Towards a post-autonomy of migration: (Young) refugees between belligerent and peaceful agency

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Abstract

Contemporary research on migration and border regimes emphasizes that migration produces effects beyond border control, as migrants act (partially) autonomously as individual or collective agents. On the discursive level, many representations tend to foster fantasies of refugees as autonomous political fighters, which overlooks their frequently peaceful aims and ignores non-violent (micro-)politics. Based on an example from Laura Otto's fieldwork with young migrants in Malta, we claim that it is important for critical migration theory not to subsume diverse forms of agency and concrete actions of migrants too easily under the umbrella of the autonomy of migration, as autonomy is a highly ambivalent concept – not an end in itself. We propose to distinguish clearly between belligerent and peaceful forms of political agency. Beyond an understanding of autonomy as combative by principle, a post-autonomous viewpoint takes constructive interdependencies among migrants and non-migrant EU-populations into consideration, too.

Keywords: *Agency; border regime; autonomy of migration; critical migration research; refugees*

Introduction: A plea for differentiation

The historical development of research on migration centered around a dilemma: On the one hand, migrants and refugees[3] themselves were overlooked as agential actors in the study of migration, which led to an underrepresentation of migrants' viewpoints; on the other hand, if migration research did incorporate migrants' viewpoints in research, they were often understood as passive subjects and thus as victims of their circumstances (Darieva, 2007). Yet neither perspective is tenable. Omitting migrant action is as unwarranted as is depriving them of their agency. It was mainly in the 1980s that migrants' practices began to receive more attention and became the central focus of research. To pay tribute to migrant actions and practices – and to overcome discourse which represents migrants solely as victims – the concept of autonomy of migration entered both academic and activist debates in the 1990s and received significant attention thereafter (Bojadzijev, 2011; Moulier-Boutang, 1993). It puts forth the view that migration entails its own principles of movement and follows its own logics beyond regulations. Vollmer (2012) notes that migrants always find a way to deal with the EU's bulwark, no matter how much efforts of securitization were put in play (Casas-Cortes/Cobarrubias/Pickles, 2015). They move between formal and informal norms, and rely

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[3] The article focuses on migration towards the EU which is framed as 'unauthorized' or 'illegal'. We do not wish to reproduce this category. Instead, we assume that forced migration and migration overlap and are not necessarily mutually exclusive circumstances or processes. When we talk about migrants or refugees in this paper, we do not refer to the assigned legal status of our interlocutors, but to self-descriptions. We employ these terms interchangeably, as our research partners themselves did, to demonstrate that they are used beyond legal categories. Flight and migration thus display a continuum instead of clear-cut separations.

on informal practices to "resist, survive, care and relate to each other beyond the control and coercive presence of institutions and states" (Fradejas-García/Polese/Bhimji, 2021: 121).

While we agree that acknowledging migrants' agency and their principles of movement is important to overcoming representations of migrants as passive victims, we nevertheless argue that the autonomy of migration approach tends to contribute to a suspicious construction of migrants as (dangerous) political combatants. Specifications of the concept of autonomy of migration have not least argued that refugees – and their agential practices – initiate a conflict relationship with the border regime (Scheel, 2015). If one thinks this logic further, migrants can be made to be understood as troublemakers – in the best as well as in the worst sense of the word. In addition, discourse on migration has become increasingly linked with critiques of capitalism, neoliberalism, and biopolitics. In short: Migration has repeatedly been used to bring political goals to the fore, which often do not reflect individual migrants' aspirations.

The article at hand is the outcome of a long-term collaboration between Laura Otto and Author 2, which has resulted in an intervention into discourse on the autonomy of migration (Hoffmann/Otto, forthcoming) and which builds the base of our article in which we wish to emphasize in more depth the necessity to differentiate between peaceful and belligerent forms of migrant agency, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of migrant autonomy. We do so by referring to dynamics taking place within the border regime of the EU: Namely, so-called boat migration from the African to the European continent. We substantiate our argument with the example of Malta: The former British colony became independent in 1964 and a member state of the EU in 2004. Malta is located between Italy and Libya in the Mediterranean Sea and is part of the EU's external border. Since its accession to the EU, around 20,000 migrants from various African countries have arrived, and Malta clearly has transitioned from a country of emigration to one of immigration (Mainwaring, 2019, 2014; Mountz/Loyd, 2014; Baldacchino, 2009). Our contribution distances itself from push-and-pull conceptualizations of migration, instead offering a more agential-led perspective. In so doing, the article is embedded within literature from within critical migration research (Hess/Tsianos, 2010; Tsianos/Karakayali, 2010), the autonomy of migration approach (De Genova, 2017; Scheel, 2015; Binder/Ege/Färber, 2011; Mezzadra 2010; Bojadzijev/Karakayali, 2007), and border regime approaches (Fradejas-García/Polese/Bhimji, 2021; Rass/Wolff, 2018).

