Asylstaffetten – A longitudinal ethnographic study of protest walks against the detention of asylum seekers in Sweden

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Asylstaffetten – A longitudinal ethnographic study of protest walks against the detention of asylum seekers in Sweden

Martin Joormann

Abstract

Based on longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork, this article analyses the social movement campaign Asylstaffetten, which since 2013 has been staging protest walks for the rights of refugees in Sweden. Focusing on the ‘immigrant detention centre’ (in Swedish förvar), the article discusses the observation that pro-refugee protest has occurred repeatedly in front of one of those migrant imprisonment facilities, namely the Swedish Migration Board’s förvar in Åstorp. Being located close enough to the social movement base of self-organized refugee activism in Malmö, this specific migrant imprisonment facility has become a site of re-occurring protest because it is there that the identity of the unwanted noncitizen materialized. Another observation is the collective oppositional identity that emerged during these protests. This temporarily shared identity, in opposition to the imprisonment of people seeking asylum, is discussed against the conceptual backdrop of ‘hostipitality’ in the form of ‘hospitality-hostility’ towards refugees in present-day Sweden. Finally, Asystafetten is contextualised as a part of the transnational social movement for refugee rights.

Keywords: Protest; Refugee Rights; Sweden; Collective Identities, ‘Hostipitality’

Introduction

Recently, the political debate in the Swedish-speaking public sphere has shifted away from a hegemonic discourse about ‘the refugee crisis’ (of 2015/16) understood as an existential threat to national solidarity and social order (see Barker 2018; cf. Sager and Öberg, 2017). Instead, much of the public
debate about refugees has placed attention on the question whether ‘Afghanistan is safe enough’ (to deport to). On 25 October 2017, for example, it was the popular documentary series *Uppdrag granskning* that devoted one of its episodes to *Afghanistanutvisningarna* (‘the Afghanistan expulsions’). In the beginning of this episode, ‘forced expulsions’ (*tvångsutvisningar*) are represented as a problem that affects not only the lives of the deportees. Into the eighth minute of the video, the narrator and main producer of the show, Janne Josefsson, describes protests initiated by young people seeking asylum from Afghanistan. He comments on these demonstrations, which took place in the summer of 2017 in Stockholm, with the following words: “[...] the question has become all the more infected and politically sensitive for Sweden, a humanitarian country [...]”.

Hence from a viewpoint that represents methodological nationalism as it can be expressed outside of academia (see Wimmer and Schiller, 2003; cf. Scheibelhofer, 2016), Josefsson repeated a discursive practice that had been dominant throughout the period of 2015-2016. ‘The refugee crisis’ (*flyktingkrisen*) was considered mainly from the perspective of the Swedish state, its bureaucracy and migration administration. It was this discourse that, by mid-2016, had legitimized the curtailing of refugee rights to a ‘minimum level’ (*miniminivå*), in order to gain ‘breathing space’ (*andrum*) for Sweden (see Barker, 2018). Elsewhere, I have problematized these discursive practices and subsequent politico-legal changes that altered the practices of Sweden’s relative welcoming refugee policy (Joormann, 2017). Until ‘the temporary law’ (*den tillfälliga lagen*) of July 2016 was implemented, accepted asylum applicants were generally granted permanent residence permits (Sager and Öberg, 2017). Under the current regulation, however, only the comparably small number of ‘quota refugees’ (*kvotflyktingar*) will receive permanent residence permits. For the majority of people seeking asylum in present-day Sweden, receiving a positive answer to their asylum application will result in a temporary residence permit valid for merely 13 months.

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2 For a limited period of time (until 4 May 2018), the episode can be watched via the following link: https://www.svtplay.se/video/15611392/uppdrag-granskning/uppdrag-granskning-sasong-18-avsnitt-10?start=auto (last accessed 29-10-2017).

3 As Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2003: 576) put it when they coined the term, “[m]ethodological nationalism is the naturalization of the nation-state by the social sciences. Scholars who share this intellectual orientation assume that countries are the natural units for comparative studies, equate society with the nation-state, and conflate national interests with the purposes of social science.”
For this article, the most important point made in the documentary is the identification of a significant connection between deportations and self-organized refugee rights protests. As the last resort of a nation-state that has decided to exclude certain people who are seeking asylum – be it, in the respective legal case, an individual or a family – a deportation is the ultimate measure of exclusion that effectively “removes” (Bibler Coutin, 2010) a noncitizen from national territory (see De Genova and Peutz, 2010). As a prerequisite to facilitate deportations, critical migration scholars have identified detention (Khosravi, 2009) as one example of materiality (see Keshavarz, 2016) through which unwanted noncitizens become ‘deportables’ (Holgersson, 2011). Protest against this form of imprisonment – being one of the few examples of frihetsberövande (lit. ‘robbing-of-freedom) that is in Sweden decided outside criminal law – will be the focus of the article at hand (see also Westfelt, 2008).

