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Spatial Mobilization and Refugees: Refugee Activism in Berlin

Introduction

On 13 July, 2014, refugees and activists gathered at a square, 'Oranienplatz' in Kreuzberg to demonstrate against Germany's asylum policy. Prior to the demonstration, a scuffle had occurred between two refugees and who were then arrested. Subsequently, the demonstration route was altered and refugees and their supporters[i] decided to follow the police and the arrested refugees to the station. Refugee activists walked to the police station carrying a banner stating, 'Kein Mensch ist Illegal.'[ii] The group was small but loud. Music streamed from a van in languages such as Punjabi and Arabic. When the group reached the station at *Iftar* time, the refugees served food with pots laid out on the sidewalk, since several of the refugees were fasting. The arrested refugees were released a few hours later. This vignette demonstrates a wave of refugee mobilization in Germany, a phenomenon which began in October 2012.

In 2012, a 29-year-old Iranian asylum-seeker committed suicide in a refugee shelter in Würzburg. Several refugees went on protests across Bavaria and in other cities demanding, the end of *Residenzpflicht*[iii], the '*Lager*'[iv], the long asylum-trials, deportations, rights to work and study, free German-language instruction, medical care, and the termination of the Dublin regulation. A refugee bus tour took place, stopping at various towns and cities to inform, campaign, and to bring refugees to Berlin from their accommodations to campaign for their demands. This bus tour arrived in Berlin where refugee activists who called themselves 'Refugee-Strike-Berlin' set up protest-tents in a square, in Kreuzberg, with the aim to voice concerns, show resistance, and gain visibility.

The refugee protests and movement included occupations of several places by 550 refugees –with Oranienplatz continuing to remain the main site of political resistance with continued events, weekly meetings and an information table.

Refugee Population and Refugee Housing in Germany

According to the statistics derived from the World Bank Data source, Germany hosted 216,973 refugees in the year 2014, showing a downward trend from 2010 when it hosted 594,269 refugees. In the same year, there were 226,191 asylum-seekers in Germany.

Refugees reside within group facilities located in any of 16 Federal States (Laender). Germany has 16 Federal States, which are divided into many more districts. Local authorities of each particular Federal State manage the communal housing facilities. These communal accommodations have been the subject of much criticism since they are often located outside cities and living conditions are far from adequate in many instances. Refugee accommodations have been subject to an increasing number of arson attacks with a recent estimated number of 200 attacks within a period of one year. The refugees are bound to their state-imposed accommodations.

Up until 2015, the asylum-seekers' movements were controlled so that they required special permission to travel outside a Federal State. One of the key demands of refugee protests in Berlin was for the German State to provide integrated accommodations and to end *Residenzpflicht*. Consequently, in order to directly contest these spatial restrictions, the refugees defied this law, left their *Lager* and began a radical spatial movement in Berlin.

Spatial Mobilizations

Recent scholarship on refugees has attended to their agency and the notion of substantive citizenship within protests (Moulin and Nyers 2007; Edkins and Pin-Fat 2005; Owens 2009; Pugliese 2002; Rygiel 2011; Shindo 2009; Walters 2002, 2008; Nyers 2003; Lowry and Nyers 2003, Wright 2003, Nyers 2006). Thus, a body of scholarship has largely contested Giorgio Agamben's argument that refugees can be seen as the ultimate 'biopolitical' subjects: those who can be regulated and governed at the level of population in a permanent 'state of exception' and that they are reduced to 'bare life': humans as animals in nature without political freedom (Owen 2009). However, this scholarship has thinly attended to the ways in which refugees mobilize within public spaces and thus politically radicalize such spatials.

Some scholarship on refugees' political acts has examined spatial resistance of refugees in border areas such as in campsites similar to those in Calais bordering the UK (Rigby & Schlembach 2013). For these refugees, the aim is to resist confinement in France and to travel to the UK. The refugee activists in Berlin, on the other hand, actually left their assigned accommodations to demand shifts in Germany's asylum-policies. This article examines the varying meanings that these activists lent to everyday spaces through their political actions.

 Spatial politics has always been the focus of much scholarly attention. Lefebvre contends that space is the ultimate locus and a medium of struggle - a crucial political issue and that there is a politics of space because space is political. For Lefebvre, space consists of a multitude of intersections, each with its assigned locations. He argues that space expresses power relations in the form of buildings, monuments, and works of art, but that such expressions do not completely crowd out

their more clandestine or underground aspects (Lefebvre, 1991:33).

Spatial mobilizations have led scholars to understand the intersections of space and place. For Featherstone (2008) 'place-based politics is produced out of negotiations with trans-local connections and routes of subaltern activity' (p.4).

There have been discussions of several protests opposing gentrification of cities (e.g. Rinaldo 2002; Muniz 1998). In these protests, the refugee mobilization differed since it dealt less with economy and spaces and more with changing asylum policies within Germany and the EU.

Scholarship on squatting in spaces in the 1990s/1980s within Europe has examined motives, strategies and securitization. (Bart Van Der 2014; Cattaneo & Martinez 2014; Holm and Kuhn 2011; Manjikin 2013; Prujit 2004; Steen 2014; Vasudevan 2015).