The article is structured as follows: In the next paragraph, we elaborate in more depth on the autonomy of migration concept which tends, in our view, to subsume individual actions exclusively under a one-sided and unifying vocabulary of struggle and strife. In a second step, we refer to, Laura Otto's ethnographic research' with young refugees categorized as unaccompanied minors (UAMs) in Malta (Otto, 2020) We illustrate in conceptual fashion the ambivalence of their agency between belligerent and peaceful practices of (micro-)political agency, highlighting the relevance of concrete empirical cases and considerations to better understand various forms of migrant autonomy. In a following part, we focus on the contradictions of a unified theory of autonomy of migration and its application in empirical research, arguing for a stronger emphasis on concrete individuals and their (peaceful) forms of action, for which ethnographic research is especially fruitful. The final section of the article offers concluding remarks, as it invites readers to think critically about which forms of migrant agency receive attention in their research: Peaceful and/or belligerent forms of agency? It is

our hope that supposedly trivial, non-combative practices of migrants will gain more attention and will be taken seriously as a post-autonomous reality in both academic and public discourse. Thus, we argue for specifications of how the concept of autonomy could be understood when it comes to evading political misappropriations regarding the real and concrete situations in which refugees find themselves. It is important for us to state here that we by no means wish to delegitimize migrant struggles, especially not if they are encapsulated in mechanisms of maintaining or asserting collective or individual self-defense against various forms of unjust discrimination and violence that can occur within the EU's border regime. But what if migrants do not fight, but act peacefully to achieve their goals? How can we think of autonomy in migration studies and still grasp these practices empirically and conceptually in situations of conflict?

The EUropean border regime and autonomy of migration

Our understanding of a border regime takes seriously the meaning of borders as a contact zone (Pratt, 1991), in contrast to an emphasis of borders as merely consisting of a "line in the sand" (St. John, 2012). As such, border regime analysis has focused on examining the interplay of institutional, administrative, legislative, and technical measures which contribute to border control. However, a border regime approach acknowledges that it is not merely official regulations which constitute borders, but that social-cultural factors (Labor Migration, 2014; Opitz, 2011; Hess/Tsianos, 2010) also play a role in comprising borders as contact zones. These also include, for example, discursive media representations of migrants as potentially threatening actors (Demirkol, 2022). The variety of discursive representation already suggests that views on and experiences of the border regime are contested and not always perceived in uniform ways; instead, border regimes produce situated forms of in- and exclusion (Fischer/Achermann/Dahinden, 2020). Moreover, migrants and refugees also contribute to its production, as they make use of their agency in multiple ways and impact its emergence. Border regime analysis therefore takes seriously the complex relations among migrants and regulations (Rass/Wolff, 2018).

To be able to take seriously these complex relations and dynamics among migrants, non-migrants, and regulations, critical migration research – especially in the German-speaking context – has made important contributions within the field of migration studies and proposed "ethnographic border regime analysis" as a suitable method (Hess/Tsianos, 2010). Its perspective entails following these multiple actors and focusing on various forms of in- and exclusion, which has brought about paradigmatic changes within migration studies (Hess/Tsianos, 2010; Tsianos/Karakayali, 2010). One presupposition of the approach is that migration occurs in ways the institutionalized border regime cannot anticipate, as migrants make use of their agency. Migrant agency is viewed as autonomous action (De Genova, 2017; Scheel, 2015; Bojadzijev/Karakayali, 2007), following Moulier-Boutang's (1993) conception of the "autonomy of migration". His work draws on the *Autonomia Operaia* (Worker's Autonomy) which emerged in Italy in the 1970s and follows theorists of Workerism (operaismo) and post-Workerism (post-operaismo) who sought to appropriate civil rights for actors themselves outside of established political interest groups. Examples included workers collectively using of public transport without a ticket, rental strikes or squatting. Autonomy here implies both a political goal and a diagnosis, namely that people do not become completely incapable of action in power-laden and hierarchized fields, such as factory work, or within migration (Binder/Ege/Färber, 2011; Mezzadra, 2010).

