

Introduction: Solidarities in Motion.

Hybridity and Change in Migrant Support Practices

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Abstract

The so-called ‘Eurozone’ and ‘migration’ crises mark critical moments in Europe’s recent political history and share similarities to the extent that they both have increased political conflict, mobilized large parts of civil society, and put renewed attention upon the notion of ‘solidarity’. Focusing on the specific case of solidarity with migrants, this article argues that times of crises have increasingly blurred the lines between contentious and non-contentious forms of civil society engagement. Scrutinizing these *dynamics of hybridization*, we bridge diverse, yet largely disconnected literatures, including social movement, civil society and humanitarian studies. In particular, we suggest that the disciplinary and analytical distinction between volunteering and non-profit activities on the one hand and social movements and political activism on the other is too rigid and does obscure parts of a complex phenomenon, which is characterized by activities that often intersect between humanitarian practices and contentious politics.

Keywords

Solidarity, Migration, Humanitarianism, Civil Society, Social Movements, Hybridity

Introduction¹

The so-called ‘Eurozone’ and the ‘migration’ crises mark critical moments in Europe’s recent political history and share similarities to the extent that they both have increased political conflict (Kriesi et al., 2012; Rea et al., 2019), mobilized large parts of civil society (Zamponi, 2017; Zamponi and Bosi, 2018), and put renewed attention upon the notion of ‘solidarity’ (della Porta, 2018; Lahusen and Grasso, 2018). Focusing on the specific case of solidarity with migrants, we argue that times of crises have increasingly blurred the lines between contentious and non-contentious forms of civil society engagement. Scrutinizing these *dynamics of hybridization* is at the core of this symposium, which bridges diverse, yet largely disconnected literatures, including social movement, civil society and humanitarian studies.

This symposium thereby joins a lively debate on ‘acts of solidarity’ in general and practices of ‘migrant solidarity’ in particular (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2019; Bauder and Juffs, 2020; della Porta, 2018; Siim et al., 2019). In the collective effort to add substance and clarity to ‘a word in search of flesh’ (Bauman, 2013), we complement the existing reflections on solidarity in various ways. First and foremost, we suggest that the disciplinary and analytical distinction between volunteering and non-profit activities on the one hand and ‘social movements’ and political activism on the other is too rigid and does obscure parts of a complex phenomenon, which is characterized by frequent intersection between humanitarian practices and contentious politics (Sinatti, 2019; Vandevooordt, 2019). While a dialogue between these fields is heuristically instructive per se (Anheier and Scherer, 2015; Wilson, 2012), times of crisis produce moreover a variety of hybrid forms and shifts in repertoires, frames and organizational structures, which require conceptual and theoretical bridge-building (della Porta, 2020a). Looking at these critical moments, we also build upon a vast body of literature referred to as critical humanitarian studies (Agier, 2011; Fassin, 2012; Ticktin, 2011), which has documented the pitfalls of support practices for migrant in contexts of unequal power relations in which marginalization and in turn dominance become particularly exacerbated given intersectional exclusions based on class, race, gender and citizenship.

Based on the integration of various strands of theory and drawing from highly diverse bodies of oftentimes hybrid empirical examples of migrant support practices since the crisis of refugee politics in Europe, we present in this introduction the analytical framework, which guides the contributions in this symposium. Combining both conceptual and empirical insights from a wide range of studies that address different aspects of solidarity practices and bringing together scholars from distinct disciplinary backgrounds, we aim at providing new theoretical reflections and empirical evidence that might be of interest to a broad interdisciplinary academic audience as well as engaged citizens interested in ‘acts of solidarity’ in times of heightened political conflict.

(Beyond) Ideal-Types of Civic Engagement for Migrants

Despite their common interest in collective forms of civic engagement, ‘[f]or a long time, the research agendas for civil society, volunteering, and social movements have developed in parallel, and remained largely unconnected. Typically, seminal work on social movements rarely references seminal work on volunteering and civic engagement, and vice versa’ (Anheier & Scherer, 2015: 494).