Virtual sites and social media have additionally been understood as spaces which have helped facilitate social movements. Castells contends, 'the networked social movements of the digital age represent a new species of social movement'. (2012: 15).

Thus, there has been much scholarship on spatial political resistance, such as squatting, virtual media, opposition to gentrification and the ways that these spatials came to be understood as sites of resistance. Yet there has not been much focus on how non-citizens such as refugees mobilize within public spaces and thus shift meanings of these spaces.

This study aims to answer the following questions: How do refugees engage with resistance in terms of space and squatting tactics? How did the refugee

movement helped transform certain public and virtual spaces into sites of radical politics so that power relations were redefined? How do refugees' spatial mobilizations relate to non-refugee spatial mobilizations? What is the relationship between refugee movement and tactics on public policy and opinion?

The article will first examine the refugees' long-term occupation of a square - Oranienplatz, the main site of resistance where broad demands were made about changes in Germany and EU's asylum policies. Then I will discuss a school's occupation and refugees' and supporters' resistance against eviction. The study will then discuss refugee protests and their demands at a hostel, a church, and an iconic TV Tower at Alexanderplatz.

Methodology

This study draws on an ethnographic approach, which consisted of participant observation and interviews between April and October 2014. I started the research process first and subsequently began to support the movement. I terminated the interview process in October 2014, but continue to remain involved with a related media working group, 'oplatz.net'. The interviewees included a combination of prominent activists as well as less prominent refugee activists. I selected interviewees such that people from varying countries of origin were represented. I interviewed refugee activists from different groups. The migrants included individuals seeking asylum in Germany and people from States other than Germany, with varying legal statuses such as individuals on *Duldung* (tolerance and temporary suspension of deportation following rejection of their asylum cases). However, I will refer to them as refugee activists as they called themselves.

Since the focus of my research was to comprehend the refugee movement in Berlin and their engagement with spatial politics, my open-ended interview questions were guided by this focus. My interviews were further guided by refugees' understanding of their own participation in the struggles at various stages. Since the aim of my research was to analyse the role of space within the movement, several of my questions were about refugees' understanding of the spaces as sites of resistance, their roles as activists, their specific demands, the purpose of their actions and occupations, and their self-reflections on their particular actions.

Timeline of Spatial Protests

Dates	Groups	Actions
October 2012-April 2014	Refugee Strike Berlin	Occupation of Oranienplatz
January 2013-April 2014	Lampedusa in Berlin	Occupation of Oranienplatz
December 2012-to date	Berlin-Refugee-Strike and Lampedusa in Berlin	Occupation of Gerhart-Hauptmann-Schule
December 2012-to date	Stop Deportation Group	Stop deportations and Lager visits
April 2014	Berlin-Refugee Strike	Actions against eviction of Oranienplatz
June 2014 to October 2015	People of the School	Actions against eviction of Gerhart-Hauptmann-Schule
July 2014	Refugee Struggle for Freedom	Occupation of TV-Tower at Alexanderplatz
August 2014	Lampedusa in	Rooftop occupation of Hostel at

	Berlin	Gürteltraße
September 2014-to date	Lampedusa in Berlin	Church occupation
September 2014	Refugee Struggle for Freedom	Occupation of DGB-(Federation of Trade Unions)

Each of these occupations differed. The first occupation at Oranienplatz conveyed a greater degree of visible politics and was always understood as a major site of political endeavour.   The occupation of Gerhart-Hauptmann-Schule in agreement with the local authorities initially served as a shelter for some people living in tents at Oranienplatz in the winter. However, the meaning of the occupation of this school shifted. The roof's occupation at Gürtelstraße needs to be understood in terms of political resistance, since the politicians officially provided the refugees with this accommodation, but the refugees received eviction orders after five months. The occupation of the church conveyed a different tone. The church elected to adopt a 'humanitarian' stance as opposed to a 'political' position and continued to assist the refugees by providing them with a living space. The following paragraphs will discuss these productions of space by the refugee activists and their support network.

The Production of Socio-Political Spaces

Oranienplatz and Refugee Politics

Asylum-seekers from differing '*Lager'* across the country first arrived in Berlin and set up protest tents (where many refugees actually resided for 18 months) with the help of supporters in Oranienplatz in Kreuzberg, a Green Party governed district. These activists subsequently helped transformed Oranienplatz to a site of political activity with an info-tent and a circle-tent where weekly meetings were held,

which included supporters and refugees. Several demonstrations took place since the

space brought about much local and national support. Thus this square was

transformed to a space of residence and protest camp. Oranienplatz included formal

and informal structures, including a kitchen where refugees of differing nationalities

cooked and ate. As some refugee activists explained:

Bino: The Break Isolation Campaign (from the *Lager*) started a long time ago. 15
years ago…20 years ago. But what happened in October 2012 we came out in new
form of resistance that was a tent-action demanding the same thing. We stressed the
end of *Residenzpflict*-the law, which restricts refugees from moving.

Koko: We have a media group structure. An information structure. We had a cooking
group. We had all this structure before they came to remove the camp.

Adam: In the beginning Oplatz was just about bringing our demands to Berlin. To see
what the politicians can do for us. And we decided to stay until they give us
something. We established some kind of structure.