The autonomy of migration concept is to be understood primarily as a critique of approaches that *overlook migrants* in migration research, but also as a counternarrative to approaches that focus solely on migrant subjects, thereby overlooking context and contingencies of migration (Bojadzijev, 2011). At a theoretical level, the concept primarily aims at conceptualizing migration in relation to socio-cultural change. At the analytical level, its observation is key that migration produces outcomes which cannot be foreseen by the institutionalized border regime. Yet, these results of autonomous action appear trivial if one conceives of migration as embedded within power-relations. Thinking with Foucault (2005), power relations presuppose a minimum autonomy of agency. Indeed, it is the unequal distribution of freedoms of choice and action of *all* actors involved which becomes the definitional aspect of power relations: Where autonomy of agency (actually a pleonasm) is totally absent, only relations of violence prevail, in which volitional, autonomous action cannot occur (Foucault, 2005: 285ff., 291ff.). The nod to Foucault is interesting for the autonomy of migration approach since its core assertion is a politically crucial realization: Efforts from within and by the institutional border regime, such as various attempts of securitization, consist of creating structures robbing migrants of their ability to act. Nevertheless, these relations are not rooted in violence alone, but assuming that migrants maintain agency even in the most sinister of circumstances, the border regime must fundamentally be analyzed through the lens of power relations in which migrant autonomy almost never fully ceases.

Another crucial aspect in the autonomy of migration approach is that proponents of the concept argue that they aim at overcoming discourses in which migrants are either depicted as passive "victims" (usually supported by the political left) or as "villains" (often reproduced in right-wing political discourse) (Hoffmann, 2017; Friese, 2017; Vollmer/Karakayali, 2017). Accordingly, the debate focuses on the *conflictual* character of autonomous modes of agency by specifying the concept of autonomy as an "initiation of a conflict-relationship" (Scheel, 2015: 2, our translation). We state that in such relationships, one must distinguish between individual and collective – and dependent and independent – agency in contexts of migration. In addition to successful individual action, migrants – both individually and collectively – challenge the rules and expectations established by the border regime. However, far more decisively, migrants and refugees also contribute to bringing it about in the first place. The concept of migration as a form of human mobility in contemporary European societies – its spatio-temporal movement, charged with specific (political) meanings (Cresswell, 2006: 2ff.) – is linked directly to the *reactive* emergence of border regimes aimed at governing these movements. Yet the actual autonomy of human mobility remains antecedent here, and it is its accompanying socio-cultural transformations which are regularly at the center of the debate (De Genova 2017: 5f.). This makes it possible to transcend the dominant discourse of viewing migrants merely as victims. Instead, refugees are understood as (partially) autonomous actors – like any other people, yet under the way harsher conditions of the border regime. Thereby, the interdependent nature of the relationship between partially autonomous migrants and the demands of the border regime comes into focus. Following de Certeau (1988), it is important to note that not every actor in the border regime can act strategically to the same extent, and migrants must often resort to tactical action. De Certeau distinguishes between strategy and tactics. The former can be understood as active longer-term planning, ordering and stabilizing the social and the cultural, as well as space and time. Tactics, however, are often ephemeral, situative and reactive, yet can restructure, reinterpret, and rearrange socio-cultural settings as well as spatial and temporal arrangements. Yet it is precisely not the case that strategically

designed, socio-cultural and space/time related actions and practices of ordering are determinist. Rather, de Certeau shows that through tactics based on narrating, speaking, and doing, it is possible to subvert power relations, and/or to act conciliatorily. Thus, tactics take place against the backdrop of certain socio-cultural, spatial, and temporal arrangements and divisions, or they emerge within their interplay. These dynamics enable different actors to fill gaps and inconsistencies within power-structures with their tactics. Individuals are therefore not only 'damned' consumers of a pre-structured space, but they are active producers thereof as well (see also Hoffmann, 2017: 40ff; 2019 for an operationalization of stretgic vs. tactical forms of agency).

The actually quite self-evident "relative autonomy" (Mezzadra/Neilson, 2013: 182) of concrete subjects in power relations underscores a different reading within discourse on autonomy of migration: that autonomy is not first or only achieved in collective mobility dynamics, but that it is ultimately based on the freedom of individual action, the analysis of which is the basis of empirically grounded research (and ethnographic approaches in particular) in critical migration research.