Despite building upon a theoretical concept that subsumes a broad set of relations and practices (Diani, 2015) and for which definitions vary widely (Anheier, 2005), the explicit ‘civil

society' literature has predominantly focused on the 'nonprofit' sector, understood as 'the sum of private, voluntary, and non-profit organizations and associations' (Anheier, 2005: 4). In a variant, the term 'third sector' has been used to denote 'private organizations, albeit operating within the public sphere and for the common weal' (Zimmer & Freise, 2018: 26), gaining particular prominence in the context of welfare service provision. These concepts, hence, intend to capture a highly heterogeneous field of activity, which involves foundations, think-tanks as well as welfare, relief and human rights associations, to name but a few. Their diversity notwithstanding, these actors share properties as far as their organization and dominant form of action is concerned. Non-profit associations usually combine a professional, employed staff with a voluntary section.ⁱⁱ Indeed, often the multiple tasks of non-profit actors cannot be fulfilled without the active support of thousands of volunteers, for which the organization provides an infrastructure. With regard to the dominant repertoire of action, non-profit organizations tend to focus, besides the provision of services, on more consensual forms of interest representation such as lobbying or advocacy, rather than protest (even though this form is occasionally used as well).ⁱⁱⁱ Civil society organizations have traditionally often used moderate forms of action, which resonate in large parts of the public opinion. While advocating social and political changes (Evers and Laville, 2004; Larruina et al., 2019; Pestoff et al., 2011), they tend towards a depoliticized framing of their activities.

We have this dominant reading of 'civil society' associations in mind, when we observe that its features differ markedly from social movements. As della Porta argues, civil society studies focuses on 'autonomy', 'civility' and a structured 'third sector', whereas social movement studies tend to stress 'conflict', 'transgression' and (loose) 'networks', instead (della Porta, 2020a: 3). She suggests that 'civil society has often pointed at *civility* as based on respect for others, politeness and the acceptance of strangers' prioritizing collective action on predominantly consensual issues' (ibid, italics in original). Accordingly, 'civil society is seen as the texture of cooperative and associational ties, fostering mutual trust and shared values, ultimately strengthening social cohesion' in a way resonant with Putnam's conceptualization of social capital (Putnam, 1994, 2000). In contrast, '[s]ocial movement practices have been defined (...) as *transgressive*, contentious and/or confrontational. Their disruptiveness allows them to draw the attention of public opinion and put pressure on decision makers, as challenges to law and order help amplify their voice' (della Porta, 2020a: 3, italics in original). Organized in loose networks, social movements are hence widely understood as 'bearers of fundamental conflicts' (ibid).

Accordingly, in an ideal-typical representation, the differences between the non-profit sector/civil society and social movements could be summarized as in table 1:

< Table 1 about here >

Florence Passy (2001) builds on a similar distinction in her work on ‘political altruism’, which she defines as ‘actions pursued collectively, with a clear political goal of social change, and whose outcomes are to benefit others’ (Passy, 2001: 6). Implicitly, she argues that social movements fulfil all three criteria of her definition, whilst actors in the non-profit sector mainly perform ‘acts of compassion’, which entail the first and the last feature, yet, lack a clear political aim (Passy, 2001: 7).

Building-upon these established distinctions (see also Anheier & Scherer, 2015; della Porta, 2020a; Ekman & Amna, 2012), we might adjust and expand them to better understand the hybrid dynamics of migrant support (see table 2). Echoing Passy’s reflection on ‘compassion’ and ‘political altruism’, but also integrating the vast body of literature on humanitarian practices, we suggest locating civil society engagement for migrants between the ideal-typical poles of *humanitarianism* on the one hand and of *solidarity* on the other. In order to relate to the aforementioned distinction of civil society and social movements, we consider first the three aforementioned dimensions (frames, organization and action), adding however two more: their relationship with the state and the dominant mode of interaction between the providers and the recipients of support.

