

Solidarities in Migration

Written by Anitta Kynsilehto

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ANITTA KYNSILEHTO, AUG 20 2018

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The contemporary migration regime is highly unequal, leaving the majority of people in the world without real access to official channels of migration. Over the past years, asylum has been attested as being in crisis (see for example Zetter 2015; Väyrynen et al. 2017, 9). The increased number of asylum seekers that arrived in Europe in 2015 concretely demonstrated this political crisis (Kynsilehto 2017), leaving thousands to struggle over basic rights and to exercise the very right to ask for asylum that is endorsed in various human rights treaties. Undocumented or irregular migration in particular is perceived as a problem by established society. Irregularity is also a severe problem for people who are themselves in an irregular situation due to their lack of access to basic rights such as accommodation, healthcare, education and work. Moreover, uneven practices by states to provide basic services for people on the move create a necessity for civil society in a large sense – comprising not only non-governmental organisations but also more informal groups – to engage in diverse forms of everyday solidarity. Many associations including registered organisations with paid staff, those operating on a voluntary-work basis, as well as formal and informal networks of organisations and individuals across local, national and transnational scales engage with people on the move in order to provide greatly needed everyday assistance, information and human contacts. I call these people and organisations ‘solidarity actors’.

In this chapter, I discuss examples of different types of solidarity action, both those with more humanitarian orientation and those geared towards advocacy and making political claims that seek to challenge the status quo. The latter are often also further divided between legalistic human rights argumentation and more explicitly political claims. However, I argue that these distinctions are becoming increasingly difficult to uphold due to the striking inequalities that actors at all levels witness on a daily basis, and the radical undermining of human rights frameworks. Most of these forms of activism comprise links across localities and countries, even continents. Solidarity networks are thus transnational and translocal. Moreover, individual solidarity actors often engage in different types of parallel and overlapping networks, formal and more informal ones, and interlinked networks exchange information, best practises and critiques of the status quo at different levels.

This chapter has a two-fold aim. Firstly, it discusses diverse forms of acting together in solidarity for, with and by migrants. Secondly, it will address the question of politics within these forms of acting together. These politics concern access to information, knowledge production and the possibilities of being mobile in order to engage in solidarity action. The chapter draws on insights from my own on-going multi-sited ethnographic research at different borders around the Mediterranean Sea, and my long-term engagement in transnational migrants’ rights advocacy. The chapter begins by addressing variegated spaces and times of solidarity activism and includes the issue of sustainability of movements. It introduces an example and innovative mechanism that combines technical academic knowledge to activist practice, and then moves to critical practices and politics of movements. A final section will address the tendency of criminalising solidarity action that seeks to impede contact between privileged actors and people on the move.

Spaces and Times of Solidarity Activism

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The phenomenon of solidarity activism is by far not new: many locations, such as the Sonoran desert between the US and Mexico (see for example Doty 2006; Cabrera and Glavac 2010; Squire 2014), and the town of Calais (Laacher 2002; Rygiel 2011) by the English Channel are well-known examples of border locations where solidarity actors have engaged for years to provide food, water and clothes for people transiting these sites. In some of these sites, more or less permanent forms of dwelling are established in the margins of towns, in the fields or forests, where shelters can be built before journeys are to continue. Based on long-term observations at different refugee camps and informal sites, Michel Agier argues:

Other spaces emerge, in this age of globalization and local interventions by the “international community”, and these become sites of political expression of a new type, which are invented and acted out in and on the limits (Agier 2011, 155).

‘Enforcement archipelago’ (Mountz 2011) refers to the use of islands to enact border control at a distance, with Nauru and Christmas Island as well-known cases for the Australian externalisation efforts, and Guam as one example of similar practice by the United States. In the Mediterranean, Lampedusa has become a highly symbolic site (Friese 2010; Cuttitta 2014) together with the Aegean Islands, of which Lesbos became the most mediatised in 2015 – even though these forms of mobilities and parallel solidarities are far from being new there either (Trubeta 2015). As the islands are located at a distance from the mainland, being stuck on an island does not always need to denote being locked into a detention unit, though this is often an additional measure used. The remote location already necessitates some form of help, usually a written document, so that the person who entered irregularly can leave the island. In the Greek context, it was for a long time impossible to even apply for asylum on the islands, leaving the capital city Athens as the only location where an asylum claim could be lodged. As a peculiar practice, one needed a removal order to leave an Aegean island, take a ferryboat to Athens, and figure out whether applying for asylum in Greece could be an option (Worldwide Movement for Human Rights (FIDH), Migreurop and Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) 2014, 75–77). While waiting, immediate assistance and human contacts by solidarity actors were highly needed.