We agree with the autonomy of migration perspective that it is important to emphasize that migrants do not simply comply with the border regime and passively accept its rules, but that they contest it with their practices. Yet we argue that their individual (micro-)political aims can neither be grasped theoretically nor empirically by homogenizing migrants as agents of political projects ultimately drafted for them by others. We perceive that autonomy of migration, which has increasingly become an umbrella term for critical migration studies, runs the risk of subsuming many kinds of migrant agency under this concept in proposing that migration is per se a social movement, as Squire (2020) has also cautioned. There are certainly many refugees who wish to engage in political struggles, as for example in the diverse movements against the EU migration regime, but quite self-evidently far more people simply want to improve their own lives – just like non-migrants, too. Empirical studies carried out on refugees in the EU (Hoffmann/Otto, forthcoming) demonstrate that refugees in general – as any person would – try to improve their situation through various forms of action and diverse means, such as through seeking support of lawyers and NGOs, by acquiring education and making themselves more attractive to the labor market, and by establishing support networks. These studies also demonstrate that migrants act autonomously in the sense that they act beyond the rules enacted by the border regime – but they do so most often with far more peaceful forms of agential action than is often times implicitly assumed in studies focused on autonomy of migration, especially in discourse on migration in terms of 'migrant struggles' (German 'Kämpfe', see for example Scheel, 2015; Papadopoulos/Stephenson/ Tsianos, 2008).

While the autonomy of migration approach has been important in making migrants subjects of politics, scholarship, and activism, we conclude that the approach nevertheless conceives of migrants too haphazardly as combative political actors as the concept of conflict – despite its conceptual openness to peaceful conflict resolution – is far too often and too easily deployed one-sidedly as belligerent conflict resolution. Yet historically, the European[4] border

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[4] The enactment of border regimes can be found throughout the globe, yet they all display distinct features. For the European context, it is important to highlight that increased freedom of movement for EU citizens went hand in hand with intensified

regime – not migrants – initiated the conflict-relationship *as such*, by ultimately *defining* migration as aggression and selectively illegalizing certain forms of mobility. In this sense, mutually interactive struggles (as opposed to one-sided aggression) only emerge through resistance to something, as Clausewitz (1976[1832]: 377) already argued regarding the practical logics of violence in the form of warfare. After all, Europe could have granted far greater autonomy to migrants, thereby enabling way more peaceful forms of migrant mobility.

Young refugees and their practices between belligerence and peacefulness

Young refugees, classified as unaccompanied minors, are repeatedly at the center of debates about migration and integration, because they embody the possibility of being viewed as victims and as being viewed as villains at the same time (Lems/Oester/Strasser, 2020; Otto, 2020; Crawley, 2011; Raghallaigh/Gilligan, 2010). The former ascription relates to their young age, the latter often coincides with young BIPOC men who are frequently depicted as dangerous and violent in general.

Laura Otto conducted research with and on these young people along the EU's external border – specifically on the island-state of Malta – between 2013 and 2018. The research was organized in one seven-month long field visit, followed by three revisits in 2015, 2016 and 2018. In total, 48 migrants classified as UAMs consented to participating in the research project. Laura Otto spent a lot of time with the young people in a state care facility run by the Maltese government to house UAMs, where she was not only seen as a researcher, but care staff frequently transferred tasks to her, mainly due to notorious understaffing. Later, and after the young refugees were no longer considered to be underage, she visited them in their own flats, which turned out to be a good way to build relationships, to listen to their stories carefully and not to confront them again with the formalized situation of an asylum interview (Chase et al. 2020).

In addition, 17 young refugees who were not considered to be UAMs participated in the project, as well as 23 people who worked for the Maltese government, NGOs, or care facilities. Following the ethnographic tradition, the project made use of the network to conduct participant observation in multiple places. The material consists of narrative interviews with refugees and non-refugees, such as NGO volunteers or ministry employees, informal talks as well as participant observation. To contextualize the material, legislative texts, NGO reports and newspaper articles complement the material.

Ethnographic research is, with its proximity to people, particularly suitable to study various forms of agency in the border regime. Studying everyday encounters among refugees and other actors means taking seriously different forms of agency which emerge in situ and can best be observed through participation. In what follows, we draw on examples of Laura Otto's fieldwork to illustrate several situations in which young refugees acted in ways through which they hoped to improve their situation – and which led us to question certain conceptual underpinnings of the – otherwise persuasive – autonomy of migration concept. The examples we refer to include how young refugees managed to achieve a certain 'age-identification', how they managed to leave the state care facility to pursue their own interests, and how they

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border control for non-EU nationals. Lutz and Karstens (2021: 370) argue that a "borderless Europe" was accompanied by the construction of "fortress Europe". Part of the EU's border regime are, for example, Frontex (European Border and Coast Guard Agency), the Dublin Regulation which determines the member state responsible for asylum claims, and European Dactyloscopy (EURODAC), a fingerprint database to identify migrants and asylum seekers.

managed not to make care staff suspicious of their plans to leave Malta. We offer insights on what these young people thought about making use of their agency in specific – yet peaceful – ways. In addition, we refer to Laura Otto's relationship with the young refugees to illustrate how more peaceful micropolitics can come about.

