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The Autonomy of Migration After its Summer

Niki Kubaczek

It has been two years that Germany's and Austria's governments opened their borders following the pressure of migration movements. Since then, a lot has changed, and not much for the better. Did the demarcations and enclosures of the nation state win once and for all? How does the present situation differ from the one of 2015? And what has migration got to do with social networks, affect and forms of commons?

On Friday 4 September 2015 thousands of migrants made their way from the train station Keleti in Budapest towards west and hundreds broke out of the so-called reception center, in Röszke.[1] Multiple actions of support followed, which were then celebrated under the term 'welcoming culture' ('Willkommenskultur'). Suddenly, everybody wished to play a part in helping people to arrive or to get further, at least that's how it seemed. Here and there, pictures of furious police officers on the German-Austrian border fighting on the correct interpretation of the border management circulated in the media. Politicians and mass media had wild debates on the proper way of dealing with the cross-border movements. The European migration regime arrived at a crisis point. Borders that seemed unchangeable and unbreakable

were suddenly open. A rupture took place, something new was happening.

Not new was the fact that movements along forbidden, illegalized, routes are often accompanied by immense violence, danger and exploitation. Living and moving as a refugee got a lot to do with living a life of crisis, in a state of exception, be it before or after 2015. Hence, what was new was not the fact that refugees suddenly lived under extremely precarious and dangerous living conditions. What was new that summer was the obvious crisis of the migration regime, not the bad living conditions of migrants and refugees. This means that the term 'refugee crisis' is quite misleading, when what is at stake is actually the crisis of the European border and migration regime.

Since then, the European nation states try to regain control over this migration regime crisis, that is, over the crisis of migration management, at all cost. Restoring the image of normality is sometimes done through the exercise of repression and at other times through the construction of consensus. One moment it's humanitarianism and inclusion, a bit later it's suppression and state legitimized violence which serves as coping strategies. But invariably, these two sides work in parallel and simultaneously, with different intensities. The terms 'welcoming culture' and 'refugee crisis' are in this sense central elements of these nation state operations insofar as they decisively contribute to a very specific striating and stratifying of the multiple events of the summer 2015. As the term refugee crisis locates the crisis 'in' the refugees, thereby distracting from the crisis of the migration regime, also the term and imagination of a 'welcoming culture' establishes one specific perspective and renders other stories and histories invisible and impossible. The notion of a welcoming culture paints an image of national bodies and national cultures of

generosity, that invites the Others, the aliens, the maltreated bodies and passive victims to stay. With the normalization of those terms, it seems as if it was up to a few national subjects, like Germany and Austria, and their generosity, to make the summer of migration happen.

This form of storytelling and history writing hides, not just accidentally, some of the most important points I wish to elaborate here. What initiated the opening of borders was not a national culture of welcoming, but first and foremost the self-determined and autonomous movements of those that were said they should not have been moving in that way but still did so. The cross-border movements that took place despite all the resistance only then brought into existence actions of solidarity, and support for flight and shelter. Therefore, migration didn't result from a supposedly pre-existing national culture of welcoming but the opposite, was it migration that produced those practices, affects, networks and ways of coming together, forms of commons. A certain sociality and economy bellow the grid of the nation state, fleeing from it and undermining it. What was later named and celebrated as welcoming culture - that is, the many and multiple practices of support and helping people's arrival and moving further, as well as the resulting micro politicizations of the resident population - was therefore not the reason nor the condition, but the result and effect of migration.

This productive and inventive force of cross-border movements can also be read out of a letter written shortly before the summer of 2015 by representatives of the municipality of Alberschwende, a small village in Austria. This letter already implied the politicizing potential of migration: "It brews in the country, it rumbles in the municipality! Through our activity with asylum seekers, we got an insight in the insufficiency of the European asylum system (Dublin

agreement). We are no longer willing to join the shoulder-shruggers. We, people on the ground, seem to be more progressive in terms of asylum politics than the discouraged and, in this case, dishonest 'high' politicians" (Gemeinde Alberschwende 2015). This means that not only the migrants were depending on local support, but also those local networks of support depended on the presence of the migrants: If these migrants had not come in the summer of 2015 with their stories, experiences, desires and perspectives, these networks of support would simply never have existed. The presence of those who traveled or fled enabled the support networks to hear new stories and histories. They heard stories first-hand, face to face, which they might have heard before through the mass media but had long forgotten behind other broadcasted horror stories.

Therefore, migration brought about a politicization of those that enjoy - seemingly naturally - the rights of the citizen through which a denormalization of the state and the nation took place, irrespective of whether the people affected by this politicization considered themselves as helpers, supporters, activists or voluntaries. Through these forms of connection and of support debates emerged on who should be able to live "here" and under which conditions. Who was to be considered "from here", who should not be living under certain given conditions, and with whom one wants to live were questions that exceeded the limited realm of law. Instead, these questions were discussed in shock, quiet, shame or fury next to the toilet at the railway station, the sidewalk in front of the refugee camp, during a common dinner, or on holidays at the sea.