For many people seeking asylum in the European Union (EU), Greece did not seem a feasible option. Many decided to continue their journeys towards other EU Member States, which turned the harbour city of Patras into a hub for people who sought a possibility to cross to Italy (Yaghmaian 2006; Lafazani 2013). Over the course of 2015, with the spotlight turned on the so-called Balkan route, the tiny village of Idomeni at the border between Greece and Macedonia became known to the wider public. Since mid-November 2015, it became a stage for successive closures and openings of the border, first with only people of Afghan, Iraqi and Syrian nationalities allowed to cross, then closing to everyone (based on the author’s on-site visit to Idomeni, 21 November 2015; see also Amnesty International 2016).

With the gradual closing of the border, Idomeni began to host an increasingly permanent form of a makeshift camp that was never established and opened as a refugee camp in a formal sense, despite the presence of several international organisations such as the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and Médecins Sans Frontières [Doctors without Borders] (MSF) since early on. After the border was closed completely, during the spring months of 2016, some 14,000 people ended up blocked in Idomeni (Al Jazeera 2016). The UNHCR issued a call saying that the situation was escalating day by day into a full-blown humanitarian crisis, and tension escalated as people grew increasingly frustrated for being blocked in the middle of fields and on the railroad linking the two countries (UNHCR 2016a). On Monday, 14 March 2016, hundreds if not thousands of people grew tired of waiting at the border. They decided to go past the border construction consisting of barbed wire fences and Macedonian military onto the other side of the border. Walking through woods and crossing a river, they made their way into the territory of Macedonia. Many ended up detained once in Macedonia, and some eighty journalists and solidarity advocates who had accompanied them were arrested for illegal border crossing. Three people from Afghanistan drowned in the river, one of them a pregnant woman. The people were returned to the Greek side of the border and the frustration caused by the uncertainty continued to grow (BBC 2016). As one result of the mounting tension, on 10 April 2016 police forces from the Macedonian side fired tear gas and rubber bullets at refugees protesting at the border, leaving not even young children unaffected (Reuters 2016).

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The unrest at the border in Idomeni was happening while the EU leaders were hastily preparing the second summit with Turkey to complete the deals, especially the deal from the week before, the week of 7 March 2016, by which Turkey accepted that the EU would return people arriving irregularly to the islands. If there were Syrians among the returnees, the EU states would readmit another Syrian via legal avenues (BBC 2016). A legal framework was not disclosed that would formally render the push-backs possible, nor was it revealed how these exchanges would be organized in practice. In monetary terms, the EU would pay an additional 3 billion euros to Turkey in addition to the already agreed 3 billion in support, for Turkey to continue to host refugees and to cooperate in impeding them from leaving the country by irregular means. Human rights groups and solidarity advocates have called these deals the biggest concerted operation of human trafficking ever seen.

Twists and turns of European border politics and overall approach to migrants and refugees is closely followed by people on the move. One of these twists, negotiations concerning the deal between the EU and Turkey, was subject to many questions at Elleniko camp in the outskirts of Athens, Greece. The camp is a combination of a former airport terminal and sports grounds constructed for the 2004 Olympic Games, namely a basketball hall and an ice hockey rink. These facilities host some 5000 people of diverse nationalities with new people arriving from the islands on a daily basis. It is an open facility with a police presence and private security outside, with people able to come and go, the minimum of structured activity by voluntary groups and a couple of formal organisations. There is a lack of security especially in the night-time. The people staying here are waiting for something to happen, being blocked from continuing further, uncertain of what might happen while waiting, and terrified of the possible outcome of the deal that is being negotiated with Turkey. Serious faces, posing questions that no-one can answer, at least for now. (Extract from field notes, Athens, March 2016)

In Europe, with increased numbers of arrivals coupled with the further tightening of access to asylum and other forms of legalising one's residence, as well as curbing legal channels of access to territory such as via family reunification, it is likely that there will be more people than ever in need of regularisation and other means for day-to-day survival, such as accommodation, food and sanitation. Much of the daily assistance to both new arrivals and those who arrived some time ago is provided by associations and individuals in a voluntary, sometimes ad hoc manner as has been manifested in 2015 and onwards, with the country case of Greece continuing as the most exposed arena of the desperate need for help. As the unrest at the border between Greece and Macedonia illustrates, the lack of official response to the plight of the people on the move calls for an enhanced response by differently positioned civil society actors – not only to respond to immediate needs, but to maintain relations as peaceful as possible. This engagement is thus indispensable, both in terms of accessing basic rights as well as for the contribution of this work towards societal peace. Yet it can be very tiresome and consuming for those who are engaged in such work, especially in contexts where the need for such engagement is already known to be long-term.