Turgay: The strategy is to fight on the streets because the problem is not just the
refugee problem-it's a bigger problem. The problem of capitalism. This system of
capitalism is a system of isolation. At Oranienplatz we started with the
demonstrations and all these actions we did because we thought that the majority of
the German population doesn't know about these racist laws and the conditions of the
asylum-seekers.

The accounts demonstrate that for the refugees, the tent-city at Oranienplatz

was a political space with structure, which they could use to articulate their demands

and shift structures. For the refugees, the space ceased to be an extant place of

residence away from their *Lager.* The refugees did not simply physically occupy the

spaces as is the case in many spatial movements, but rather they developed strong ties

with the square and formed structures. Furthermore, the square became a meeting

point for demonstrations and conflicts with the police, local politicians and State

order. Since it allowed for inclusion, equality and contestations of power through

different tactics, Oranienplatz became associated with refugee politics and adopted a

radical tone. Furthermore, Oranienplatz became a representational space, which stood

in direct opposition to state-administered *Lager*, which were situated in far-flung areas so that refugees remained isolated from the larger German society.

Oranienplatz also needs to be understood as a site of ideological struggle. When I first went to the information table at Oranienplatz a refugee activist immediately told me, 'We are here because you (Europeans) destroy our countries' thus making the argument that the 'refugee problem' need to be linked with European colonialism. In this way, the refugee activists used the space to repeatedly convey their ideologies to passers-by. Thus the refugee mobilization in Berlin was instrumental in shifting the meaning of the square such that it came to represent an anticolonial struggle, which came to be intertwined with claims to local space in order to express these positions. As has been pointed out, 'for immigrants and diaspora, colonialism intermixes with local forces at any given moment' (Comaroff 1991).

Oranienplatz aimed to be an open and outward-looking space. Within this spatial framework, the refugee activists formed alliances with neighbours, neighbourhood movements, and established squatting movements. For example, the Refugee Strike Berlin showed solidarity with a long establish squat – the Cuvry Squat. The Cuvry Squat was located on the River Spree in Kreuzberg and reflected the district's alternative culture. The settlement included over a hundred people such as the Romas, homeless people, and a few refugees. As one refugee activist from Iran, Amir, told me, 'the movement tried to get connected with some of the resistance structure that was already going on in the city such as the Cuvry Squat'.

Oranienplatz was also known as a heterogeneous and dynamic space. Differing groups of refugee activists, from different countries, with differing legal status lived in Oranienplatz in order to voice their struggles. For example, in the

course of the 18-month period of the occupation of Oranienplatz in Kreuzberg, refugees who had been fingerprinted in Italy, Greece and Spain and were not permitted to claim asylum in Germany because of the Dublin law, gradually connected with refugee activists from Refugee Strike Berlin. They demanded their rights to work and move freely within Europe. This group known as 'Lampedusa in Berin' explicitly contested the Dublin regulation, spoke of wanting to have more power, leaving their vulnerable and their dire economic conditions in Italy, and seeking the right to live and work in Germany. For this group of refugees, coming to Oranienplatz was also a political transformation, since they did not allow their lives to be suspended in the economically depressed Southern European states. Even though some of their demands differed, this group subsequently decided to form an alliance with the group Refugee Strike Berlin, who had arrived from Würzburg. But the Lampedusa in Berlin group differed in terms of their connections with Oranienplatz. For them, it was clearly a space to articulate their political demands and to find shelter since they did not have any other accommodation in Berlin. They did not necessarily demonstrate the same level of political and affective commitment as the refugees from Refugee Strike Berlin, as they entered into political negotiations with the Green party district. Thus, Oranienplatz took on different meanings for different activist groups.

Oranienplatz needs to be further understood as a site of political tension. For example, relations between supporters and refugee protesters did not always remain amicable. Tensions over tactics, strategies, and use of funds arose frequently. Questions of power and privilege were repeatedly discussed. There was evidence of hierarchy among refugees as well as supporters. There were concerns about sexism since the refugee activists mainly included men.   At the same time, close proximities

and frequent meetings in this context also led to some romantic unions between European supporters and refugee protestors.

There was also evidence of significant tensions between Refugee Strike Berlin and the Lampedusa group. Initially, the two groups tried to reconcile their differences. As Napuli from Refugee Strike Berlin explained, 'But then we had difficulties with the Lampedusa people....but in some ways, we make the same demand, we all wanted the right to stay.' However, the two groups divided when politicians exploited these tensions. For example, one supporter pointed out 'divide and conquer was the politicians' way of gaining control and power of the situation at hand.' She explained that the group from Lampedusa and the asylum-seekers from Germany became divided because they had different demands. However, the differences between the two groups could also be attributed to the ways in which they related to Oranienplatz. The Refugee Strike Berlin group demonstrated stronger political commitment whereas the Lampedusa in Berlin group simply envisioned the site as a temporary place to demand their rights for accommodation in Germany.