Without going into detail, what we refer to as humanitarianism is a combination of values and affects, which are rooted in the liberal thought of the Enlightenment. It presupposes the acknowledgement of a universal mankind, from which ‘the obligation to provide assistance’ (Fassin, 2012) to others, particularly those in need, is derived. While resonant with, it is however not identical with religiously connoted concepts such as the above mentioned ‘compassion’^{iv} or ‘charity’. What is furthermore inherent in the idea of humanitarianism is its adherence to principles such as humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence (Roepstorff, 2019). Although recognizing the multifarious meaning that has been given to the concept (Bauder and Juffs, 2020; Oosterlynck, Stijn Loopmans, Maarten Schuermans, Nick Vandenabeele, Joke Zemni, 2016), we define here solidarity as a relational practice, which explicitly aims at inclusive social change. In this definition, we draw from the seminal work by Featherstone (2012) and Agustín & Jørgensen (2019).

In such an ideal-typical distinction, humanitarianism tends to have a more consensual relationship with the state, more moderate (often depoliticized) frames, with activities often understood as emergency assistance, predominantly using non-contentious forms of action (volunteering rather than protest) and developing a hierarchical relationship between providers and recipients of support. In contrast, solidarity can be considered, again as an ideal-typical conceptualization, as a transformative practice, aiming at social justice. This practice tends to have a more conflictual relationship with the state, being more sensitive to power relations between those offering and those receiving support. Solidarity is predominantly performed in grassroots settings and often involves contentious forms of action.

< Table 2 about here >

Such a classification also incorporates the more fundamental distinction of ideal-types of engagements, which reflects the effects on migrants lives of voluntary or professional charity and more social justice oriented forms of migrant activism. Critical theories and empirical studies of volunteering and humanitarian action often argue that charities (made of volunteers and professionals alike), in contrast to social movements, do not fight against the causes of the issues they aim to address. Scholars have pointed at how a focus on migrant suffering and its alleviation by (non) governmental actors risks hiding the structural nature of deprivation, depoliticizing the issue and by this contributing to the perpetuation of existing power relations (Fassin, 2012; Ticktin, 2011). Empirical research documents these pitfalls of humanitarianism, when volunteers claim to be ‘neutral’, operating outside the realm of politics (Fleischmann and Steinhilper, 2017).

Certainly, the boundaries between the two analytical categories are empirically blurred as civil society organizations (and their volunteers) often participate in contentious campaigns, join informal networks and support advocacy campaigns, and encounter social movement activists in various arenas. On their side, social movement organizations at times engage in the provision of services, avoid politicized frames and practice unequal power distribution between, for instance, autochthon activists and migrants when the former try impose their ideology to advance their own political struggle (Cappiali, 2018). In fact, research on specific campaigns - such as Latino mobilizations in the US (Nicholls, 2013; Zepeda-Millán, 2017) or antiracist protests in Europe (Fella and Ruzza, 2013) - shows the blurring border between civil society’ and ‘social movements’ organizational forms of action repertoires and collective frames. Analytically distinguishing the two concepts we want therefore not to stress differences but

rather to observe hybridization. By first ideal-typically distinguishing civil society and social movement types of practices, as well as humanitarianism and solidarity - carving out differences in their respective repertoires of action, the main actors involved and the role of the state therein - we aim to then point at the interactions between the different forms in practice. Drawing from a growing literature on the political dimensions of humanitarian practice (Fleischmann, 2017; Sandri, 2017; Sinatti, 2019; Vandevordt, 2019) and bridging it to debates on more overtly politicized migrant support (della Porta, 2018), we suggest that moments of crisis reconfigure the broader field of civil society engagement for migrants, resulting in arenas shifting shapes and actors morphing both ideationally and strategically. These hybrid and complex practices of civic engagement in support of migrants, as reaction to specific crises, are at the core of this symposium.