In many of the most exposed 'hubs', there is a need for ensuring sustainability of activities that often signifies a need for long-term commitment. In long exposed 'hubs' such as Calais, Lesbos or Oujda at the border between Algeria and Morocco, six to seven years of experience in the local context count as a short-term commitment for some actors in the field. As an example, I met a middle-aged woman at a food delivery point for migrants in Calais in January 2010 and asked whether she had been volunteering for a long time with people on the move. She replied: 'No, not for a long time, just for six, seven years'. I have heard similar remarks at each site I have visited, from people for whom engagement with people on the move has become a part of their everyday life. Indeed, it has become such a naturalised part of everyday life that one does not even recognise the time that passes. There is a need to learn from these longer-term experiences while developing new practices and ways of engagement.

For those who come to help for either shorter or longer periods of time, appreciating local knowledge and remaining sensitive to learning local dynamics and practices of working in the local context are important. This is a recurrent theme, both as a modality of critique and as something to be highlighted in more neutral terms that I have encountered at various sites where both locals and internationals are working on similar issues. An abundance of critiques have addressed the dynamics between big international organisations and international non-governmental organisations that employ and import expatriate staff in a particular context (Harrell-Bond 1985). This is a theme that more informal groups and engaged individuals also seek and need to remember when engaging in a context they – or we, as I consider my own positionality as much as that of any other – are not fully familiar with: to listen and learn

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from local dynamics, and to fully appreciate the knowledge and skills of those already present, including foremost those whose fate is at stake.

Innovative Practices of Alert

Solidarity networks create innovative practices in all areas where states are constantly failing their connected responsibilities. One of these areas is the on-going tragedy at sea borders. As a well-known example, the Mediterranean Sea has been a stage for increasing numbers of deaths at sea over the years, in particular since the signature of the Schengen Accords and, consequently, the establishment of a strict visa regime (European Commission n.d.) that has sought to separate the two shores since the early 1990s. The mobility of citizens from the northern shore of that sea is enabled, whilst that of a large majority of the southerners, both from coastal states as well as further on south- and eastwards, is in actual fact blocked via official venues. This uneven access to mobility has forced many to use very dangerous means for crossing the border that have resulted in ever increasing numbers of deaths. At the same time, there has been a multiplication of surveillance mechanisms at sea that have not been able to bring down the number of casualties which continue to increase (International Organisation for Migration 2017). In the midst of developments of what was labelled as the Arab Spring in 2011, a famous event took place. The 'Left to die' case concerned a vessel that had departed from Libya and was drifting at sea for 14 days with all eyes watching, including international media, a NATO operation that was going on against the Gaddafi regime, and all the existing surveillance in place by the European Border Agency Frontex and national coast guards of the Mediterranean coastal states. Sixty-three people died on board (see Forensic Architecture n.d.).

Awareness of these tragedies and the failure of states to respond adequately triggered a response by concerned individuals around the Mediterranean Sea and further in Europe. The Watch the Med initiative is one of the results from this concern. This initiative has created an alarm phone that provides an emergency number that functions 24/7, is ran by volunteers, and covers the Central, Eastern and Western Mediterranean 'corridors'. The idea is to localise the migrant boat in distress and contact the coast guard responsible to come and perform a search and rescue operation for the passengers. Thus, the idea is to give such specific details that the coast guards can no longer claim that they were not aware of the boat in distress. If they fail to act, the case is rendered public and disseminated widely in the media. Through this practice, the activists are using new technologies to perform a 'disobedient gaze' (Pezzani and Heller 2013) to the maritime areas that have become increasingly lethal over the past years. This disobedient gaze refuses to remain silent when obvious abuses and neglect happen and, instead, the constant search for information is used to render responsible those officials that are not fulfilling their search and rescue (SAR) responsibilities.