Oranienplatz came to represent a site of utmost political resistance and refugee politics when refugee activists and supporters protested against politicians' lack of tolerance for the protest-tent. After months of negotiations were put in action and the tents were dismantled in April 2014, the Lampedusa group entered into an agreement with the Senate and agreed to move into temporary accommodations provided to them. The original group of refugee activists resisted this agreement and understood it as a 'divide and rule' tactic by the government. When the tents were dismantled, this group of refugee activists and their supporters resisted forcefully. Several refugee activists stated:

Adam: Our demand was to close the '*Lager*' and abolish Residenzpflicht. So we didn't accept or sign the agreement. But the other group-the Lampedusa group agreed to sign it.

Asif: The politicians felt that the Lampedusa group was stronger. Bashir was given a lot of power. So he made a list. In the end the Senate said you go and destroy O-Platz. Then some of the refugees came to defend O-Platz. We were successful in stopping the refugees-then the police came. Then the police controlled the entire area.

Napuli: I saw that the circle-tent was not there. I said, 'Are you crazy? Nobody can sell this political ground. It's for nobody. It's for the movement.' Then I saw a tree. I got on the tree. And then when I was on the tree I said everything what we were struggling for but my main point was about the circle-tent of our meeting and the infopoint.

These accounts demonstrate the Refugee Strike Berlin group's political, social, and affective ties with Oranienplatz and the ways in which the meaning of the space shifted. The activists had for two years peacefully occupied the space. However, when the police arrived to dismantle their tents they demonstrated much resistance. This resistance received international attention. Thus, Oranienplatz came to be known as a site of radical politics. This resistance differs from other spatial mobilizations since activists do not necessarily always maintain such strong territorial connections to squares and spaces of protest. For the activists, the physical place and the resistance became intertwined to the extent that they could not envision the resistance to progress in the absence of their physical presence at the square.

The square had become simultaneously the refugees' permanent home and a political site where they lived, slept, ate, held meetings, and planned actions. The tree, that Napuli spoke of came to symbolise an extension of their home, which they occupied to make specific and immediate demands. Furthermore, this action was spontaneous. As Honig (1992) argues, 'often political action comes to us, it involves us in ways that are not deliberate, wilful or intended' (p. 225). Thus the refugees' political actions transformed a treetop to a representational space enmeshed with political structures as negotiations regarding the existence of the info-tent continued

while Napuli remained in the tree. Thus the spatial politics of this particular refugee movement needs understanding in more complex ways than the earlier squatting movements, struggles at borders, and protests at squares. The occupations aimed to gain political visibility and in turn transformed physical spaces to spaces of resistance until specific demands were heard and negotiations could take place. In addition to the tree actions, there were also a series of hunger strikes at the square, which prompted further attention and actions.

While spatial mobilizations are not new, this particular refugee mobilization diverges from other types of spatial political actions. Many types of political activism involve the presence of activists in spaces during protests and squatting, but in this context it was the refugees' and the support network's degree and processes of interaction with the space that helped translate Oranienplatz and the movement to a radical political spatial mobilization. For Lefebvre, space expresses power relations but he argues that it does not undermine their more clandestine or underground aspects. Because of the refugees' demands for major shifts in Germany's and EU's asylum policies, their anticolonial struggles, their radical tactics, their resistance to deportation policies, their struggles with politicians and police, and their alliances with local activism and long-established squats clearly demonstrate that the refugee movement transformed Oranienplatz – a public square - to a key site which represented underground aspects and radical refugee politics.

Refugees' Rights to an Abandoned School Building

The refugees' struggles did not terminate with the expulsion of the protest tent in Oranienplatz. These activists continued to occupy several spaces, resisting eviction when the police and the Senate tried to evict them. However, the resistance and

occupation of these spatialities differed from that of Oranienplatz in terms of

rationale, duration, and the level of involvement of supporters. The following

paragraphs will examine some of these factors.

During the winter period, three months after occupying Oranienplatz, several

refugee activists had relocated to an abandoned school called Gerhart-Hauptmann

Schule with the agreement of the local politicians. Initially, the school served as a

communal space for refugee activists. Over time Roma families, some homeless

people, and musicians also came to live in the school. About 250 men and ten women

lived in the school. The school had a communal room where German classes,

solidarity parties, films, and meetings between refugees and supporters were held.

Although there was no kitchen space, the refugees cooked food on donated stoves.

The school ultimately became a site of resistance. A politician from the Green

party visited the school-site each Friday to negotiate matters about the future of the

school. It soon became apparent that the district's aim was to evict the people in the

school. The people who lived in the Gerhart-Hauptmann-Schule understood this

space as an important site for their resistance. Al-Nour contended:

The school is Oranienplatz. The school is just a place and Oranienplatz is our
political place. It's our project. Everything is here and there. They don't want to find a
solution for the people in the school. But for sure the school is not going to be evicted
like O-Platz.

Similarly, several other refugees understood the school as a political as well as a

social space. The school occupation came to convey multiple social and political

meanings for its occupants. For many refugees it was a relatively free place since they

did not experience the restrictions that they had had in the *Lager*.

As refugee activist Mary told me:

For me the school is perfect. Here there is no control. And the school is a squatted house in Berlin. But it's different from other squatted houses because normally when people are planning to squat they know each other from before. In the school we don't know each other.