Focusing on one specific example of such protest, this article is concerned with the Sweden-based, pro-refugee social movement campaign Asylstafetten (see Djampour and Söderman, 2016). As I have elaborated in a paper published right after the first protest ‘relay’ (stafett) in 2013, the campaign was initially built around the engagement of a young asylum seeker from Afghanistan, and supported by different social movement organisations in Malmö (Joormann, 2014; cf. Barker 2015; Nordling et al., 2017). This initial walk, in which I participated for research, took us from Malmö to Stockholm, travelling for 34 days and over a distance of roughly 750 kilometers. The march had departed in mid-July, and we arrived in Stockholm in mid-August 2013. While the first day of walking from Malmö to Lund had mobilised some 400-500 people, there were about 30 participants who travelled the whole distance (Joormann, 2014; cf. Djampour and Söderman, 2016).

A year after the initial Refugee Protest March through Germany in 2012, while Asylstafetten was walking through Sweden in 2013, refugees were occupying a central public space in the German capital, staging a dry hunger strike at Pariser Platz right in front of the Brandenburg Gate and the US Embassy (RSFF, 2013). Moreover, by temporarily squatting the office of the European Commission, placing the banner “Stop Killing Refugees” across the main entrance, the scale of protest shifted towards a supranational focus on Brussels’ responsibility (SSRG, 2013). In the following summer of 2014, the

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4 To my knowledge, this protest march from Wurzburg to Berlin in the summer of 2012 has been the first in Europe that was organized mainly by refugees themselves, see e.g. http://thevoiceforum.org/node/2790.
protest form of pro-refugee marches finally became transnational. The ‘Freedom March’ (or: ‘march4freedom’) departed from Kehl, went across the German-French border to Strasbourg and, via the small town Schengen in Luxembourg, to its destination Brussels (Joormann, 2015).

The data on which the article is based includes material from longitudinal (2013-2017) participant observation. Initially, I began to collect this data through around-the-clock participation in Asylstafetten 2013. This included 30 days and more than 750 kilometres of travelling, i.e. mostly walking (see Vergunst and Ingold 2008). After this initial protest walk, it was in Lund in June 2014, in front of the förvar in Åstorp in August 2015, in Malmö in July 2016 and, once more, northwards from Malmö in June 2017, that I re-joined as a participating researcher in order to conduct engaged fieldwork (see Sluka 2012; Kosmatopoulos 2012) from a position that Karen O’Reilly (2009: 50-156) calls “the participant as observer”. What time-and-again captured my interest during this longitudinal fieldwork, over by now more than four years, is the importance of the förvar in Åstorp, about 70 kilometres north of Malmö.

The most emotional protest event – marked by a serious anxiety attack expressed through the screams and tears of one of the participants – that I observed during the initial walk in 2013 emerged in front of this migrant imprisonment facility. The social movement campaign then returned to the site with a protest on bicycles in September 2013, and thereupon had it as its destination in 2015. Also in 2016, on its way from Malmö to Sweden’s second-largest city Gothenburg, the protest walk stopped there for a demonstration.

**Förvar as Camps for Concentrating the Unwanted?**

The criminalization of migration has become central to the policy of governing through crime (supranote: Simon 2007). It creates criminals to be able to punish them. Redefining a social issue as crime, and categorizing an affected group as criminals, is a political strategy to legitimate further intervention into matters not previously regarded as criminal (supranote: Dauvergne, 2008) (Khosravi, 2010: 21).

Towards the end of a beautiful summer day in July 2013, we reached the mentioned förvar close to the Scanian small-town of Åstorp. As we approached the building, judging from the facial expression of the participants,
there was a clear distinction observable within the group; between those who had been detained in such a building, and the ones who had not experienced such imprisonment. While this appears to be obvious, maybe it is less obvious to reason that the danger of being detained, expelled and/or deported in the future deepens this divide that is rooted in, primarily, residence status and citizenship (see Holgersson, 2011). The different identities of either citizen or noncitizen thus constrained the possibility of building solidarity with those imprisoned; at least such solidarity that is based on first-hand, personal experiences of detention, expulsion and deportation. Or, as one participant who had been deported from Sweden as a child, but today holds a Swedish passport, formulated their thoughts on the symbolic importance of this site:

[The detention center in] Åstorp made a deep impression. Therefore, we could move the detention centre to Medborgarplatsen [a square in central Stockholm]. The Swedish government wants to isolate people and Medborgarplatsen in the middle of Stockholm is the place where the isolation must be symbolized. We should have a performance, maybe dressed-out as police officers, at the same time as we are talking to the people.