Critical Practice and the Politics of Acting in Solidarity

Solidarity acts are often enacted by people endowed with various degrees of privilege compared to those in a less privileged position (see for example Rozakou 2016). These positionalities and privileges are far from being fully static: they are somewhat fluid, and they may concern the legal status in a given country, socio-economic means, or access to information and funding. Increasingly, people on the move also take ownership of their struggles by engaging in new forms of solidarity (also Bredeloup 2013). In Morocco, for example, sub-Saharan migrants' groups and associations began to emerge in 2005. First they were largely established and promoted by people without a residence status, and not officially recognised as organised civil society by the Moroccan state. By claiming their space and gaining visibility through sit-ins and public marches, especially in the capital city, Rabat, they made themselves heard. Different ethnic and national groupings organised in nation-wide Councils. Parallel to these developments, and to a large extent with the same people involved, a migrant section was established as a part of the trade union Organisation Démocratique du Travail (ODT) in 2012. The regularisation campaign in 2014 that theoretically targeted people living in migrant 'ghettos' but in fact enabled a wide category of people, such as foreign students, to regularize their statuses, in parallel with the enabling of foreign residents to legally establish associations in Morocco, contributed to creating a firm ground for migrant organisations to begin formal operations, including competition over funds.^[1]

Diversely positioned noncitizens acting in solidarity often advance even more diverse claims compared to those

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advocated by, say, undocumented migrants identifying as such, or other movements that are geared towards the claim for a general legalisation (Nicholls 2010; Robertson 2015). In other words, migrant groups may remain even more respectful of state sovereignty and the state's ensuing claim of protecting its borders and territory, and choosing those it allows to enter and stay, than groups that advocate for solidarity with everyone, including the right to free movement. Moreover, based on her work with Bulgarian migrants' associations in Turkey, Zeynep Kaşlı (2016) reminds us that migrants' networks helping the newly arrived and undocumented migrants are not free from the power struggles and profit-making that exploits the vulnerability of those co-ethnics without access to accurate information and legal status.

The central paradox in humanitarian work that Ilana Feldman calls its endemic challenge; that is, the requirement to abstain from taking a political stance and to push 'to keep people alive but entirely incapable of changing the conditions that have put them at such great risk' (Feldman 2008, 139). This internalised requirement for being apolitical is more and more overtly challenged, even by organisations that have thus far kept relatively silent or, to say the least, have been more ambiguous in their critiques of state actions. One example could be the UNHCR's refusal to transport people to detention centres in the Aegean islands, explained by the Refugee Agency's unwillingness to be party to practices that breach international human rights commitments (UNHCR 2016b).

Well-intended humanitarian action and solidarity engagement includes difficult questions that need to be resolved in the course of action. Much critique has been written on the actions of international organisations (see for example Harrell-Bond 1985; Verdirame and Harrell-Bond 2005; Agier 2011), international non-governmental organisations (Terry 2002; Fassin 2011), and researchers as activists amongst other forms of participation (see for example Askins 2009; Darling 2014). Critical engagement is emerging also on and within social movement-types of responses to humanitarian crisis situations, even if this is again more difficult, knowing that the individuals in question invest their own time and money to alleviate the suffering of those considered 'beneficiaries' in the organisational jargon or 'friends' to highlight the shared humanity. All these responses embody divergent political stances with regards to the right to mobility and with regards to the takes on state action; that is, whether the role of the state is seen as something to be supported, or as something the very existence of which is to be put into question.

In 2015, in the midst of what has been labelled a refugee crisis, more people than before woke up to the catastrophic conditions at many border sites, and deficiencies in the official reception of the newly arrived. They felt compelled to do something concretely. Many engaged in solidarity groups in their own countries and neighbourhoods, whereas others travelled long distances to come and help in the most exposed sites where help was needed, such as the Aegean islands in Greece, at different 'hubs' along the so-called Balkan route, or in Calais on the shore of the English Channel. These acts of solidarity became highly visible in traditional and social media alike. Alongside celebrating the drive of people to contribute their time and skills for the sake of others in need, these movements have triggered many questions which are being answered in the midst of events. Some of these questions concern the need for organising the acts in the best possible way to respond to multiple needs. Drawing on his work with ad hoc volunteer groups and more established organisations in Rome, Nando Sigona gives the example of donations: 'it was all too easy to end up with millions of Xmas jumpers in a warehouse, when that positive energy should have been channelled elsewhere' (Sigona and Bechler 2016). Similar examples have been echoed throughout the peak months of 2015, and networks that organise collections seek to specify the needs in terms of sizes and kinds of clothes, shoes and other items to orientate those giving donations.