Thus for Mary the school could be understood as a site of resistance since its occupation continued to defy *Lager* restrictions. Similarly, other refugee activists understood the school as a site of struggle since they believed that they would have to fight for their rights to remain in the school:

Asem: The school is a really nice place for all the refugees to come together and make actions. I will do anything to save the school. But the politicians will not listen to my voice. So this time we are going to do a big demonstration about the school.

Mohamed: The school is important. We need this space in the school to organize. We are human beings and we need our rights. That is why we are here and we are fighting. We have no idea to resolve this problem because the politicians don't want to come and talk to us. They just want to clean this place and put people in the *Lager*.

The accounts demonstrate the school's political tone. Although the school was initially meant to shelter refugee activists during winter, its meaning soon transformed to that of a political space. This was due to the refugees' battles with politicians and the police, similar to those which occurred during the occupation of Oranienplatz. Thus, the occupation of school needs to be also interpreted in terms of Lefebvre's representational space, embodying complex symbolisms.

The political meaning of the school gained impetus when the threat of eviction became imminent. In order to protest eviction of the refugees from the school, a demonstration took place on 3rd June 2014. The protest was not simply against the eviction, but contained elements that were in continuum with the demands of the larger movement, proving that the occupied school was a socially produced space with a political goal. At one demonstration, which culminated at the City Hall, refugees challenged the transparency of the eviction process in their speeches:

We have built a community in the school. We feel at home at the Gerhart-Hauptmann-Schule. Some say that the Senate is searching for alternative housing. There is a disputed list with names of people who would be granted a house. The Senate is refusing to give the names of the people in a transparent way because every time registration was organized it was cancelled.

When activist Mimi spoke, she called for transparency, but activist Bino reminded

everyone present at the demonstration of the larger goal of the movement:

Control. Control. Wherever they are. Stop threatening people in the school with eviction. We know you are good in eviction. But we want our freedom. If you give us our freedom we are gonna leave your school. We will leave your O-Platz. But there are two announcements: Tomorrow at 3 we will have a meeting at O-Platz. Also we want to call you for our daily cultural evening at O-Platz. Everyone - even Mr. Henkel you are welcome. Even the police you are welcome.

Thus, the speakers at the rally articulated that the school was an important

aspect of the refugee movement. Bino's speech was significant, since he

demonstrated that the occupation of spaces were symbolic acts, representing refugees'

demands for alterations in asylum policies leading to freedom as opposed to control.

Furthermore, his 'welcoming' note suggests a certain degree of irony because of the

many layers of control in place for refugees within Europe**.** Thus the school's

occupation gradually came to be a symbol of refugee resistance.

When the police came to evict the refugees from the school, the majority

agreed to move to the accommodations organised by the district and the Senate.

However, 40 refugees and some supporters stayed and went on the school's roof with

the banner, 'You Can't Evict A Movement.' Thus, the school's rooftop came to

symbolise a site of radical politics. For nine days, 1700 policemen cordoned off

sections of streets around the school. This police presence drew resentment amongst

residents in Berlin. Thousands of Berlin/Kreuzberg residents rallied against these

police actions. There were also refugees who joined the protests. Mary recounted her experience:

I was filming the situation and the police told me not to film them. I told him that I was just filming the situation and not him. He told me to show him the video. But I told the police that I could not show him while I was filming. But they kept telling that this was a police zone. The police always pushed us but then I say 'abuse' 'abuse' and they leave you alone. It was all so empowering.

Refugee activist, Turgay understood the resistance in the following way:

It's the first time such a strong governmental action took place amongst the refugees. It's something special for Europe and that such an action took place. And that all the neighbours showed such solidarity. So the resistance was good. And we have to commune to fight against capitalism and racism.

Thus the school space, which was initially meant to be a shelter from the cold, transformed to a highly contested spatial site. The refugees understood their resistance to be against the local police as well as against macro power structures such as capitalism and racism.

The refugees' resistance transformed a local abandoned school to a site of international focus. These protests continued to receive much national and international attention for the next few weeks. In this process, the refugees' demands translated into 'discourse' since there were a number of occupations and demonstrations, which led to further publicity. The mainstream German media as well as the international media gave substantial coverage to these protests in Berlin. The refugees' resistance and demands were discussed within differing spheres in terms of their complexity.

The spatial resistance at the school differed from the protests at Oranienplatz since the people in the school engaged in a local long-running legal battle.   Unlike Oranienplatz not all of the people in the school were forced out. About 40 refugees

remained in the school and they signed an agreement with the district, which allowed them to remain in the school. Although the people who remained in the school won their spatial rights, the occupation of this space did not serve to help influence asylum policy at a broader level. Local politicians and the refugee activists in the school remained embroiled in these very local contestations and negotiations.   However, it was always made explicit that Oranienplatz was the main site of political resistance and meetings continued to be held at the square.

The nine-day display of protests also needs to be understood in terms of reclaiming of space from the local authorities. The supporters expressed solidarity with refugee activists because they encountered suspension of basic rights such as violation of institutional agreements, strong and continuous presence of police, and restriction of press from entering the protest site. In this regard, ordinary citizens felt threatened which resulted in vast support for refugees in the immediate neighbourhood. However, this level of support did not continue since many supporters ceased to return once the police dissipated. Hence, the refugee struggle came to temporarily intersect with the local neighbourhood struggle against police authorities, restriction of press, and the actions of the local politicians. However, the refugees' actual demands failed to continue to generate mass support in the long term.

