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if we can't have çay together, it’s not my revolution

Sketches towards a transnational politics of anti-racist friendship, and the struggle for the common among unequals.

Newroz Duman / Niki Kubaczek



"Solidarity is not writing a co-authored appeal. Solidarity means getting to know each other and spending time together." In the summer of 2019, with this motto in mind, We'll come United brought large cushions and semawers (Turkish tea cookers) into a garden tent to create a place in the shade where the coming revolution could be dreamed and planned.

This shady spot was one of the few shelters from the sweltering heat. Here, near Nantes, the *Transborder Camp* took place from 10 to 13 July 2019, bringing together several hundred anti-racist activists from all over Africa and Europe. The ZAD – Zone a Defendre – was occupied by many different people united around the desire that meadows and forests should not be flattened for a huge international airport project.

Among the supporters of ZAD are anarchists who have nothing less than the destruction of global capitalism in mind, as well as doctors who don't feel like letting the planes over their heads ruin the idyll of their family home and the value of their property. "In this respect, it was very difficult to conduct this struggle for the ZAD together, between Molotov cocktail throwing and petition writing. What we saw in any case is: a common enemy helps immensely. But when it really comes to building a community out of diversity, many have just left," one of the squatters of the ZAD told the Transborder guests during the welcome round. "So the question has always been what can be done against fractioning. After all, we're talking about different fights here... Our goal was and is clearly to become more and more autonomous. That means having a mediation group that changes every month. The purpose of this group is not to be dependent on the police when conflicts

arise. Nevertheless, there were still problems that we could not solve, occasions where we failed ...".

City Plaza is everywhere!

With different backgrounds, reasons and motivations, activists came to the *Transborder Camp* in the North of France from across Africa and Europe, to rack their brains over anti-racist strategies and possibilities. Here, people with and without experience of racism came together, activists with and without the experience of illegalisation, with more or less money, so-called women, so-called men as well as other genders, people with more or less experience in activist self-organisation. With all these different experiences they had at least one aim in common: to oppose racism, to fight for freedom of movement and not to close their eyes to the brutality of racist violence.

Despite the intensification of racism, nationalism and fascism in Europe and beyond, there are self-organized networks fighting for the right for freedom of movement and caring for the right to stay. Strengthening these existing networks and thereby building a corridor of solidarity was the declared goal of the *Transborder Camp*. This militant care and caring militancy always consists of activities that, at first sight, seem to have little to do with militancy: coordinating accommodation, organizing money, being there for and listening to each other. Places and infrastructure that enable people to care for each other in the midst of illegalisation, such as the shelter in Rabat or the City Plaza Hotel in Athens are essential in the fight against illegalisation and the racist border regime.



Anti-racist work, self-organization and support of migrants is always also a matter of developing social relationships. These social relations continue, even if the visible symbols of this networking become targets of state repression. 'City Plaza is everywhere!' was written on the banner made on the occasion of the closure of the City Plaza at the *Transborder Camp*. These social relations under the radar of visibility are the condition for building another society. They are the basis for not having to have the same mother tongue, hair color or passport any more in order to be together. They are interconnections and shifts in society that create, at least in some marginal spaces, a certain uneasiness about contexts in which everyone is ticking or looking the same. Emphasizing the importance of social relationships among unequal people is much more than a naïve wish for harmony, because "if we don't build relationships, we can't face repression," as one activist pointed out on the first day of the camp.

The struggle for being together and for the common among unequals

So how to build these relationships? One thing is clear: relationships only emerge when we do not lecture each other, but listen to each other. Relationships only develop when we are generous with each other, reach out to each other, give each other time and advance trust.

When social relationships take on a form of friendship, a deportation does not only affect the deported person. It means loss to anyone who is a friend of that person who was deported. Of course it makes a substantial difference whether I am violently dragged away by the police to a place from which I escaped with the use of all means possible and maybe even at the risk of my life; or whether I will miss my deported friend without ever facing the possibility of being dragged away by the police to another country. However, it also makes a substantial difference whether someone is deported and nobody notices it, or whether someone is threatened with deportation and this leads a network to search for possibilities to prevent deportation, to an anti-deportation alliance, and to common repulsion towards deportation authorities and the current so-called 'foreigners and asylum law'.