Hybridity and Change in Times of Crises

The analytical and descriptive focus on hybridization of migrant support practices in this symposium is linked to a contextualized explanation of how this mechanism spread in times of crises pushed first by defensive alliances to respond to emergencies and, then, by the relational experiences in these newly constructed arenas of struggle. The contributions to this symposium are historically situated during and after the ‘long summer of migration’ 2015, which has been described as a critical juncture in the political landscape in Europe. We argue that, to fully understand the shifting terrain of engagement for migrants, we have to take into account the interplay of various interrelated crises, which have affected the relationship between humanitarianism and solidarity, and between social movements and the civil society more broadly.

Firstly, the financial breakdown in 2008 followed by austerity policies and particularly in Southern European countries by a ferocious retrenchment of the welfare states, have dramatically increased the number of people in need of support (Bosi and Zamponi, 2015; Lahusen and Grasso, 2018). In this context, many citizens felt they were left with no alternative as to get engaged in various ways in order to fill the vacuum left by the state. Especially in Southern European countries, civil society developed practices of critical mutualism. In Greece, so-called solidarity clinics mushroomed, providing free health care to people in need, but also soup kitchens and markets without middlemen, knit together into a system of ‘welfare from below’. Those involved in the provision of basic services included social movement actors, humanitarian professionals and ordinary citizens, which had never been involved in civic engagement before (Malamidis, forthcoming). In a context of economic downturn, social

movement actors diversified their repertoire of action, temporarily focusing on ‘direct social action’, defined as practices ‘that do not primarily focus upon claiming something or other from the state or other power holders (...) but that instead focus upon directly transforming some specific aspects of society by means of the very action itself’ (Bosi & Zamponi, 2015: 369).^v A vibrant informal civil society developed, with a different social basis than formal voluntarism, including those who were hit by the crisis and the politically engaged (Hadjimichalis, 2018; Malamidis, forthcoming). While social movement actors have so bridged protest activities with alternative service provisions, also non-profit actors and charities have changed their frames and repertoires of action in times of austerity, at times and allying with movements to challenge government (della Porta, 2020a: 7 f.). Similar patterns can be traced in activism around migrant issues. Face to a shrinking welfare state, both result of neoliberal reforms and rigid austerity measures, civic engagement has diversified here as well, bringing about hybrids which elude and reshuffle the analytical space between ‘solidarity’ and ‘humanitarianism’ introduced above (della Porta 2018).

Secondly, neoliberal transformations of society, which date from long before the financial crisis, have over time resulted in an increasing dissatisfaction among citizens with (multiple) governments’ failure to keep up to the promises of economic growth and a gradual move towards ‘post-democratic’ modes of governance, in which small politico-economic elites dominate and the space for democratic control is shrinking (Crouch, 2004). These socio-economic transformations have also resulted in an increasing polarization of society, among others around an ‘integration-demarcation’ cleavage, which opposes those in support of open, inclusive and internationally-oriented societies to those who favor economic and cultural nationalism (Hutter, 2014; Hutter et al., 2016). In the last decade, right-wing nationalist parties and movements have been particularly successful in mobilizing dissatisfaction, stigmatizing not capitalist transformations and related rising inequality, but the liberal model of society and its focus on minority rights. In the context of a ‘great regression’ (Geiselberger, 2017), in which civil rights are increasingly being attacked, the space for those mobilizing for an open society has shrunk. Nationalist parties and movements have at times succeeded to shift the dominant discourse and contributed to the discrediting of civil society activities, including practices, which have been previously considered at the foundation of democratic and liberal values. Accordingly, in addition to economic transformations and crises, a crisis of liberal democracy is testified for by the frequent electoral success of far-right and illiberal parties. In fact, the ‘political and cultural reverberation of the socio-economic crisis into a crisis of legitimacy has also affected civil society organizations by reducing the political support and polarizing the

public opinion up to the point of criminalizing some acts of solidarity and the individuals and groups that perform them' (della Porta & Steinhilper, forthcoming). This shifting political and discursive context, in which all kinds of minority rights have become contested political issues, affects not only progressive social movements, which have mobilized for change, but also those professionals and volunteers, who have previously perceived their activities as non-political and rooted in a consensual normative universalism. At the same time, the resistance to the backlash is growing, among others through the construction of broad alliances among progressive actors (della Porta, 2020b).