On site, another participant shouted into the microphone: “Why is this called detention (förvar)? Isn’t it more honest to call it prison (fängelse) or camp (läger)?” An activist from ‘Action against deportation’ (Aktion mot deportation) then addressed in particular those participants who had come to such a place for the first time: “By locking up people, the population is divided. Sweden is divided into citizens (medborgare) and non-citizens (icke-medborgare).” In the meantime, a car had driven by and the passengers had shown us their middle fingers...

In spite of this openly displayed hostility (Benhabib et al., 2006: 182; cf. Derrida, 2000), the planned demonstration proceeded by chanting “No Borders No Nations - Stop Deportations”. Then the group sang “And if we try as hard as we can, and if we try as hard as we can, the wall will fall, fall, fall, it is rotten to the core”, a song composed for the ‘Asylum Musical’ (Asylmusikalen), which had been staged several months before the campaign in Malmö. Later on, a participant touched upon the crucial difference of personally having or not having experienced detainment:

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6 To avoid the gendered binary of ‘the two sexes’, and to safeguard the anonymity of the research participants as much as possible, when referring to participants I am using the pronouns ‘they’, ‘them’ and ‘their’ also for individuals.
I can never talk about how it is to sit in a detention centre (fövar), or how asylum policy could be improved. I can only stress the oppression. As a matter of fact, I have been deported, but not because I applied for asylum, it was because I applied for residence permit. But now I use the formal power I have within the third sector, civil society [...] but I also have responsibility for those people who are here with Asylstafetten. They need the privilege of interpretation (tolkningsföreträdet). And when we meet the media it is not my task to talk.

The same participant developed those thoughts on their role in relation to the identity\(^7\) of a former noncitizen, who had become a non-white citizen of Sweden – a “naturalized citizen” (Gardner, 2010: 202) – by arguing the following about förvar, which the participant quoted further above had proposed to be re-framed as “prisons”, or “camps”:

To be detained (förvarad) in a detention facility (förvarshuset) is, after all, oppression by the system in its most concrete form [...] And when there is such a performance of violence, if you take away a human being’s freedom, it gets very important who holds power [...] I, for example, have my citizenship, I am not white, but I can freely walk on the street. I have to take responsibility, the responsibility to be here in solidarity with every paperless person who cannot be here, because they are afraid in public spaces.

These reflections should be read against the background of the possibility to be granted protection and to be allowed to stay in Sweden, i.e. within the limits of Europe’s governance of refugees and the policy of offering the perspective of being allowed to apply for asylum in the European Global North\(^8\), yet without providing any legal ways\(^9\) to travel there (Karakayali and Rigo, 2010: 129ff.). Since, if one is not allowed to enter EU-territory and/or the Schengen Area, but at the same time confronted with the possibility to be

\(^7\) I am using the word identity in two main ways. In regard to residence (permits), I am referring to a person’s identity as this is defined through citizenship (or the lack thereof, which concerns stateless noncitizens). Yet, when mentioning collective identity, I am drawing on the European strand of Social Movement Theory and, in particular, Alberto Melucci’s idea that collective action leads to the formation of (temporary) collective identities among those who participate in activism (see Melucci, 1996; cf. Klandermans and De Weerd, 2002).

\(^8\) With European Global North (cf. MacGregor, 2017: 3), I am referring to those relative wealthy European countries that are not developing countries. Thus, I argue that for example Switzerland and Norway are part of the European Global North without being EU member states, while Romania and Bulgaria are not part of the European Global North despite the fact that they are EU countries. This can exemplified by the fact that the EU-countries Bulgaria and Romania are, as of today (2018), not incorporated into the Schengen Area.

\(^9\) An exception is those aforementioned ‘quota refugees’ re-settled to Europe by UNHCR.
legally recognized as in need of protection through applying for refugee asylum from within these territories, what are the alternatives to irregular migration? Against the backdrop of this seemingly paradoxical policy, it might indeed be accurate to understand migration control as “[...] a technology by means of which the ‘outside’ is captured within the national juridical order (i.e., the field of the political), which seeks coherence and ascertains the boundaries of its political community through the lines of exception” (Andrijasevic, 2010: 161).

