

Self-organisation – what's up with that?

First and foremost thanks to the organisers for their great dedication and hours, days and weeks worth of work that made this event possible in the first place. In times of Germany's so-called "welcoming culture", which enables everyone to become a shareholder in anti-racist practices by doing little more than donating clothes and holding ahlan wa sahlan signs at German railway stations, it's refreshing to be present at a critical and non-white-centred conference. I also would like to thank the organisers for inviting me to provide the keynote to this conference, and especially Bahareh Sharifi for her wonderful support.

The title of my keynote is: self-organisation – what's up with that? So really, what is up with that?

From MIA, a Tamil refugee, I'd like to turn towards an anecdote from my own life:

One afternoon in the early 90s, a phone call from Austria reached our council estate. A day later Appa made his way to North Rhine Westphalia to pick up my then to me unknown cousin. She was abandoned by a smuggler together with a group of young Tamils in the border area between Austria and Germany. They were disoriented, desperate, hungry and undercooled. They ate snow to not die of thirst. We were familiar with the images from Akte XY episodes where swollen bodies of Tamils were drifting in the Eger river, only 70kms from our refugee camp away, at the border to former Czechoslovakia. It could have been my cousin; it could have been Amma. It could have been me.

Appa organised a new smuggler, a fellow Tamil who picked up the young women from Austria to drive them to North Rhine Westphalia where they were redistributed. Back then, almost a decade after the beginning of the Tamil exodus from Sri Lanka, structures have come to exist which assisted the flight of today more than a million exiled Tamils. Most of these were criminalised, anti-state infrastructures.

When Appa picked up my cousin, he committed a crime. He suddenly became a smuggler of an undocumented person: my cousin. Back then, my father just as us and most other Tamils were only legally tolerated in this country. Neither his precarious status, the constant fear of deportation, of racial profiling and targeting of Tamil refugees through so-called "Tamil Regulations" didn't prevent him to act against the law, to decide in favour of the survival of our family.

My father's actions carried no other name for us but to protect our family, to provide security, to practice resistance against the genocide against Tamil people; and indirectly also to resist global border politics. These were strategies and organising cultures many communities were forced to learn in order to safeguard their own survival in face of oppressions, wars and genocides. We didn't have any other vocabularies or another language but that of survival and resisting.

Today, decades since the first refugees from the Global South arrived in the Federal German Republic we speak of self-organisation of refugees and migrants. But what does self-organisation really mean and where do we locate such?

Self-organised groups are groups where concerned individuals take leadership roles and self-determine their actions and organising capacities. Self-organised groups are often situated at the margins of white power structures as individual forms of marginalisation often neatly mirror larger structural positionings. Self-organisation stands in direct tension with third-person organising practices. Third-person organising refers here, in our European context, to majority white, so-called “solidarity structures” in which non-concerned persons are dealing with the needs and requirements of concerned people without having to share their experiences or forms of marginalisation. And without directly having to face the consequences of their political demands.

Germany’s “welcoming culture” is by and large, if not fully, externally organised. Part of this “welcoming culture” are the many opportunities offered to non-concerned people who are able to build careers, perspectives and resources on the histories, experiences and bodies of concerned people. They act in the name of solidarity, equality and self-determination of others, but in fact do the opposite: reinforce unequal power-relations, which often times are the very sources of displacements others face.

In activist and scholarly circles, the term “self-organised” has been widely normalised. It is associated with images from Oranienplatz and with refugee caravans and marches from Bavaria. It is equally associated with organisations that do amazing cross-community work for refugee rights. Yet we also need to confront ourselves with the novelty, even strangeness of such terms within concerned communities. How and where are these terminologies used, who do they mobilise and to whom do they remain foreign words, or even third-party interventions in their everyday work and lives? Is there a level of abstraction? What is the difference between self-organised work and community work? Where does self-organisation begin and where does it end? Can it be individual or does it need to be collective?

The term “self-organisation” quickly marks something, which was for long considered to be common amongst concerned communities. If we don’t organise for ourselves, who else will? “For refugees by refugees” is not just a slogan that is relevant in the country of your arrival; it’s not just in foreground since organisations such as RISE or The Voice. The question of political actions of refugees is a question of self-determination: when, where and whose actions are seen and acknowledged? And how much of it is political? Or, where is politics being located and where does it remain unread?

What’s today considered as self-organised, what’s considered as activism often responds to normative, visible forms of political organising and protest culture which mirror in western protest norms and institutions. It privileges certain forms of political actions whilst marginalising others and thereby rendering them invisible. Self-organisation is essential, critical and resistance against the hegemony of majoritarian structures. These structures are intersectional and adapt according to context. But we aren’t doing anyone a favour if we continue to reduce refugees’ political practices to only those that are visible subversions of dominant structures.