The present nation state model of distribution of rights and duties, which enables a relatively good life for some while deporting, incarcerating and criminalizing many others thereby making them even more exploitable, suddenly appeared as no longer the only

option. Rather, it stood for what it is: just an alternative among better ones. Thus, the summer of 2015 revealed that political conditions are certainly not set into stone. "To question the state through the detour of immigration leads, in final analysis, to 'denaturalize' what is almost considered “natural”. As a consequence, the state (or that what is within it), infected as it was by a history amnesia, is getting historized again, which in turn means that we are remembered of the social and historical conditions of its formation" (Sayad 2015: 39).

De- and Renormalization

Since this summer of 2015, much effort has been invested in the renormalization of the migration regime. The fantasy of closing and opening of migratory routes proliferates as never before, as if the streams of migration could be opened and closed as a water tap. The ghost of integration is haunting the present as if Kanak Attack, Maiz, 1.März, the many Refugee Protest Camps since 2012, Non-Citizen Conferences, No-Border Camps, Refugee Forums, flight support convoys, smuggling networks, post-migrant theater, Sans Papiers occupations, and many more antiracist and post-national forms of cross-connection of the last years and decades never existed. However, there is something primal to those dreams of control, desires of integration, processing, and job creation that is worth remembering: a force against which to react, that should be governed; a movement that forever differently runs riot, gets carried away, and never lets itself be totally managed. It is a potentiality that will make the water tap leak again and again, no matter how many other taps or how much thread seal tape is added. This resistance, this force, that is continuously challenging government and management, was often referred to as the

autonomy of migration. "If necessary, we will find loopholes over mountains, through villages, or through the jungle."[2]

The autonomy of migration does not primarily describe a kind of heroic practice that originates from just neglecting the existing obstacles and controls. Instead, the term autonomy is an attempt to understand the capability of braving control and confinement *if necessary* only to escape in the next moment, to maybe come up with an unexpected story in another situation that is capable of distracting supervisors. Just as it is pointless to wrap migrants or migration in imaginations of pity and victimization, it is also absurd to heroicize and romanticize migration. Repeatedly withdrawing itself from representation and placement, migration is neither victim nor heroine. It is maybe both, but probably something completely different.

The cross-border movements of people that made their way to a given destination even though they supposedly should have stayed put, crosses as often well as not the secured border lines. Transport is at times expensive and at other times not, sometimes dangerous, other times funny, in one moment quick and full of hope, in the next tough, wearing, deadly and traumatizing. The movements of migration run along very different lines and realities - paths significantly affected by state obstacles, filters and barriers, as well as by violent or pleasant smugglers, by the availability of money, and by information and infrastructure. And all this, depends for sure much on one's friends. The autonomy of migration lies thereby less in a romantic, independent heroism but much more in getting further "partly-in-common" despite all the opposition - "partly-in-common" because the networks of support are not homogeneous communities of unbroken solidarity and collectivity, neither are they free of exploitation and violence. Yet, the existence of these conflictual and ambivalent networks of support,

care and exchange is the very condition of the possibility of migration[3]. Networks of exchange among migrants (in which, as mentioned above, here and there also non-migrants might be involved) are especially important here because they enable migrants to move faster or to arrive despite hindrance and deterrence. The summer of 2015 has shown us that it is possible that those not taking this governance of migration for granted, this distribution of rights, possibilities and affects, become more both in terms of sheer numbers and in terms of differences. At the same time, the summer of migration contradicted this governing and this division in government and governed insofar as it referred to the fact that politics can never be the business of a few professional politicians but rather it is an ongoing work on the question of how we, who are here in this very moment, want to deal with each other and the problems we face together.

Whether migration is welcomed, exploited, included or criminalized, she will carry on by finding new paths; "if necessary“, as stated above by the person at the Belgrade train station. Its capacity to create forms of connection and of commons that perpetually produces social realities, different than those provided and prescribed by the nation state, is decisive for this resistance and persistence. Autonomy thereby lies in the creative and inventive force of uttering new social networks, narratives, and affective connections that repeatedly undermine, surround, besiege and put under pressure the enclosure of the nation state - whether it is revealed or concealed in a given historical moment.

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[1] For more details, please visit f.ex. http://moving-europe.org/march-of-hope-3/

[2] This is my translation of the translation of a quote by an interviewee at the central bus station of Belgrade in the summer of

2015. https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article146507736/Wer-die-historische-Grenzoeffnung-wirklich-ausloeste.html

[3] For more information in this topic see Papadopoulos / Tsianos 2013 or Kuster 2017