Age negotiation and prison release

All refugees who arrived in Malta before 2015 were detained, including young people whose age was unclear upon arrival. In detention, they underwent a process of 'age identification' in which their chronological age was supposed to be identified. Those who were classified as UAMs were allowed to leave detention sooner, but those considered to be eighteen had to stay until their asylum claim was decided upon. While an earlier release from detention was certainly interpreted as an advantage among Laura Otto's interlocutors, they still did not have an interest in being classified as underage. They knew that they would be housed in state care facilities until they turn 18, which meant having less freedom compared to adults. In addition, minors were – unlike adults – not allowed to travel in the Schengen Zone once they received a status of protection. Therefore, the goal was not to be 'too old' to be released from detention faster, but no one wanted to be 'too young' either, because that meant being seen as UAMs for a longer period of time, which many felt was detrimental. Absimil, a young male refugee from Somalia, wanted to be classified as 17 years old, as he told Laura Otto during fieldwork. He had, as many others, heard after his arrival that UAMs had to live in a state care facility until they became adults, were not allowed to travel, and could not hope for a work permit until they were 16. These circumstances did not resonate with Absimil's understanding of being in Europe. He told Laura Otto about his situation and what he experienced:

> »In detention they told me that I am only thirteen years old. I told them seventeen. […]. They said that if I don't accept, I have to stay longer in detention. They threatened me. I accepted and after three weeks I left detention. But in [state care facility] I started to make many problems, I broke things [...]. Because I cannot be thirteen. That is too bad. Then I told them my real age of fifteen. Then they gave me that age.«

Facing threats from the prison staff, Absimil decided to change his strategy: In order to be released, he acted tactically – to think with de Certeau (1988) as suggested above – reasoning strategically that he would get another chance to achieve what he desired – a result which he ultimately succeeded in bringing about. Such resistance on a small scale is repeatedly used by refugees in everyday situations – again, as any people do.

From confrontation to deception, or how to watch the Champions League final

In May 2013, the young refugees Laura Otto met during fieldwork were prevented from watching the Champions League Final – a football match of a pan-European competition – in the state care facility. The youths had been looking forward to the game for several weeks and were sure they would get to watch it. However, on the day of the game, things turned out differently. The management refused to unlock the TV cabinet for them because "they would break it anyway", as Eva, the manager of the facility, told Laura Otto The reason why she did not allow them to watch the match was rooted in her previous experiences as the facility's manager: She explained that previous residents had displayed their resistance in demolishing the television to express their dissatisfaction with the accommodation a few months prior to

the match. Staff from the state care facility responded with strict sanctions for former and later inhabitants, including the current group which was now frustrated. When the news was announced on the morning of the game, there were initially loud disputes in the facility. The young people could not understand the decision and felt they had been treated unfairly: After all, it had not been they who had caused problems in the past. The employees, however, would not listen and upheld their decision. They made clear to the residents that they should stop arguing, otherwise there would be further sanctions. The residents changed their strategy of confrontation to one of deception and accordingly sought a different tactic: To be able to watch the game and not let the dispute over the locked TV escalate further they developed a plan instead. They knew that they could be out late in the evening if they worked at a hotel or in a restaurant. On the evening of the Champions League Final, a number of residents told the staff that they had an appointment to meet with potential employers and conduct trial work and that they had to stay out late – which was permitted. This is how they managed to watch the game together outside the facility in a bar.

Secret plans for departure

Another example which illustrates migrants' ways of acting agentively occurred around their attempts to leave the Maltese island-state. As mentioned above, refugees classified as UAMs are not allowed to travel, but most of the youths were unsatisfied with the situation in Malta and hoped for a better future elsewhere in the EU. They had heard that if one arrives in another EU country and is considered to be underage, one could stay. Under no circumstances did they want to risk employees finding out about their plans to leave the country. Over the course of many months, Laura Otto noticed that the residents and the staff repeatedly discussed whether Malta was actually a nice place to live and how they envisioned their future there. Even though most of the young people did not feel comfortable on site and did not see themselves in Malta in the long term, they always answered in an adapted way: Malta is very beautiful, they are grateful for the hospitality, they want to work here, start a family and lead a nice life. The young people gave these answers especially when they were already secretly planning their departure. Many were indeed successful in acting this way.