The school was simultaneously a site of much tension. Amongst the refugees, Roma families, and homeless people, there were also people living at the school who were involved with the selling of drugs in a nearby park. Thus the school became subject to police raids. There were discussions amongst refugee activists and the support network on how to best resolve this situation. Although many activists believed that the selling of drugs could be explained by structural factors, it was

recognized that it was difficult for many people to live in peace in the school in these conditions, which led to differences of opinion.

There were added tensions when refugees in the school expressed solidarity with a non-refugee local protest group, which campaigned against rising rents, forced evictions, and the neoliberal structuring of the city. However, this alliance met with some criticism since the group was believed to have imposed their values onto the refugee protestors and were believed to have co-opted the refugee protest actions. In one demonstration, this group with the assistance of refugee activists squatted a dwelling, which led to police intervention and arrests. Several refugee activists and supporters criticised this particular action. Thus, the spatial politics of the school were not free of tensions.

The plan for the school was to serve as a social and service centre. Although there were different visions and goals for Oranienplatz and Gerhart-Hauptmann-Schule, the degree of resistance and claims to space overlapped. Hence, because of the refugees' 24-hour per day protests for the right to remain at the school, the police confrontations, the level of visibility attained in the public sphere, the forging of alliances with neighbours, and the incorporation of social media, this space needs to be understood as evidence of radical political ruptures as well as a social site.

Occupations, Ruptures and Political Visibility

In addition to the school, there were other occupations for shorter periods which gained much attention. These spatial actions differed from the occupations at Oranienplatz and the Gerhart-Hauptmann-Schule, which had broader socio-political demands. The motives for these spatial actions were more specific. The aims were to

contest the Dublin II regulation, to promote short-term visibility, and to encourage a church group and trade unions to express solidarity with refugee demands.

Two months following the 9-day protests of June 2014, another group of refugees, 'Lampedusa in Berlin' protested in August upon receiving 'negative' notices from the Senate, informing them that on account of the Dublin regulation they were not eligible to apply for asylum in Germany. This group had entered a six-month agreement with the Senate that their individual cases would be reviewed. However, local authorities failed to fulfil this agreement and within five months of the agreement, 108 refugees received orders to leave the temporary accommodations in hostels provided to them. Some of the refugees went on the roof of one of the hostels to protest the eviction. Others were on Gürtelstraße to protest the end of the agreement. Unlike the protests at the school and Oranienplatz, where the refugee activists and the support network made much broader demands with respect to asylum policies, the refugees who occupied the hostel rooftops and demonstrated on the street were primarily focused on the right to live in Germany for people affected by Dublin II. In this regard, Gürtelstraße and the hostel's rooftop came to be linked with specific refugee politics and contestations of local power.

There were a series of demonstrations and confrontations with the police. The ten refugees on their hostel's rooftop gave press conferences via mobile phones. In this way, Gürtelstraße in Friedrichshain was transformed into a site of resistance. In one instance, the police stopped the demonstration as the protestors approached a café where some musicians were playing. Following this, there was scuffle, which resulted in tables and chairs being overturned. However, the musicians continued to play calmly. Thus, politics and art merged spontaneously on a street corner in Berlin. For Rancière (2010), 'dissensus is a conflict between a sensory presentation and a

way of making sense of it…and this is the way in which dissensus can be said to reside at the heart of politics, since at bottom the latter itself consists in an activity that redraws the frame within which common objects are determined (2010:139). Thus, the political transformation of the street corner could not be denied as the band played on - thus momentarily causing dissensus.

After 13 days of protests, the police cleared the demonstration. Undaunted, 120 refugees and supporters occupied a church in September 2014. A refugee activist Ali gave the following description:

 We came in quietly and with due respect listened to the church service. The priest was very happy to see us because he thought we had come in all seriousness to worship. After the service was finished, then one of the refugees got up and raised his voice stating, 'We are here. We will fight. Freedom of Movement is Everybody's Right!'

The refugees occupied the church for four days until the church helped find about a hundred refugees a temporary place to live and they have continued to receive church protection. The German media covered their actions. Thus, the refugees shifted the meaning of a religious place to that of a site concerned with refugee politics in Berlin.

In addition to the three groups, another group, 'Refugees Struggle for Freedom' also arrived in Berlin in July 2014 from different asylum accommodations. This group occupied the TV Tower at Alexanderplatz with the sole purpose of gaining short-term visibility. They stayed in the tower for a few hours until the police cleared them out. This action was followed by a hunger strike at Brandenburg Tor where they also had to confront the police.   These actions bore some resemblance to those of Lampedusa in Berlin who had occupied a hostel's rooftop since a spatial meaning

was temporarily shifted; however, the actions differed in that Refugee Struggle for Freedom temporarily changed the meaning of a well-known tourist attraction with significant visibility to that of a protest site related to asylum politics.