It is in this context that the interviewed ‘naturalized’ citizen, then as an ‘activist’\(^\text{10}\) for the rights of two differently disadvantaged (yet possibly overlapping) groups (LGBTIAQ-people & refugees), had a point when relating the issue to a discussion about the actual forms of social harm and structural violence that migrants are experiencing differently in different contexts (for gendered forms harm, see Canning, 2017). Since citizen rights (as opposed to human rights, see Benhabib, 2016) are by definition tied to the concept of citizenship (Corneliesse, 2010; cf. Arendt, 1976), a consideration of the identity of noncitizen can confront also citizens of the EU with different images of ‘their’ societies. The abstract notion of rule of law, much based on Western liberal law’s “promise of certainty” (Banakar, 2015: 13), does, in this context, not relate to the lived experiences of people seeking asylum (Canning, 2017: 2ff.) – quite simply because they can be expelled from the territory where this rule of law shall apply (Bibler Coutin, 2010: 368). This becomes even more clearly visible when examining the ‘non-identity’ of people without (the right) papers, i.e. undocumented people: “The undocumented position emerges as a legal category defined only through omission, produced and reproduced through administrative routine and practice”, as Erika Sigvardsdotter (2012: 4) aptly summarizes the situation in Sweden.

Yet one more detail becomes palpable if close attention is paid to how the participant cited above formulated their claim of representation. While stressing the personal experience of applying unsuccessfully for a residence permit, of then being deported and of, finally, being granted Swedish citizenship, they highlighted the fact that “the paperless” were the ones “who cannot be here”. The Swedish state provides to its citizens, but also to people registered as asylum seekers and other (temporarily) legally residing individuals, the opportunity to perform legally accepted forms of protest,

\(^{10}\) While Victoria Canning (2017) prefers to use the term people seeking asylum rather than asylum seekers, I find that the word activist has a connotation of permanence – as if people would be activists throughout their entire lives. In most cases, however, people participate temporarily in activism.
generally also in front of a migrant imprisonment facility. However, this legal right is *de facto* denied to the ones who are the most directly affected, i.e. undocumented people. During *Asylstaffetten*, the identity of being ‘paperless’ was represented as ‘in solidarity with the paperless’. In reference to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1988: 72ff.) conceptual distinction, it was merely possible to “re-present” the paperless, because representatives of this group could not be present.

What became further understandable from the narratives of a participant from Afghanistan is a detail which can otherwise be easily overlooked. Asylum regulations in Sweden, Europe and the Global North more generally tend to benefit young asylum seekers, who have considerably higher chances to be granted asylum, if they can prove to be ‘unaccompanied minors’ (in Swedish *ensamkommande flyktingbarn*, i.e. younger than 18 and travelling without parents). Indirectly, this practice thereby favours young people seeking asylum who succeeded with their “transgressive travels” (Khosravi, 2007: 330) to (and often through) Europe.

Behind the humanitarian motive of protecting children, one can meanwhile identify the policy aim of socially and economically ‘integrating’ the young and able – young people who have proven to be physically and psychologically resistant individuals. As Holgersson (2011: 255) stresses in reference to Nicholas De Genova’s analysis of undocumented people living in the US, many migrants in North America are left ‘in limbo’ also in order to “provide employers with cheap labor by threatening people with deportation without actually deporting them”; a practice that Holgersson, however, does not consider as a part of Swedish immigration policies “in the same way” as in the US. The European governance of refugees offers the prospect of legal residence to people who seek refuge, i.e. people who have made it despite the obstacles. This being noted, with migrant imprisonment facilities such as *förvaret i Åstorp*, Europe has established places that are *de jure* not prisons and, yet, *de facto* sites to imprison those who are unwanted (cf. Khosravi, 2010: 102).

That summer evening in 2013, the collective reaction from within the group mirrored this reality while standing in front of such a building. Tears, screams, and then primarily one response: anger. As we had listened collectively to several stories told by the detainees, who spoke from the inside via mobile

11 Despite the view of the OECD (2015) that in Sweden “the growth in inequality between 1985 and the early 2010s was the largest among all OECD countries”, Sweden is still strongly influenced by, among other results of long-term social-democratic rule, relatively protective labour regulations.
phone and amplifier, many participants started to approach the mirrored windows of the building, trying to get close enough to somehow see through the cleanliness of the façade. One participant stepped forward and exclaimed into the microphone: “This is a system which has to be demolished!”

Regardless of the different political identities in the group, this moment constituted an instance of identity shift (McAdam et al., 2001: 27; Tilly and Tarrow, 2007: 206). Apart from the different framings as to how radical such “change” should (and could) be realized, a process of collective identity formation (Melucci, 1989) developed around a consensus that agreed on the following, common political position. Migrant imprisonment facilities, at least in their current form, should be challenged. The collective identity of the group could thus fill the 2013-walk’s loose slogan of “For a humane refugee policy” with some meaning.

The solidarity with the imprisoned, however, differed significantly concerning the envisaged ambition of change; from humanitarian engagement to make migration control, and thereby also migrant imprisonment, (more) “humane”, to radically altering, or “demolishing the system”. Moreover, group identification shifted in this moment from the inside towards the outside of the group (see Klandermans and DeWeerd, 2000). The imprisoned people could have been fellow participants, had they not been detained. Thus, some of the manifestations of borders, residency and citizenship statuses became materially tangible (see Keshavarz, 2016) – also for those who had, until then, only known them abstractly.