The empirical examples demonstrate that (young) refugees act autonomously in various ways, and that they are able to shift their tactics to achieve their various goals, such as a faster release from detention, leaving Malta in secret, or to watch a soccer match. Yet, it would be too simple to equate these practices with peaceful agency. While the young refugees did not use physical violence against others or destroy anything, they did make use of deception at times, even though often performed in a conciliatory fashion. Therefore, the examples highlight that autonomous action by refugees can be characterized on a spectrum from peaceful to belligerent. Significant differences in their autonomous actions can be observed between Laura Otto and the official actors of the border regime. The young refugees' contact and interactions with the latter can be described as one-sided. The unidirectional character of sanctions in play, such as not allowing to watch the soccer match, rendered any dialogical processes impossible (Hoffmann, 2019: 70). Laura Otto's interlocutors were often confronted with authoritarian micro-politics by the staff in particular and by the broader border regime in general, and they did not experience understanding for their individual goals and aspirations. In this situation of unilateral and anti-dialogical enforcement in which young refugees frequently found themselves, mutual goodwill was not the affective basis for peaceful politics and thus not the foundation of these relationships and interactions.

Beyond such small-scale resistance as described in the examples above, the young refugees were also concerned with achieving fundamental legal goals, such a securing a residence status. They emphasized repeatedly that – to bring about their strategic goal – they had to manipulate their asylum narrative on a tactical level, even if they disliked such manipulative courses of action. Sabiye, a young Somali, recounted: "They make me lie, I don't like it, I never lied, but I have to now", illustrating that people in contexts of migration have to fight ('fighting' here means, in a broader sense, deception, lying, protesting, etc., and not necessarily physical violence), even though they do not necessarily want to – much like also occurs for non-migrants in many situations.

Constructive relationships in the computer room

In contrast to such belligerent forms of micropolitical agency, the interactions between the young refugees and Laura Otto can be understood as far more peaceful micropolitics. The young refugees repeatedly sought dialogue, direct contact and mutual goodwill. During research, the management of the care facility gave Laura Otto a key to the computer room where she acted as a supervisor, and residents were only allowed to use the room if a supervisor was present. The managers of the state care facility had created a power-structure in which 'good behavior' became the currency for computer usage: The young refugees received vouchers to use the computer if they cleaned the floor, for example. The structure of allocating time for computer use was dissolved through dialogue between the residents and Laura Otto: together, they developed a new system that regulated time on the computer according to logics of practical fairness. When Laura Otto was present, the young refugees were allowed to use the computer as long as no other resident also wished to use the computer, in which case deliberation had to take place. Against the background that the residents were dependent on the computers – to talk to their families, to research matters which were important to them, to apply for jobs – Laura Otto not only considered access to the computers on the basis of completed chores absurd, but also realized that sanctions and practices of control led to resistance and conflict.

When a space between powerful border regime actors (to which Laura Otto belonged) and migrants emerges in which intentions on both sides are not combative from the start – but rather the transformation of a relationship of unsolved conflict into a constructive one ensues – peaceful forms of agency (on part of the migrants) come to the fore and become possible.

Lessons learned about autonomy

What these empirical snippets reveal is that the relationship between border regime actors and migrants is not *necessarily* or *immanently* belligerent. As such, these relationships do not differ from non-migrant relationships in general. The examples above illustrate that migrants are interested in achieving certain goals, but that there are different ways of bringing them about. At the very least, these examples reveal a further triviality: migrants (much like other, non-migrant people) are often not interested in seeking out conflict and engaging in struggle when they become part of the border regime. Yet the production of the border regime does not solely occur in pacific ways. Struggle can occur, for example, at the legal level with migrants contesting the protection status they have (not) received, or at a more mundane level with various situations of everyday life. Struggles at the micro-level, such as Absimil's successful attempt to receive a higher age determination, are repeatedly used to describe autonomous agency in critical migration research. Both such everyday struggles and political struggles on a

larger scale led to resistance. Yet in many such circumstances, struggle is – regarding the respective subject position within the border regime – a necessary means to an end; it is *not* a political end in itself. The situation in the computer room provides a counter-narrative to migrants as (political) fighters as such. Migrant actors were neither concerned here with political change, nor with fighting: they were satisfied with the peacefully established solution of computer usage in the facility.