We need to constantly remind ourselves that every refugee is self-organised and that our experiences and decisions are political: it starts off with the act of fleeing which is hugely political and the act of survival, which is equally political. These are organised in individual and collective manners, continue across borders, continents, language and time barriers as well as legal titles. The realm of political actions and activism need to be considered more critically and more diversely in order to read politics where it's often never sought for.

The occupation of Oranienplatz was indeed a critical moment and an important occupation of a public space in the midst of the German capital. But it only remains one occupation amongst many in post-war Germany. Albeit Oranienplatz remains to be ignored by mainstream society, it's still the occupation that was the most visible to the mainstream and thus gained activist and discursive acknowledgments. Yet there are several kinds of occupations of public spaces that are not seen, that are not considered political. Our bodies are mobile occupation zones and borderlands that question nation-state constructs, territories, ideologies and identities. Our presence alone is a form of resistance that calls for hostility and violence, whether in the country of arrival or point of departure. Both force us to organise ourselves in order to attain our right to existence and our right to security.

The everyday of refugees is thus coined by political decisions and critical questions that are not at the centre of debates. This concerns all age groups, including children who are often forced to make decisions that are in so-called ordinary circumstances reserved to adults. Many of us who were then children stuck within the asylum system where intimately connected to the struggle for our right to stay and collective survival. Our everyday was coined by struggles which are today no more acknowledged as such as they lack majoritarian societal acknowledgements. Only few of us held up banners, stood in front of western institutions or signed petitions. Nonetheless, we always acted politically and fought in our everyday for the humanisation of our bodies and the acknowledgement for our reasons for fleeing.

The kind of politics we should be concerned about is the sort of politics that is quickly dismissed as trivial even if it remains to be existential for the survival of refugees. It takes shape in its everydayness and is situated on the periphery, sometimes in the centre of spaces occupied by majoritarian society. These consists of reordering camp spaces, organising a cooking, cleaning or shopping plan or planning a pick-up to a paediatricist; all of these actions are political but are very rarely considered as such and are seldomly placed in the centre of debates.

The dehumanisation of refugees is articulated in many different ways. Similarly, the resistance of refugees expresses itself in many different ways. It takes different shapes and can sometimes even contradict the demands of other refugees and migrants. We are neither a homogenous group nor are our experiences all the same. It can differentiate based on the region you're placed in, your race, caste, class, gender, sexual identity, ableism, etc. But our struggle for recognition of our right to stay often brings us together, similarly as to how Germany's camp politics forces us to encounter each other.

We, the children of yesteryear, are today citizens of this republic. Yet, we still remain to be located outside of the discourse. Today we have gained a language in which we can be heard, in which we are able to narrate our own stories. But still, no one wants to allow us to

speak or we are quickly dismissed as being “dated”, “inauthentic” and “privileged”. Even if I don’t resemble the phenotype that is today, in 2016, associated by majority white society with refugees, our biographies, experiences, knowledges and traumas aren’t temporary or dependent upon our legal status or discursive focus.

The stigma of light, the stigma of poverty, camp experiences, continuous humiliations and dehumanisations leads many of us, people from yesteryear, to remove ourselves from our own biographies to ensure our own survival. MIA whose music video “Borders” opened this talk was critical for me as a Tamil refugee to reflect upon my own biography and experiences and to eventually learn to articulate these. She is, just as I am, self-organised, works individually as well as collectively to empower our communities, to reclaim the spaces that we were never allowed to occupy. We work from the inside to the outside, from the outside to the inside, in different countries with different methodologies. But what we and all other people with refugee experiences do to empower ourselves, to break the silence and to prevent discussions that bracket us, is significant for us as individuals and groups to find ourselves, to strengthen ourselves and to stand up for the rights we ought to enjoy.

Self-organisation is more than what is visible, more than what is acknowledged by the west, more than what is temporary. It’s embedded in our everyday, its signified by its triviality, in its everyday importance, in its everyday insignificance as well in its resistances.

Before I come to an end of my speech, I’d like to thank my parents who were meant to be present today. Today, on their 35th wedding anniversary, we have come to commemorate our third decade in exile. The years they have spent in exile today outnumber those they have spent in their homeland. My parents are an example for those hundreds of thousands of people with refugee experiences who have been living in this country since decades. Their experiences are not still not acknowledged and neither are they consulted to find solution for contemporary refugee-related issues. But we are here, in this space and elsewhere in this country, afar from urban centres, afar from the media focus and the majoritarian society. And we will continue to exist in this country even after Germany’s “welcoming culture” is exposed as non-sustainable, even after, as it has already been the case, the interest for refugees will fade again.

We, as people with refugee experiences, are aware that we are the discomfort of all nation-states; that we are the nightmares of all borders.

Thank you.