Sometimes such a mobilisation can prevent deportation, but often deportation takes place despite broader resistance. However, the mobilisation leads to skepticism among so-called citizens towards the prevailing migration and asylum policy. This skepticism often does not directly help the deported friend, but it is the condition for condemning the current migration policy and thus for a more just understanding of who must be able to stay here in the future.

This future is facing a present in which racists increasingly determine the atmosphere, in the media as well as in the neighbourhood. To disrupt this atmosphere, to encourage each other and to make these connections visible was and is an explicit goal of *We'll Come United*. During the *We'll Come United* Parade in Hamburg on September 29, 2018, 30,000 people took to the streets to celebrate antiracism. So it is not primarily about a specific campaign or a selective coming together of networks of refugees, migrant and solidarity groups, but rather about starting a common process, which negotiates the difficulties and the possibilities of coming together and of being on equal terms among sometimes extremely different biograhies, experiences, wishes and ideas. It is about leaving the position that is defined exclusively by defensiveness, even when we are under attack: we need to talk about how we want to live together - and this can only be done by getting to know each other. "Of course, there is a need for separate spaces in which people who have had similar experiences – for example, illegalised migration – can share them. But at least as important are rooms in which we come together and meet on a shared level." To do this, “we must bring with us the desire to build the common, even if this can sometimes be complicated or take a long time," emphasizes one activist.

"We have a cooperation with the CGT (the second largest French trade union) called *Education sans frontieres*. When it comes to preventing deportations, this joint work is essential," explains Ousmane Diarra of the Malian Association of Deported AME. "We need to reflect together on what this coming-together can look like. We have to pull this question out of the darkness." And Pierre from the association of rejected Migrants ARACEM (L'Association des Refoulés d'Afrique Centrale au Mali) emphasizes: "The Europeans must understand why we came here.

Many of those who have been deported to Dakar, for example, have gone crazy because of what they have experienced. The IOM [International Organisation of Migration] wants to scare the migrants. But you can't scare people who have accepted death. Once you've crossed that threshold, somehow you're not really living any more."

The border regime destroys people, as colonialism did and continues to do; this concerns not only the colonized, but also the colonizers - although in a very different way.[1] Europe likes to talk about the human being and humanity yet murder humans everywhere they are found, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe, as Fanon already pointed out in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* from 1961. So what to do in the midst of racist, Eurocentric, disenfranchising and exploitative violence? "To go alone is quicker, but together we go further", Pierre is sure. Hence, the question of the common is not posed despite the manifold racist violence, but is posed precisely because of it: in order to be able to respond to it better and stronger.

The common is therefor definitely not the form of coming together that happens when we forget about the violence some of us are faced with and others may have no clue about. The common is made possible only through discussing and learning about the differences – regarding the different extent to which we are exposed to violence, exploitation and subjugation – among each other. It is this learning, unlearning and listening to each other, through which difference becomes less a contradiction to the common but rather to its precondition.

Of wishes and experiences

Not forgetting the sometimes radical difference of experience is essential for being able to come together. Without the knowledge of each other, friendship is nothing more than an alleged friendship, emphasizes Achille Mbembe in his recently published book *Critique of Black Reason*. The lack of knowledge of one another constantly leads us to step on each other's toes, disappoint and hurt each other, even if we don't want to. For this reason, over the last few years, there has been a demand for self-criticism above all by those activists who do not experience racism on a daily basis themselves. This was very important in many anti-racist contexts for raising awareness that there is a difference between intention, the wish and the desire to counter racism, and actual or real anti-racist practice. In other words: just because someone means well, it does not automatically mean that their actions are good, right or helpful. Desire and reality do not coincide.

When Pat Parker, black lesbian feminist activist, poet and close friend of Audre Lorde, spoke to an audience of people both with and without personal experiences of racism at the feminist anti-imperialist congress BASTA in Oakland in 1980, she declared: "We must also define our friends and enemies based on their stance on imperialism." (Pat Parker (1983[1981], p.239). As important as it is to pay attention to difference in experiences, we must also not forget the question of stance and intention. Certainly, the experiences we have made and the position we are assigned to in society are anything but secondary. But at least as important is the question of what kind of political attitude and practice we adopt in our lives, and what wishes, intentions and desires we pursue in our struggles. For just as desire and reality do not coincide, experience and desire do not coincide either.