We therefore understand these micro-politics as post-autonomous politics which rely on the recognition of mutual relations of interdependency among each other and towards the home's management. Yet this facilitated peaceful forms of micropolitical agency *beyond* an understanding of autonomous migrant agency as belligerent *per se*. While we differ from others' conceptualizations of post-autonomy, such as proposed by Foltin (2016), we nevertheless share its main tenet. From a post-autonomous viewpoint, it is important to differentiate between different types of autonomous action: on the one hand, within social situations aiming at and specifically promoting it; on the other hand, within conflict situations which provoke autonomous action. A post-autonomous viewpoint is also about valuing non-autonomous interdependence on the basis of mutual goodwill, wherever possible, fruitful and desirable. Therefore we argue that the focus in discourse on migration needs to shift to such a quite common interplay and, accordingly, to tensions between combative struggle and peaceful collaboration in concrete situations. Within the discourse of autonomy of migration, the empirical confluence of fairly distinct modes of agency repeatedly leads to an equation of struggle and agency in general. Too often refugees are considered to be involved in struggles only, instead of offering a differentiated view on their practices. The practical logics of fighting as a (not only physical) logic of violence, which is defined by the fact that fighting can be exercised unilaterally and thus independent of and against the will of others[5], is often hardly distinguished from other forms of agency. Autonomy, as independent agency (again the pleonasm), thus primarily becomes a polemological concept. As in the politics of the autonomous left (Foltin, 2016), such discursive reasoning is most obviously due to these ubiquitously one-sided (or polarizing) logics of violence in migration and in other regimes. Still, such a framing remains a problematic generalization. The discourse *on* migrants then quickly turns into a political appropriation *of* them as heroic agents of socio-cultural combat per se (Friese, 2017: 65ff.; Hoffmann, 2019; Scheel, 2013). This can, in its ambivalence, feed the discourse of migrants as a threat. Accordingly, "border spectacles" (De Genova, 2013) and migrants' resistance against the border regime can be interpreted – especially by actors from the political right – as an 'attack on Europe', instead of as supposedly legitimate answers to concrete obstacles and perceived or alleged injustices inherent to EU border politics.

The ambivalence in such representations highlights the concept of relationality, especially in political conflicts. The possible ways in which political opponents of migration can interpret and react to such representations and, ultimately, the question of how refugees' practices are "taken into view" (Friese, 2017: 104, our translation) by the media in general, all have to be taken into account in political reasoning. In short: The claim that migrant mobility is (partially) autonomous is politically ambivalent. On the one hand, it illustrates that freedom of choice in migrant decision-making precedes control enacted by the border regime. It is especially true when "force" (Papadopoulos/Stephenson/Tsianos, 2008) becomes a predominant concept

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[5] This might be the smallest common denominator of practice-logical definitions of violence in a broad range of authors like Clausewitz (1976), Arendt (1972), or Foucault (1981).

to describe collective migrant autonomy, which leads to abstractions which overlook concrete individuals' (often peaceful) actions. With recourse to Hannah Arendt's understanding of the term "force" (Arendt, 1972: 143f.), we assume that in describing migration as forceful social movement, it is invoking a "natural" force. As a consequence, migration is de-individualized and instead understood as a collectivizing abstraction of political struggle.

Precisely because migrants' autonomous actions *can* ultimately entail uncertain outcomes (Papadopoulos/Stephenson/Tsianos, 2008) – which need not be emancipatory – caution is required in assessing their representation in media and public discourse, where migration is often represented as a combative practice as well. This is a central reason why it is important for us to ensure that the concept of the autonomy of migration is always tied back to the individual and concrete – also to understand mobile subjects beyond the facile binary construction "repressed/resistant" (Rass/Wolff, 2018). Respective discursive collectivizations of migrants' agency along this binarism are to be found all over the media, currently regarding the "refugee-protection-crises" (Cyrus, 2017: 114, our translation) at the Central-European borders of Poland: Frequently, refugees are depicted as desperate aggressors while at the same time being depicted as desperate victims of governmental oppression.[6] In both cases, the concept of desperation overrides the discursive possibility of individual policies and politics. In the case of a single refugee's voice being cited directly, it serves only as a token for a collectivized viewpoint to be represented. Such generalizing and varying degrees of abstraction of "migrant struggles" quickly suggest political unity and evokes an alleged "we" among refugees, which hardly exists.

Nevertheless, we emphatically recognize that relatively "safer spaces" (Mader, 2018: 81) where refugees do not have to fight are often the result of numerous cases in which contestations and struggles have taken place. Therefore, we do not wish to present another romanticized understanding of migrants' agency but a nuanced one. Migrants' agency, as we have shown, does not necessarily aim at forms of resistance, but often aims at dissolving boundaries in the sense of creating something new (Mecheril, 2009). It is especially possible in safer spaces – which are often only temporary as with Laura Otto's presence in the facility – in which refugees do not have to act in combative ways. Thus, we consider a full empirical recognition and as clear as possible differentiation of peaceful and belligerent forms of migrant agency to be of crucial importance, especially in times of increasing normalization of logics of violence. The question which arises is how one should pursue the realization of goals while evading combative measures in basically violent regimes? Accusations of naiveté are repeatedly cast against peaceful forms of politics, but these accusations often reveal a particular naiveté themselves: to believe that migration regimes can be overcome solely based on confrontational forms of politics does not hold up to empirical scrutiny. Borders in the widest sense might be demolished by one-sided force; but overcoming respective sociocultural boundaries is based on mutual goodwill.

