donations from the local population. The mobilization of local resources to supply the refugees was the volunteers' most obvious activity at the station that the local authorities took advantage of. The authorities were interested in maintaining the volunteers' engagement in order to expand and conserve their own resources and those of other conventional aid organizations, such as the German Red Cross, since it could not be predicted how long the migration movements through Middletown would last and the refugees would have to be supplied. Therefore, the official who led the humanitarian activities provided by the municipality and was the direct contact for the volunteers said in an interview:

If they [the volunteers] didn't exist, then we would certainly do something on the part of the city, too, by having a field kitchen there with halal food and we would provide drinks and tea, and that would be it. Well, the city would certainly not provide a clothing store or the broad spectrum of aid that volunteers can currently provide from donations. But we would certainly also do something there for the humanitarian mission. And we are quite happy that the volunteers are doing this, because otherwise I would have to build something there with my own resources. (Interview with leading municipality employee, Winter 2015)

The statement of the official makes it clear that the authorities were interested in maintaining the engagement. In view of such an official occupancy of the engagement in the voluntary refugee relief

of 2015, scholars have also spoken of a "neoliberal instrumentalization and appropriation" (Steinhilper & Fleischmann 2016; Van Dyk & Misbach 2016). However, greater consideration must be given to the volunteers' agency, as they also declined offers from the authorities to take care of the refugees. Exemplarily, when I asked Nadine in the interview whether the refugee relief should be provided by professionals, she answered as follows:

We thought about that at the beginning, like, "Why doesn't somebody else fill in somewhere?" But we discarded it very quickly. I discarded it very quickly for me, because I said: "It's my own fault. I don't have to go to the station anymore." [...] Well, we can't get upset about the city [the municipality] and still do everything ourselves. They would have to step in, of course, but as long as we do our job well down here, they'll say to themselves: "Why should we? It works." (Interview with Nadine, Winter 2015)

Others argued that they had turned down the authorities' offer because they wanted to provide the refugees with the most comprehensive care possible and they did not consider the authorities' care to be sufficient. In this case, their decisions drew on ideas that were based less on political programs or professional criteria and more on an everyday and commonsense understanding of appropriate and "good" aid for refugees.

In addition to satisfying the refugees' physical needs, many of the volunteers' activities aimed at improving the refugees' emotional well-being (Sutter 2017) and can, thus, be understood as "emotional work" (Hochschild 1979). Like Nadine and Gerhard in the situation described above, the volunteers, for example, played with refugee children to distract them from their physical exhaustion and make them smile, or they talked to the refugees to calm them down and make them feel safe. The importance of these activities for the authorities' borderwork at the station became apparent in the activities of the interpreters. One of the volunteers working as an interpreter was Sahin, who was in his forties

and had migrated to Germany as a refugee several decades earlier. Sahin had arrived at the station on one of the first days of the engagement after a day-trip to his relatives who lived in a nearby town, as he had told me in the interview. When he saw the large crowd of refugees who had also just arrived, he went to one of the police officers present and offered to translate, which they accepted. Sahin had been at the station every week since then and, like most other volunteers with migration experience, helped as an interpreter. Among other things, he justified his commitment to the railway station in the interview as follows:

I've been thinking: What happens if the police officer cannot communicate? Of course, he gets angry, and if this person who is looking for help cannot express his opinion, then it becomes doubly dramatic. I said to myself, a little help can do something about this violence, and what you have seen in Hungary or in the Balkans can be avoided. They're human beings, and I'm human too. As a human being you can be there for people; that is my motivation. (Interview with volunteer Sahin, November 2015)

Sahin's statement illustrates how his activity as an interpreter aimed, *inter alia*, at emotionally relaxing the situation between the refugees and police officers. The importance of the interpreters' activities for the authorities' work at the station was also highlighted by a leading police officer. He emphasized in the interview that the interpreters' communicative activities had contributed to a "chain of trust" between the refugees and the police officers and had strengthened the refugees' confidence in the police.

At the same time, the collaboration did not proceed without conflict but was repeatedly the subject of negotiation. In some situations, the volunteers also openly opposed the actions of state authorities directly at the station. For example, in one case, they temporarily suspended their contribution to humanitarian activities when the buses transporting the refugees across the border had been stopped and the refugees had been checked by the authori-

ties of the neighboring country, allegedly contrary to agreements with the local heads of the federal police. The volunteers publicly announced this decision by posting a statement on their Facebook website. It became apparent in these situations that they had, in some cases, gained a wider scope of action vis-à-vis the authorities through their commitment. The volunteers had obtained the position of a negotiating partner to whom the authorities had to make partial concessions.