This concrete experience of protesting in front of a materialization of exclusion moreover illustrated the position of ‘the irregular migrant’, representing an existence in permanent risk of detainment and deportation; utvisningsbara (‘deportables’), as Helena Holgersson (2011) calls this position. She clarifies her terminology as follows: “In general discussions I refer to my informants as noncitizens, and in more specific parts of the analysis as asylum seekers and deportables respectively, depending on whether they have received a deportation order yet or not” (Holgersson, 2013: 248). Thereby, she adjusted her terminology to the legal status of her informants and, thus, stressed the importance of law for the right to citizenship and residence. It was under this impression of inequality due to differing statuses of legal residency that a participant from Britain, who wrote about the 2013-walk in a blog (Martyn, 2013), formulated the following interpretation, after he had been standing for the first time in front of a Swedish förvar:
I wonder if the benign nature of this building speaks of governmental hope of keeping difficult issues out of mind and out of sight? I wonder if it is an act of patronage, of protecting its citizens from spending their time worrying about the complexities and consequences of migration politics. I see a process of social blindness, where difficult truths are kept out of sight, forgotten or not looked for. [...] There are some simple truths about this detention centre: The people contained in these centres have not proven themselves a risk to society. Nor are they being contained for any crime. They are being detained because they are not citizens of Sweden. They are being detained because their request to live in Sweden has been rejected. They are being detained because the authorities presume that they will hide to avoid deportation. [...] It is hard to imagine what it is like, as a lifelong legal citizen of Europe, to be on the other side of this line. And why is living in a country illegally preferable to living in your country of origin?” (Martyn, 2013, my emphases in italics).

It is important to stress that this description is partially incorrect in the Swedish context. As for instance Lisa Westfelt has elaborated, also in Sweden a noncitizen can be sentenced to ‘expulsion because of crime’ (utvisning pga brott). In this sense, also in Sweden ‘crimmigration’, i.e. the conflation of criminal law and immigration law, is practiced (for the UK-context, see e.g. Bosworth and Turnbull, 2015). In other words, one consequence of being a noncitizen with a criminal conviction in Sweden can be detention in order to enforce deportation.

Yet, by admitting that it “is hard to imagine what it is like, as a lifelong legal citizen of Europe”, Martyn points to a significant problem. Imagination is needed, also after awareness has been established. The possibility of being entirely unaware of the existence of these sites (in rather isolated locations) Martyn relates to a “governmental hope of keeping difficult issues out of mind and out of sight”. Becoming aware of the mere existence of such places does, however, not equate to the experience of having been imprisoned inside one – a detail which was stressed also by the participant who is cited further above. During the 2013-walk, awareness of the existence of these facilities as places for imprisoning the unwanted could lead towards the formation of the collective identity of a non-politicized humanitarian solidarity among certain participants, but also to a further politicized radical solidarity directed against “the system”.

How then could the knowledge that such migration imprisonment facilities exist, and that these buildings – in the eyes of people who visit them – tend to display similarities to “prisons” or “camps”, be further developed to evoke solidarity also among those people who had not been detained, and who are
not in acute danger to be locked up there in the future? This question is both connected to the movement’s general difficulty of mobilizing larger shares of society and to individual standpoints such as being against deportations but, at the same time, for some form of immigration control.

**Two Years Later: Asylstafetten 2015**

In the morning of 18 August 2015, I once more joined a protest walk, this time for its last two days on the way to Åstorp; 30 kilometres up to the förvar, followed by 24-hours manifestation constituted mainly by camping, protesting and finally performing a short theatre play in front of it. In a catch phrase, it would become ‘camping outside the camp’. While walking the first hours with the group, after greeting familiar faces and introducing myself to less familiar ones, I got involved in a longer conversation with one participant. Already during the first walk in 2013, and since then quite regularly in Malmö, I have had longer talks with this person, who had migrated to Sweden more than 40 years ago. Now, I must introduce the opinions that are reflected in what follows as rather an exception than the views of a representative of the group’s more collective standpoint. However, it is analytically important to cite this participant, on migrant imprisonment facilities in general and on the determination of a refugee’s ‘credibility/genuineness’ (trovärdighet) in particular. This is important precisely because these views are based on the conviction that a politico-legal regulation, and therefore also a certain control and limitation, of migration to Sweden is needed. The participant explained why they marched, namely in protest against “the current detention system” (det nuvarande förvarssystemet); a stance that was developed as follows:

If someone for example arrives to Italy, but goes on to Sweden, then one applies for a residence permit in Sweden – full stop! I mean that this Dublin Regulation must be taken away, totally. If one comes to Greece and is provided neither with food nor with a roof over one’s head or anything else, and if one goes on to another EU country, then it is there one applies [for refugee status].