Other questions, in line with critical humanitarianism, concern the parallel phenomena created along the way, such as 'holidarity' and 'voluntourism' (see ReflActionist Collective 2016). This refers to the fashionable act of engaging in movements during one's vacations, and the different capabilities of differentially positioned people to engage in solidarity activities, especially further away from home. That is, the necessity to address the inherent and complex inequalities embedded in the system where some have the suitable identity documents, necessary financial means and flexibility with time schedules to engage in different types of solidarity acts, and others not. In the accelerating speed of political developments that in many ways has started to resemble a third world war, it may be difficult to take the distance needed to reflect upon and analyse the actions undertaken (see for example Coleman 2015). However, as much as this reflection could be integrated into the course of action, not as a paralysing idea but as something that would be helpful in making the practices more equitable, it is likely to benefit the solidarity movements' work in the

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long run.

Criminalising Solidarity

An important and worrying phenomenon is the harassment of solidarity actors and other activists in many contexts. In France, for example, solidarity actions have been sought to be criminalised for years under the pretext of fighting human smuggling, as 'facilitating irregular movement and stay' (Worldwide Movement for Human Rights (FIDH) and World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) 2009; Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) 2011, 14). Fear is a well-known way to control others (see for example Koskela 1997), and fear is a means by which governments that are unfriendly, even hostile to migrant causes and civil disobedience, seek to exert control over people willing and committed to this struggle. These authorities do it following a logic that is not quite so distant from violent factions that seek to challenge this authority, using these means to maintain an illusion of control (Brown 2010) in a global context that is beyond anyone's control.

The requirement for each person who comes to the Greek islands to help refugees to register (Secretariat General for the Aegean and Island Policy 2016) was introduced in order to have an idea of who actually came and worked with refugees. The continuing arrival of boatloads of people over the summer, autumn and winter months incited many people across the globe to engage with the plight of refugees. Some eighty non-governmental organisations arrived on the island of Lesbos, together with more informal groups and countless individuals for different periods of time (Nianias 2016). While each was willing to help, and their engagement and contribution valorised, the public authorities needed some organisation to these comings and goings. The registration process then introduced is to be done with municipal authorities, to get a global idea of who is present and engaging with people in a vulnerable position. This requirement was not fully innocent either. Early on, there were rumours about the border agency Frontex being involved in registering solidarity actors in the Greek islands.^[2] An obvious question in this regard is what their involvement exactly is and why they are implicated? For what purpose are they involved in registering people who come to do voluntary work? Given the security-focused mandate of the agency, the purpose of likely intelligence-gathering. This rang the bell of criminalising solidarity, as has been the case in different locations, notably in Northern France where charges have been raised for years against those who consider it their moral duty to help others in need.

Concluding Words

Differentially positioned solidarity actors – associations, networks, individuals – are in a very problematic situation. Fundamental rights that were imagined as already shared values, at least by the state parties that have signed and ratified legally binding commitments such as the Convention of 1951 and its additional protocol at full, are put into question from different directions. Thus, commitments that have been imagined as givens, on the rhetorical level at least if not in practice, are being violated more and more openly. Moreover, solidarity actors need to ask themselves – indeed, we need to ask ourselves, as I feel implicated in this framework through my various academic and non-academic commitments – with whom do we solidarise and how do we express this in practice, in a volatile context where networks and movements are in a constant process of movement? These questions go beyond the impact analyses in the humanitarian and development industries' project logics. What moves us towards acting in solidarity and, consequently, what does this do to the various formations, temporary or more permanent ones, thus constituted? Also needed is alertness towards the impact of the solidarity acts in the lives of those towards whom these acts are geared. It is not a schematic understanding of impact in quantifiable terms we need, we must assess this question more broadly, accounting for the qualitative 'changes' or 'moves', however temporary and volatile they might be. Solidarity ties form and sometimes dissolve with new information and new urgencies. Not everyone can physically go and work for weeks or months in order to provide help where it is needed the most, be it for financial reasons, family commitments, emotional capacity or other reasons. For this reason we need to acknowledge these are not the only available ways to 'do something', to act in solidarity. Every encounter counts. Everyone is needed.

Notes

[1] This part draws on the author's fieldwork in Morocco.

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[2] Drawing on the author's exchanges with solidarity groups.

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About the author:

Anitta Kynsilehto is a Senior Research Fellow at Tampere Peace Research Institute, Tampere University.