### *Governmental Figurations of the Compassionate Volunteers*

I have argued above that the volunteers themselves formed a self-image as a caring and compassionate community in the course of the events. They were also simultaneously confronted with external ascriptions deriving from various actors. Firstly, there was the feedback that the volunteers received directly at the station for their commitment, especially from those receiving humanitarian aid, and, for example, from residents who came to the station to make donations. Once, I stood by and watched as an elderly couple handed over a large donation to Gerhard at the information counter, thanking him for the volunteers' work. Gerhard smiled and answered: "Thank you for your donation! Without you, this wouldn't work either." Furthermore, one has to consider the often emotional feedback the volunteers received on Facebook, praising and thanking them when they reported on their activities at the station.

Secondly and corresponding to the reporting on the civil society commitment for refugees throughout Germany, both local and national media reported in numerous articles, in detail and mostly positively, on the commitment at Middletown station during the first months of the engagement. The media descriptions of the commitment as a whole and the portraits of individual volunteers from the station presented them as "normal" and "working" people who simply wanted to help and who were committed to the point of exhaustion. The reports emphasized the great helpfulness of the residents of Middletown and highlighted how the volunteers

had organized themselves with little or no support from the authorities. The media reports also portrayed the volunteers as people who were very emotionally moved by the gratitude of the refugees and by memories of encounters with refugee children. Finally, the events at the station were presented as a living “welcome culture” and the station itself as a place where chancellor Angela Merkel’s appeal was translated into civil society practice. The volunteers repeated their self-description as a “family” in individual reports and regarding the authorities, said that “... they had to shed their negative perception of the authorities.” Occasionally I tracked how the volunteers received the media reports and linked them, for example, on their Facebook website. They often referred positively to the media portrayals of their commitment and the attributions contained therein. Media reports were also the subject of conversations among the volunteers at the station, as I could observe, although only on rare occasions. Gerhard and Nadine, for example, together with other volunteers, had a positive conversation about an article in a regional daily newspaper in which they were portrayed as self-organized and self-sacrificing volunteers, for whom a child’s smile was enough and to spare. In addition, a regional newspaper chose the volunteers of Middletown station as the volunteers of the year based on the readers’ vote. Some of the volunteers followed the election closely, reported on it on their Facebook website and finally published a group photo of themselves on the occasion of the award ceremony. Following Moritz Ege and Jens Wietschorke, I comprehend the mutual process of self-stylization, on the one hand, and external ascription by individual participants, such as aid recipients, donors or the media, on the other, as “cultural figuration” (Ege & Wietschorke 2014). In this process of cultural figuration, the volunteers formed a shared view and an idea of themselves as a self-active, caring and compassionate community which affected their everyday performances at the station.

Thirdly, I argue that one has to consider that the process of cultural figuration took place against the backdrop of broader political-economic developments. From a historical perspective, one has to

trace the genealogy of the term “welcome culture” as a label for civil society engagement in Germany. It was first defined in a political-economic context in relation to migration policy before it was taken up in the media in 2015 as a label for the civil society commitment of refugee aid and, in part, by voluntary initiatives. In the course of a change in German migration policy from the 2000s onwards, predominantly employers’ associations voiced an increasing need for immigration of qualified workers, in the sense of “neoliberal migration management” (Hamann & Karakayali 2016: 73; Kannankulam 2014). At the same time, the demand for a societal “welcome culture” was formulated in order to make immigration of qualified workers more attractive. The term was also translated into the state administrative context in the following years, especially to the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, where it was used to demand and support a receptive attitude of civil society toward migrants in the broader sense, which should now also include refugees (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge 2013; Schünemann & Voigt 2016). In the light of these political and economic definitions, which continued to resonate in political and media discourse, the term then became the central label for civil society refugee aid in 2015 (Trauner & Turton 2017).