At the same time, they identified the severe shortage of affordable housing as a problem which further complicated the seeking of asylum:

[The housing situation] is very tricky, because many young Swedes still live at home with their parents, because they cannot get a rental apartment or the initial 10 per cent of the real estate’s price [handpenningen] that are
needed to buy an apartment. And there are far too few student apartments. This makes it of course even more difficult for refugees, but one thing is clear as well: That all municipalities in Sweden together must contribute to a solution of the problem.

The participant thereby touched on an important aspect of the complex dynamics that influence the debate on Sweden’s responsibility as well as ability to welcome asylum seekers. A few weeks before this day of walking through Scania, I had read a *Guardian*-article that linked the electoral success of the ultranationalist *Sverigedemokraterna* (‘The Sweden Democrats’) to the current housing shortage, and – indirectly – also to ‘care racism’ (Mulinari and Neergaard 2014; 2015), i.e. a form of social exclusion that evolves around the standpoint that “we have to care about own people”. From a trip to the annual politics-event *Almedalen* in Visby, *Guardian*-journalist Julian Coman reports as follows:

Ragna, a policewoman from Västerås, had travelled to Visby for the day to hear Åkesson [*Sverigedemokraterna*’s chairman]. ‘Instead of taking more and more people in, we have to take better care of the people who are already here,’ she says. ‘We have housing shortages that means our young people are trapped living with their parents. If times are tough and the state doesn’t have money, we have to think about our own people’ (Coman, 2015).

This view of refugees as competitors, for example on the housing market, is obviously not in any way a specifically Swedish perspective. Yet, the current severe shortage of affordable housing is an issue that is a constant worry for everyone who lives in Sweden’s bigger cities – and who is not part of the upper (middle) classes. Political scientists Sören Holmberg and Henrik Oscarsson have claimed that it is in particular men, members of the Labor Union (*LO*), recipients of social benefits, pensioners, the lowly educated and/or unemployed, and Scanians (*skåningar*), who have voted for *Sverigedemokraterna* in the 2014-national elections (Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2016). In direct reference to this study, writer and journalist Jan Guillou (2016) reasoned as follows: “That so many recipients of social benefits support the Sweden Democrats can be interpreted as self-interest; they think that immigrants threaten their benefits.”

With some hesitations, I share Guillou’s interpretation of this particular motivation (among others) of anti-migrant hostility (Benhabib et al., 2006: 182; cf. Derrida 2000) and consequential support for culturally racist (Mulinari and
Neergaard, 2014; 2015) politics. The Swedish housing market today is a social field where in particular the socioeconomically marginalized strata of the population may perceive migrants as a threat. Or, to paraphrase a neighbour of mine who currently receives a sick-leave pension and lives in a rental apartment in one of Malmö’s lower-income neighbourhoods: “Newly arrived refugees (nyanlända) will cause the rents to increase even more.”

At the same time, my observation is that two different people in different contexts – a policewoman interviewed by journalists at Almedalen in Visby, and a pro-refugee protester while walking through Scania and responding to my questions – in different ways linked the immigration of refugees to the current housing shortage. This view of refugees as competitors is thus one factor in the complexity of the following, generalized, formula: ‘Refugee migration to Sweden has to be legally regulated and, thereby, limited to a certain extent’; a formula which directly relates to the discussion about the legitimacy of rejecting and, consequentially, expelling and deporting rejected asylum seekers.

The Right to Protest and the Demand to Remain Silent

During the 2013-walk, one participant had been deported to Kabul. A very pleasant surprise of the 2015-walk was to see them again. While walking, we had a longer talk and they revealed a bit about their struggle since then. They had finally managed to return to Sweden. However, I did not want to request a formal interview. Among other critical migration scholars, Ruben Andersson (2014: 35) has aptly stressed that migrants are constantly questioned, not only by state officials but also by academics and other interviewers. For the main argument of this section, I deem it sufficient to highlight that they had been expelled from Sweden, then managed to return and obtain a residence permit. As we were walking besides each other in August 2015, they protested against the current practices of detention and deportation.

The contentious potential of such a political stance combined with this participant’s identity, i.e. to be a migrant who, upon deportation and return to Sweden, had finally been legally recognized, and who exercised the civil right to demonstrate, became discernible on my second day of participating in the protest walk of 2015; in particular once the group started chanting, ”No borders, no nations, stop deportations!” at förvaret i Åstorp. As the participants were shouting this and other political messages throughout the morning and noon of 19 August 2015, someone came out from the förvar and
asked the participants not to block the entrance at the side of the building. Then a police car drove onto the parking area and the two officers inside the car spoke with the group. Thereupon one participant decided to call once more the workers inside the förvar. They were invited to a discussion about the current practices of detention and deportation. What happened then stayed with me as one of the most unpleasant memories.