Subsequently, the Refugee Struggle for Freedom occupied the floor of the Federation of German Trade Unions in Berlin (DGB-DeutscherGewerkschaftsbund) in October 2014 in order to gain solidarity from the trade unions. The trade union building was transformed from an ordered space to a site which symbolised resistance - where refugees ate, slept, and held press conferences and meetings.   This group's strategies were similar to the strategies of the Refugee Strike Berlin, and the Lampedusa group because they aimed to make their demands heard through occupying spaces; but they also differed, since their goal was not to demand shifts in asylum policy, but rather to gain support and solidarity from the trade unions. The refugees told me that they planned to stay in the building because they hoped to receive concrete support from the trade union. Another refugee activist then explained to me their specific demands from the trade union, which included receiving legal protection from the union, having a meeting with 8 of the member trade unions, finding a way for the refugees to become active members of the trade union, and assisting them in finding a responsible person from the Bundesrat (representatives of the German Federal States) to speak with them. In this regard, their spatial action can be arguably understood as part of refugee politics since the group's requests extended beyond demanding their rights to residence. In fact, their particular demands needed to be understood in terms of striving for refugees' rights for equal membership in society.

The refugees resided in the DGB lounge for week. Through everyday acts of resistance the refugees helped transform the lounge of DGB to a space of political

intervention for refugees. The weekend they occupied this building coincided with the weekend when the marathon in Berlin was taking place. In front of the building a small banner hung with the words 'Kein Mensch ist Illegal' (No human being is illegal). As I entered the building, the refugees were engaged in everyday acts of resistance.   Two men of Pakistani origin were sitting on the floor watching the runners go by through the glass doors. On one end of the room, there were three Ethiopian women who were combing each other's hair. There were others who were resting or engaged in conversations. The group additionally held press conferences in the DGB building where they articulated these demands. Thus the DGB building became a contested site.

This group had managed to stay in the building for an entire week, pressing on with their demands, until on 2nd October 2014, 200 policemen intervened and evicted them, transforming the DGB building to a highly contested and visible political site. On that day, twenty refugees had chained themselves together and the eviction process was publicized in the media and the federation of the German trade union met much criticism. It was noted that the DGB simply acted as the arm of the State. The website of "Klasse gegen Klasse", a German-language online magazine which focuses on class struggles, reported: 'Today was probably the biggest police intervention in trade union buildings since the SA stormed the trade union buildings in 1933 as a "helping police"'. Other media accounts included that of RT, the Russian 24/7 news channel which ran a video clip with the headline: 'Chained protest: Police clear out refugees resisting eviction in Berlin (VIDEO)'. A Spanish independent online news-media outlet published a full account of the resistance among refugees and their eviction by the 200 police. A German newspaper, Taz, reported that several trade unions in Germany denounced the police operation of the DGB. More significantly,

the trade unions called for two meetings with the refugees concerning the eviction of the DGB Berlin-Brandenburg house. They made a public written statement expressing their support and solidarity with the refugees. Tyler (2013) writes that protests may 'register as little more than minor disturbances within the public sphere, but the restaging and repetition of these acts form part of a critical practice of counter-mapping which creates an unravelable fabric of political resistance within the state and beyond its borders' (p. 103).

The political act of 25 refugees who occupied the lounge of the DGB headquarters itself did not garner substantial support during the week-long occupation, since only three non-refugees provided constant support. But this resistance did result in creating an interruption in the public sphere since there was overt criticism and questioning of the role of the umbrella organisation of the German trade union. Thus, this action gained coverage in differing spheres leading to debates about the trade union's role within refugee politics, once again translating the demands into discourse. The refugees gained some support from teachers' unions and young members of trade unions. Thus, similar to the TV tower, this space became known for its refugee politics. Although this mobilization was relatively short-lived, the police contestations, the visibility, the inclusion of social media and the press conferences gave the space a radical tone.

A significant difference between Refugee Struggle for Freedom and the other groups was that the former's spatial actions did not always include the presence of supporters.   They preferred to first formulate their actions independently and subsequently ask supporters for assistance. Refugee Struggle for Freedom believed that in this manner any potential tensions between supporters and refugees could be

eradicated. However, the refugees did expect their actions to be supported and expressed disappointment when relatively few non-refugee activists demonstrated support. In this regard, Refugee Struggle for Freedom's actions differed from the Refugee Strike Berlin and Lampedusa in Berlin actions groups since the latter's spaces of occupation were clearly dominated by refugees.

Supporters of the refugee movement posted updates on tweet-spheres such as #Ohlauerstraße, #Gürtelstraße, #Thomaskirche. Thus, the inclusion of social media further demonstrated the ways in which everyday spatial practices and representational spaces come together. In this manner, the refugee movement needs to be understood as a contemporary spatial movement representing a new species of social movement similar to other spatial movements (Castells, 2012:15). Refugee activists provided short interviews of themselves, which were uploaded on You Tube and various websites. In this way, these geographies become virtually linked and associated with refugee politics.