Parker thanks everyone present for being here to fight together against imperialism and for feminism. But one thing she

emphasizes: "[I]t is critically important to me that you who are here, that your commitment to revolution is based on the fact that you want revolution for yourself." (ibid. p. 240) Friends and comerades for Parker are therefore not primarily those, with whom she shares the same experiences, but those, that have a similar attitude or desire towards imperialism, racism and feminism. The revolution, Parker argues, can only succeed if we do not make it out of generosity or pity for the other. The condition of the revolution is the desire for it, and this desire can only be understood as a common as well as very own, that is, as shared desire. Without connections neither revolution nor revolt nor insurrection.

"Despite all the violence, the people in Sudan have stuck with it - and that without a leader," emphasizes an activist from Sudan. "This only worked because they had networked through Instagram and Facebook. But the neighbourhood committees outside Khartoum were also important. They were the places where the protests broke out in late 2018." An activist from France continues, "Every roundabout is different. In Alsace, there are many fascists among the Gilets Jaunes. In Toulouse, it's different. The struggle between fascists and antifa in the movement is exactly the same as in the rest of France. One could also say that we have lost the fight in terms of racism, homophobia ... But we think that this is wrong. These struggles within the movement have led to the result that now many more people can distinguish between antifa and fascists. You must go into the discussion, you must interfere! This is the only way to find common ground."

Neighbourhood committees play an important role not only in the suburbs of Khartoum, but also in Rojava "In neighborhood circles we sit down together and everybody can say something. But it is also the place where everyone takes responsibility," says a Kurdish

comrade. "It's about nothing less than overcoming patriarchy, living anti-hierarchically and anti-nationally and building an economy of solidarity."

"The other illusion is that revolution is neat. It's not neat or pretty or quick. It is a long dirty process. We will be faced with decisions that are not easy," Parker knowingly proclaimed already 40 years ago. If we do not have equal access to resources, then we need a process that allows equal access. This process is a challenge and it takes time as well as patience with each other. But if we give ourselves and each other time, listen to each other, and don't get bogged down in the privileges that we have, but instead share and use them, then the chances are not so bad that it will work out sooner or later. The process of building the common thus takes place as an ongoing engagement with the question of how to wrest the possibility of this common from its impossibility.

On and beyond racism and paternalism

Among many other workshops a workshop on paternalism took place on the second day of the *Transborder Camp*. It was intended to open a space to discuss the difficulties that arise when people with very different experiences and approaches work together in a project or live together. It was unclear whether it would be a debate characterized by distrust and embarrassing silence or by trust and equal footing. The atmosphere at the beginning of the workshop was rather uneasy and hesitant. Apart from the question of who starts where and how, there was a further ambiguity as to whether the workshop should be open to everyone or only to those people subject to racism. In the end, the workshop was made open to everyone and lasted five hours, involving about 150 people.

A comrade who lives in Reims says: "I live in a squat in which many French people live with papers. Once when journalists came, those people insisted that I speak with the journalists. I spoke to them twice, then I refused. I was a victim of racism. Another time, when I handed out plates during lunch, another white supporter told me not to do it, because he wants to do it. Then I went to my room because I was extremely annoyed by that statement. But when I saw him again, I decided to tell him that it's not nice and that if we want to be in solidarity with each other, we have to treat each other with respect, no matter what papers we have".

"I think there are two kinds of racism," a French activist elaborates: "One is when people call refugees 'my children'. And on the other hand, there are activists who believe that everything that refugees say is right. This once led to the fact that an activist who was affected by abuse by a refugee did not go to the police to avoid giving a bad picture of the refugees. I really think that's a problem."

Yesterday I was in a workshop on self-organisation and people were talking about everything but self-organisation. Nobody interrupted them – that is also paternalism, letting people, just because they are affected by racism or have fled their home, just talk about something that is not the point at all. It is very important that we address things – like yesterday someone said in plenary that it is almost exclusively women in the kitchen here at the camp and that it is not acceptable. And lo and behold, now things have changed." So paternalism can be to belittle a person, but paternalism is also when we immunize a person or group from any criticism.