A woman opened the main door of the förvar and talked with the three protesters who had, until then, spoken into the phone located to the right of this door. As I watched the scene from the distance, only some minutes later I got to know what had been said. The woman had claimed that staff were not interested in talking to the protesters. Instead, she had demanded that we should stop shouting and chanting or, otherwise, the people detained inside would not be allowed to step outside and “enjoy the weather” – in the fenced yet roofless part of the building complex. As was confirmed by participants who had been imprisoned in this and other facilities, it was of course in this yard that the inmates would have been closest to the protest. The group was affected by this demand, which was understood as a ‘blame-game’ (skuldbeläggning) in the logic of ‘punishment’ (straff) – exercised apparently not only behind the shiny façade of the walls in front of us.

The suspicion that the police had been called by the employees was discussed among the participants. After all, even a Swedish citizen is potentially in danger of being arrested during such protest – depending on what happens and how law enforcement (re-)acts. What about, however, people who have their asylum applications pending, or legally recognized refugees who want to apply for Swedish citizenship? The Swedish Migration Board informs that applicants must have lived a ‘well-behaved life’ (skötsamt liv), which is described as follows:

To become a Swedish citizen you must have behaved well during your time in Sweden. The Migration Board looks both at how you have behaved so far and how we think that you will behave in the future. The Migration Board will demand information [about you] from other authorities in order to control if you have debts or committed crimes in Sweden. The information is retrieved from: The [Debt] Enforcement Authority (if you have debts) The Police (if you have committed a crime or if there is suspicion of a crime) The Security Police (security control) (Migration Board, 2015).

This is the current regulation, at least in terms of ‘law in the books’ (see Banakar, 2015: 6; cf. Pound, 1910) as it is presented by the Migration Board. Sverigedemokraterna, however, have pronounced their ambition to confine all
asylum seekers to detention, and to deny those people whose asylum applications are pending the right to participate in demonstrations (see Hussein, 2016). As this party, despite their documented connections to Sweden’s neo-Nazi movement of the 1990s, has a realistic chance to exert considerable influence on Swedish politics after the next (planned) national elections in September 2018, the future of self-organized refugee rights activism appears to be uncertain to say the least.

**Conclusion**

It is clear that förvaret i Åstorp has been the destination for several of Asylstaffetten’s protest walks also because the social movement base (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007: 192) of refugee rights activism in Sweden has for a long time been located close to Malmö. More precisely, it is around Möllevångstorget (a square with historical importance for the Workers’ Movement in Malmö and Southern Sweden more generally) that solidarity with refugees and, since 2013, self-organized refugee rights activism could be sustained. Having said this, it should be noted that the recent mobilisation of young people seeking asylum from Afghanistan (Ung i Sverige), which I addressed at the beginning of this paper, has focused its campaigning on gaining visibility through protests in central Stockholm.

Regarding protest in front of a förvar, it is a site where different identities, primarily rooted in different citizenship and residence statuses, can materialize. In other words, these identities become more easily discernible; almost touchable. As a site of imprisonment, it moreover contextualizes the right to demonstrate, which in Sweden can be publicly realized through protesting in front of a förvar; however not by just anyone and not just in any way. Legal forms of protest are limited to the outside – except for communicating between the inside and the outside – of such facilities. In consequence, this limits the potential for self-organized migrant rights activism. If first-hand experience of detention shall be truly represented (Spivak, 1988), only people who had been imprisoned, who have since then been released, and thereupon received some form of residence permit, can,

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12 The anti-racist research foundation Expo has published a timeline, illustrating with texts and photos the development of ‘The Sweden Democrats’ since the party was founded in 1988 until the present day. For instance via http://expo.se/sverigedemokraterna/rasism-vald-hat/page/4/ (Accessed 2016-10-27) one can read about July 1996, when local SD-politician Anders Westergren “leased out land” for the “National Socialist Front’s summer camp” in the Scanian small town Höör. In a photo taken at this event, one sees a person in Nazi-uniform, the right arm raised, in front of both the Swedish and the Nazi-Swastika Flag.
**de jure**, join a protest in front of such sites of migrant imprisonment. This becomes most clearly palpable during the policing of protest, as possible identity checks and/or (temporary) arrests render visible that, in particular for undocumented migrants, the participation in such political protest is extremely risky. Detentions of the past and present as well as possible future detentions are linked to the overall threat of deportation. That said, as the regulations of the Migration Board describe it, noncitizens must have lived a ‘well-behaved life’ (skötsamt liv) to be eligible for Swedish citizenship.