Furthermore, Silke van Dyk and Elène Misbach, among others, have argued that the commitment during the migration movements of 2015 and the comprehensive involvement of the volunteers in humanitarian refugee aid must also be related to a societal change in Germany toward an “activating welfare” state (Van Dyk & Misbach 2016: 209). This change also redefines the relationship between state and citizen and calls upon civil society as a “compassionate” and “caring community” (ibid.: 210). I would argue that one could also observe this process at Middletown station during which the volunteers were called upon not only as self-responsible and active citizens but also as compassionate subjects. This was the case, for example, when local and regional politicians visited the station to thank the volunteers for their commitment or when the

municipality expressed its gratitude and appreciation to the volunteers by organizing a party at which the mayor thanked them for their engagement.

## Conclusion

Drawing on my ethnographic research, I have argued that civil society refugee assistance in the migration movements of 2015 can be understood as vernacular humanitarianism. It was carried out by different grassroots actors, who had come to the station rather spontaneously and only developed an organizational form in the course of their engagement. Their activities were fundamentally based on skills and resources that they brought with them from their everyday lives and they were guided by humanitarian ideas, which originated less from a coherent ideological agenda and belonged more to their everyday knowledge and commonsense. Linked to their social constellation and everyday world views, the volunteers developed a heterogeneous and sometimes even contradictory range of action which cannot be reduced exclusively to the action repertoire of social movements, on the one hand, or humanitarianism, on the other, but instead can be conceived as a combination of both.

I have argued that the volunteers' repertoire of action was comprised of activities that can be comprehended as a certain form of prefigurative politics. They transformed the station into a space of encounter in which they developed new kinds of relationships and offers of participation in an experimental way and in which marginalized actors gained access to resources relevant to everyday life. In addition, they formed an imagery of themselves as an inclusive collective of "normal" and compassionate locals who were driven by their ideas of good help and good treatment of others.

A temporary arrangement of collaborative governance developed simultaneously at the station and the volunteers contributed by mobilizing local resources to which the state actors had no access. Moreover, the volunteers contributed to the authorities' borderwork through emotional practices which aimed at improving the physical-emotional condition of the refugees. Finally, I have argued that the

self-image of volunteers as proactive caring and compassionate collective developed in a process of cultural figuration. In this process, the volunteers were confronted with external ascriptions deriving from different actors, such as the aid receivers, donors, the media and local state actors. I have argued that this process should not only be understood against the backdrop of a societal change toward an activating welfare state in which civil society is called upon as a compassionate and caring community. It also corresponded with political-economic initiatives to promote a civic welcome culture in Germany.

In conclusion, it seems to me necessary to think even further beyond previous understandings of research on civil society involvement in refugee aid and refugee solidarity. This concerns particularly the question of how such a commitment is to be grasped in its political dimensions. An ethnographically informed and praxeological perspective can contribute to this by making it possible to understand how current civil society activities develop in relation to state politics in the arena of everyday worlds.

## Notes

- 1 I thank the editors and anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of my manuscript and the insightful comments and suggestions. Furthermore, I thank Oliver Müller for linguistic support.
- 2 The article contains revised passages already published in German in Sutter (2019).
- 3 The pseudonym "Middletown" is used for anonymization. Some more information, including the names and gender, age or professions of the persons involved, have been changed by the author to maintain anonymity, as this information was irrelevant to the analysis.
- 4 When I use the term civil society, I follow the hegemony-theoretical understanding of Antonio Gramsci (Hoare & Nowell Smith 1971). According to Gramsci, civil society in the liberal democracy ranges from the family, sports clubs and the mass media to citizens' initiatives and social movements and it is to be distinguished from the state-institutional organs. It is on the terrain of civil society that struggles are played out over the consent of politically significant sections of the population to competing sociopolitical projects and their associated ideas. Hence, people's voluntary engagement with refugees in the "integral state" of capitalist societies does not lie outside, but rather in a relationship of tension to the political institutions of the state (ibid.).

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- Ove Sutter is Professor and Head of the Department for Cultural Anthropology and Folklore Studies at the University of Bonn. His research interests include political activism and forms of protest, everyday storytelling and political narratives and the politico-economic development of rural regions in Western Europe. A recent publication (with Oliver Müller & Sina Wohlgemuth) is *Learning to Leader: Ritualised Performances of “Participation” in Local Arenas of Participatory Rural Governance* (2020, *Sociologia Ruralis* 69[1]). (ove.sutter@uni-bonn.de)