"You will experience racism everywhere", adds a Spanish comrade, "when in the subway there is talk of pickpockets and everyone looks at me. Or a person turns around, sees a black person like me

behind him and is scared. This is very hurtful, we need to talk more about this." "On the tram they didn't ask me for my ticket, they asked me for my papers," continues an activist from Reims. "Then once again I had to go to the authorities - they simply didn't accept my papers. Then I went there with a white person and they accepted the papers. I was so angry that the officer didn't dare to look at me any more. Another time I was insulted by a racist, so I just punched that white woman in the face. There is racism, yes, but we also have to learn to defend ourselves and not let it ruin our day. We don't have to feel guilty when we are dominant.

"I think we are already much further ahead than a few years ago" a Kurdish comrade from Germany points out. "We know that there is paternalism - but we must also allow ourselves to become friends. This means that the focus is not my story of flight, but our common history. I got organized in a squat and at the beginning I always thought: yuck where did I end up. They had their fight, I had mine. The people in the squat were very well informed and gave me good advice. And it certainly wasn't equality; that's also not possible at the beginning. But it was a togetherness that was not against each other. It was solidarity that grew into friendship.

If we don't see this as a hobby, but take politics into everyday life, then we will also be able to speak on a shared level. It is not a temporary project, it is our life. We are a movement in movement. New people are joining us all the time. This also means that the experiences must be told again and again. These problems that we are discussing here, we won't just get rid of. Some of us had to fight for our lives, others have no idea about such things. Understanding this as a strength takes us further than just criticizing each other. Of course it needs critical reflection, but above all it needs paying attention to the common."

"We are talking about taboo subjects here and this is extremely important", emphasizes Riadh Ben Ammar. "When I first got to know the radical left scene, I was very shocked by the way they all looked. When the activists from No Lager came and showed a film, there were suddenly two men kissing in the film - we were shocked. It's difficult for migrants to stick with students and activists, for various reasons ... But activism can also be a good therapy against depression, because activism is a way to express yourself and to break through isolation and depression. It needs this encounter – it's not about *you* accepting *me*, it's about *us* accepting *each other*. We have to take each other seriously, but please no positive racism; this is a very terrible racism. We have to build trust in each other at first; and that requires a lot of patience - from everyone."

Revolutionary serenity

Hence, transnational work requires patience. It is the condition for getting to know each other and for connecting the struggles. This process, in which the connecting lines are created, is certainly not an easy one and that is exactly why it needs trust in each other and it needs the insistent desire to bring the struggles together. Sometimes it seems as if the specter of Pat Parker, almost exactly 30 years after her death, is haunting the packed gatherings in the shadow of the burning sun to bring the question of coming together out of the darkness again:

“Another illusion that we suffer under in this country is that a single facet of the population can make a revolution. Black people alone cannot make a revolution in this country. Native American people alone cannot make revolution in this country. Chicanos alone cannot make revolution in this country. Asians alone cannot

make revolution in this country. White people alone cannot make revolution in this country. Women alone cannot make revolution in this country. Gay people alone cannot make revolution in this country. And anyone who tries it will not be successful."

If the revolution is to be successful one day, it will only happen together. For this we need spaces like the *Transborder Camp*, where the many thoughts, struggles, failed attempts and successes, languages, faces and stories of solidarity can come together. Spaces that, in difficult times, make it possible to exchange experiences and perspectives, to learn from one another, to create connections across borders and to be open to new relationships. Spaces in which the everyday struggles, which today are transnationally connected, can encourage and celebrate together. The condition for this coming together is made by many transnational lines that run across the Balkan route, from Kurdistan to Sudan, from Ljubljana to Tunis to Bamako, from Chemnitz to Izmir, from Ouagadougou to Hanau to Athens and Alexandria. These lines of solidarity and common struggle refer to courage and hope for new processes, to inspiration, friendships, joy, tears, love, quirks and madness, to a for and with each other, without which history would never have been written.

To make revolution is to learn serenity and mutual trust in a brutal and shattering world, where there is absolutely no reason for serenity, friendship and patience with one another. At the same time, patience with and trust in each other is the only possibility to live in this world and to fight for a better future. We are not talking here about a serenity that would mean if we would only stop talking about ugly things, then everything would be fine. The serenity we are talking about here is rather that of the comrade, who resolutely throws her fist in the face of the racist, who insults

her full of hatred, then continues to slurp the Çay with her friend and does not let her day be ruined.

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[1] "The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've already recognized that it's fucked up for us. I don't need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more

softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?" (Harney/ Moten 2013, p. 140)