Moreover, my ethnographic research has shown that, over the social movement campaign’s ‘life course’ (Snow and McAdam 2000, p. 55) of, until today (2018), more than four years, _förvaret i Åstorp_ became time and again a site of protest also because temporary collective identities evolved and shifted in front of this site (see Tilly and Tarrow, 2007: 206). Reduced to the smallest common denominator, all participants whom I have spoken with agreed that Sweden’s migrant imprisonment facilities must be challenged. Yet, while such collective identity formation processes are important also to further mobilize larger shares of society, the tensions between the two (generalized) political standpoints of ‘asylum only for legitimate refugees’ and ‘no borders, no nations’ are strong – even within a pro-refugee social movement campaign such as _Asylstafetten_.

One observation related to this finding, which can be identified in the wider context of debate in the Swedish-speaking public sphere, is the importance of a discourse that frames refugees as competitors for increasingly scarce resources, especially affordable housing. By further relating this to the existing literature on the continuously widening gap between rich and poor – as the OECD (2015) put it, “[in Sweden] the growth in inequality between 1985 and the early 2010s was the largest among all OECD countries” – the neoliberalisation (see Harvey, 2007) of ‘the Swedish Model’ can be identified as one significant factor to understand hostile attitudes towards refugees in present-day Sweden (cf. Mulinari and Neergaard, 2014; 2015).

Conceptually speaking, to borrow from Şeyla Benhabib and in reference to Jacques Derrida, the right to hospitality that people seeking asylum are supposed to be granted – not only ethically (the concept of ‘the human right to seek refuge’) but also legally (“conceptions of human rights [that] require specific legal norms” [Benhabib, 2016: 137; cf. Alexy, 2002: 47-48]) – is challenged by ‘hospitality’. In other words, asylum seekers are perceived as ‘guests’ and/or ‘strangers’ through an iterative process that involves both
hospitality and hostility (in reference to Georg Simmel, see Benhabib et al., 2006: 155-158).

Finally, it is important to understand *Asylstafetten* as a part of the wider and indeed transnational social movement for refugee rights and against migrant detention. As I have elaborated elsewhere (Joormann, 2015), *Asylstafetten* is a social movement campaign that contributes to a trans-European network of activism for the rights of refugees. One result of the activism sustained at the social movement base in Malmö has been the practical work during those weeks of late 2015 and early 2016, when literally tens of thousands of people arrived in Malmö; most of them in dire need of a roof over their heads. In the self-organized community centre *Kontrapunkt*\(^\text{13}\) alone, more than 17,000 people were provided with a warm meal and a bed for at least one night.

Many people who had participated in the initial protest walk of 2013 continued with their engagement. Some engage locally, sheltering people seeking asylum in shared flats. Others have been, and currently are, active in different refugee rights struggles throughout Europe, in places such as Berlin, camps at the Serbian-Hungary and Greek-Macedonian border, or the Greek island of Lesvos.

In the autumn of 2017, I had the chance to meet and speak with volunteers who work for CBOs (community based organisations) on Lesvos. I had been invited by someone whom I had met for the first time while walking with *Asylstafetten* through Sweden in July 2013. Speaking with this group of engaged people in Mytilene, I was once more reminded that activism does not stop at national borders (see King 2016); and neither at the external EU border. As we were speaking, a group of activist scholars, journalists and filmmakers were on their way from Turkey in order to document the manifestations of ‘the EU-Turkey Deal’ in the migrant imprisonment facility of Moria, just outside of Mytilene.

Such activist work – especially if it is unpaid – still tends to be dominated by young, white Westerners, often with an educated middle-class background. On Lesbos in 2017, in Malmö since 2013, and also in Berlin when I spoke with participants at a refugee protest camp in 2014, however, it became clear that people with direct experience of seeking refuge are increasingly claiming their space within migrants’ rights activism (see also Canning, 2017).

The strength of such self-organized refugee activism was, to me, most clearly palpable when we visited Lesvos Solidarity, also known as ‘PIKPA camp’,

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which is “an open refugee camp in Mytilini, Lesvos” (Lesvos Solidarity Webpage). To establish this place, several buildings and the surrounding park, “which previously operated as children’s camp”, had been occupied, and “volunteers transformed the place into hostels for vulnerable groups of refugees and other groups of vulnerable people” (Lesvos Solidarity Webpage). There on Lesvos, refugees and citizens-in-solidarity had thus filled the word camp with the positive meaning that it can have. Entirely lacking any aspects of imprisonment, we were shown around a place that the people who lived and worked there indeed presented as an open camp; a camp with doors and gates which the inhabitants were opening and closing themselves.

References


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