Concluding remarks

How should we think about the autonomy of migration post-autonomously in light of these empirical and theoretical considerations? At an empirical level, we have shown that (young) migrants are not interested in pursuing combative methods per se. Instead, we have shown that peaceful politics – which still lead to an improvement of their situation – are possible and

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[6] See for example Spiegel (2021): "Flüchtende attackieren polnische Grenze" (Refugees attack the Polish border, own translation).

allow for completely different, in principle more constructive, de-bordering and far more efficient procedures in the long run. That is *if* the goal is to achieve peaceful coexistence. Still, the violent logics of the border regime are always present in principle: Laura Otto simply could have refused dialogue, as could have the facility management, which brings structural power relations into play that largely exclude entirely 'non-violent' forms of conflict resolution. We are reminded that there can be no space devoid of power-relations in the Foucauldian (1981) sense.

In consequence, the micropolitical modes of agency of refugees could be thought of as a chiastic structure between belligerent and peaceful modes of autonomous agency. At times, these contrasting forms of action overlap in political practice; but mostly, they mutually exclude one another by principle. There are cases in which words, negotiations between actors, and dialogue may not seem feasible. Especially for those cases in which agents – both migrants and actors from within the (institutional) border regime – are interested in peaceful collaboration, belligerence and combative rhetoric may undermine the outcomes they are meant to generate.

These basic modes of (micro-)political conflict imply an analysis of determining which forms of political practice make more practical sense in any given situation. Precisely because of the empirical oscillation between peaceful and violent practices in conflicts, we believe it is important to constantly make this distinction and to emphasize it repeatedly, especially in relation to media-representations (Hoffmann, 2017; 2019).

At a conceptual level, we have shown that thinking about migration post-autonomously means recognizing that interdependencies between migrant action and border regime actors can be productive, especially considering that autonomy primarily implies a 'self-limitation' (Castoriadis, 1997: 405) and, above all, a dissociation from the *Other*. The concept does not exactly invite for solidarization. Thus, autonomy in emancipatory contexts can only be a necessary means to an end in a violent environment and not an end in itself, as in identitarian contexts. This consideration is central when it comes to counteracting a problematic Othering of refugees (Hoffmann, 2017) as totally different political agents and, conversely, to constructively contributing to a "migrantization of the study of societies" that moves migration "from the margins to the center" (Labor Migration, 2014, our translation).

A post-autonomous viewpoint takes seriously that migrant agency does by no means have to be politically motivated *per se*. Still, it puts forward a perspective which promotes a focus on more peaceful forms of autonomous actions, which often remain overlooked. They are, however, essential if we wish to represent migrants neither solely as victims of their circumstances nor as belligerent political actors per se. The post-autonomous viewpoint, as suggested here, aims at examining migrant agency in an impartial manner which demystifies their agency. Peaceful and belligerent agency demarcate two ends of a spectrum, and migrant agency can, as we have shown, oscillate between them – much like non-migrant agency also does. Furthermore, if one employs a post-autonomous viewpoint, one can take into account how migrants and non-migrants act together autonomously in constructive ways and beyond the state and its regulations. Autonomous agency is, thus, much more common place in the border regime than is generally believed.

At this point, the question is: What is achieved at the political level with the tendency towards one-sided representation of migrants as combative, thereby collectivizing abstractions of

"migrant struggles"? That question is especially relevant when we acknowledge that reporting on actual migrant struggles, as well as on their strategies and tactics, has often only led to larger-scale adaptations within the border regime, which have often increased the precarity of migrants (Hoffmann, 2017). Corresponding discursive representations ultimately run the risk of simply reproducing prevailing hegemonic discourses. In these cases, the political is not understood as it should be: namely, as a field of conflict in which both peaceful *and* violent practices take place. Instead, current representations repeatedly fuel a discourse in which the political is conceived from the outset only as a painful practice of demarcation, struggle, and competition.

In a similar manner, overt solidarizations with refugees can easily become a means to an end – whose ultimate purpose is the struggle against identitarian movements – instead of allowing it to be an end in itself. The marginalized, everyday successes of peaceful agency on a small scale hardly receive attention. At worst, peaceful politics are framed as apolitical and thus empirically and theoretically irrelevant. Instead, we hope that the supposedly trivial, non-combative practices of migrants will gain more attention and will be taken seriously as a post-autonomous reality.

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