The Public, Policy and Spaces

The understandings of these spaces for the refugee activists themselves can best be defined in political terms - transforming their extant meanings - since they utilized these spaces to make political demands and in turn managed to rupture the given power structures of spaces such as public squares, a school, rooftops, iconic buildings, a church and a trade-union building. However at the same time, for some refugee activists seeking significant changes and solutions, the occupations ultimately were of little consequence, since their visibility and actions did not lead to significant changes in Germany's asylum policy. There were some amendments to the *Residenzpflicht* law and rights to work. But the *Lager* remained in operation subject to

an increasing number of arson attacks. A year later, in 2015, there was also an amendment of the Dublin regulation for Syrian refugees. At the very local level, twenty of the two hundred people who occupied Gerhart-Hauptmann-Schule were finally allowed to stay following several court battles. However, the goal for the school to work as a self-organised social international centre remains questionable.

On a broader level, the number of deportations to countries of origin and to EU countries of entry increased. The refugee movement did not have much of an impact on public sentiments at a larger level. Because of the mobilization's very radical and anti-authoritarian tone there was immense initial coverage of the movement within various media outlets. However, turnout in demonstrations began to slowly dwindle after October 2014.

Refugee concerns among the large public outside the movement did not generate much interest until July 2015 when increasing numbers of refugees were left without housing since the State office for Health and Social Affairs (LaGeSo) was unable to provide them with adequate services. In September 2015, a *Willkommen* initiative was launched and several Germans welcomed Syrian refugees who arrived by train via Hungary and Austria and Italy. This favourable public response, however, was somewhat of the independent of the refugee movement and did not serve to change any structural conditions for the refugees. The refugee activists and the support networks continue to grapple with questions of strategies that will ultimately lead to significant changes in asylum-policies in Germany and the EU.

Conclusions

The occupations of spaces by refugee activists can thus be understood in reference to Lefebvre's theoretical work; as an ongoing struggle between an 'abstract space'- a mental space, where refugees remain excluded and 'representational space'- a symbolic space where refugee activists and their supporters insisted on gaining visibility, displaying their ideologies and aiming to get their political demands met. However, most significantly the spatial protests need to be understood in connection with refugees' broader demands. These protests were not exclusively about refugees' 'rights to the city', 'anti-gentrification protests', and 'urban anti-authoritarian protests'. In this manner refugees' spatial mobilization differed from other spatial mobilizations since it had less to do with direct concerns and issues related to urban spaces. This mobilization further differed from border spatial struggles such as in Calais where the primary aim for refugees is to contest the physical borders and cross into the neighbouring country.

Refugee activists embodied spaces to voice their demands. Because it was non-citizens who embodied multiple spatialities, the process became more complex. There were tensions amongst refugee activists, amongst supporters and between supporters and refugee activists. Furthermore, refugee activists were far more vulnerable than citizens since they had defied the restriction of movement law and thus encountered constant threats of deportation. In this regard, the refugees' mobilization needs to be understood as a radical turn.

The occupation of spaces became an important tactic since it did lead to the forging of alliances, visibility and much press coverage for the refugees. The refugee activists aligned with supporters who were citizens of varying nations within Europe,

so that in some instances, the divisions between supporters and refugees either surfaced or became blurred, especially when supporters, who self-identified themselves as students, artists, cultural workers, anarchists, and neighbours also became the subject of police and state control.

The refugees' movement translated to an infinite political movement since even after the occupation of spaces ceased, refugee groups continued to meet, put forward publications, give speeches, work with theatre groups and cultural workers and hold exhibitions about the movement. In doing so, the political actors inadvertently demonstrated that they could belong to a range of socio-political milieux in Germany. As Nyers (2006) citing Cherfi, argues, 'We need to be radical. That is the best way we are going to grow and be effective…People who are directly affected need to be the ones fighting and creating this movement with allies' (p. 64).

The refugees and the space of their actions gained much visibility even though the occupations were short-lived**.** The question of visibility in public spaces such as squares and public buildings is important, since it is through continued visibility that refugees can make their own political demands and shift the 'Othering' present within the larger society. Refugee protests are important not only because they focus on policy changes, but also because they help refugees attain visibility in the public sphere and promote alternative discourses. Thus refugees, asylum-seekers, and destitute individuals who are 'uncounted' acquire visibility through challenging the same social mechanisms, which control their freedom within and across states. It is this visibility which in turn transforms their politics into discourse. Rancière (1999) understands the term politics as an extremely determined activity antagonistic to

policing and legal institutions: 'whatever breaks with the tangible

configuration…political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to

it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen,

and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes

understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise' (p. 30). Refugees usually

excluded from ordered spaces such as the TV tower, Trade Union Building, public

square and the streets transgressed the notion of a 'safe' public/private space.   The

occupations, the spatial practices of non-refugees living in Berlin, and the abstract

spaces of State order interconnected and served to produce contested political spaces

which in turn helped refugees attain visibility and promote alternate discourses.

Notes

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[i]The supporters were from varying states including Germany, Italy, France, Britain, Serbia and the United States.
[ii] "Kein Mensch ist illegal" is the name of a political movement that originated in the asylum-debates in the early 1990s and was institutionalized at the Documenta X, an art exhibition, which takes place every five years in Kassel..
[iii] Asylum-seekers were subject to compulsory residence within their state of jurisdiction.
[iv] The refugee-activists employed the term *Lager* to convey the difficult conditions they encountered in the refugee shelters. I use the term *Lager* since it conveys the refugee-activists' position.

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