Thirdly, while European societies are increasingly divided between advocates and opponents of pluralism more broadly (Foroutan, 2019; Grande, 2018), at the latest since the crisis of European migration politics in 2015 the issue of migration has - at least temporarily - become the dominant issue of political conflict (Rea et al., 2019). In the crisis, not only closure and xenophobia have grown, however, but also inclusive responses proliferated. Given increasing arrivals of migrants from war-torn countries and the incapacity of governmental authorities to guarantee basic services, many citizens have stepped in and performed a wide range of activities between direct service provision and protest (della Porta, 2018). During the economic crisis mentioned above, when a diverse set of actors, social movement organizations, volunteers and non-profit professionals increasingly came together, the 'refugee crisis' narrative and the real challenges of migrant reception sparked practices that resemble the direct social actions identified in Southern Europe during the economic crisis (Zamponi, 2017). At the same time and given the political conflict on the issue, governments in various countries have enacted series of restrictive migration policies in their attempt to cater to a growing right-wing electorate. Not only migrant mobility came increasingly under attack, but also the practices of those offering support (della Porta & Steinhilper, forthcoming). The conflicts around humanitarian actors organizing search and rescue activities of migrants in the Mediterranean (Heller and Pezzani, 2017; Steinhilper and Gruijters, 2018) grew in a historical context, in which the restriction of migration and a 'shrinking space' (van der Borgh and Terwindt, 2012) for civil society activity have become two sides of the same coin. Laws against illegalized migration, presented as targeting human trafficking, have been used against individuals and organizations offering humanitarian support, including responses to basic needs such as food, housing, healthcare and legal assistance. Protestors against deportation on planes have also been targeted as criminal offenders. Broadening the definition of unacceptable acts of solidarity aimed 'not so much to prosecute more people but to warn those in civil society and public office that the threat of prosecution is real and imminent' (Fekete, 2009: 83).

In this context of multiple subsequent and intersecting crises, the lines between the arenas of social movements and civil society blur. Particularly since the ‘summer of migration’ 2015, scholars have in fact engaged in a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between humanitarianism and politics of solidarity inquiring the ‘possibility for political dissent to be formulated and enacted from *within* humanitarian reason’ (Stierl, 2018: 3, italics in original). Balancing the previously dominant scepticism toward the transformative potential of humanitarian practice, empirical studies have documented hybrid forms of ‘enabling humanitarianism’ (Sinatti, 2019) and ‘subversive humanitarianism’ understood as ‘a morally motivated series of actions which acquires a political character not through the form in which these actions manifest themselves, but through their implicit opposition to the ruling socio-political climate’ (cited in Vandevordt & Verschraegen, 2019: 105). In line with this reasoning, it is precisely the *hybrid dynamics of migrant support*, that allow for a ‘shift from a humanitarianism that transforms forced migrants into recipients of aid, to a form of solidarity that allows more room for their socio-political subjectivities’ (Stierl, 2018: 706). Such a shift requires a re-politicization of migration and an ambition to aim at more long-lasting political changes (Atac et al., 2017; Sinatti, 2019; Vandevordt, 2019), even when they are presented as following a de-politicized strategy (Fleischmann, 2017; Sinatti, 2019; Vandevordt, 2019). In this symposium, we trace in particular the intertwining of dynamics of ‘NGOization of social movements’ and ‘SMOization of NGOs’ (della Porta, 2020a: 6 f.). While the former depicts a ‘moderation of action repertoires’, a ‘structuration of organization’ and a ‘depoliticization of frames’, the latter traces the reverse path (della Porta, 2020a: 6).

Times of crisis, our core argument goes, fuel complexity and hybridity in and between the arenas of civil society activity and social movements. The detailed case studies in this symposium highlight that the practices and identities of migrant support actors – social movements, charities or volunteers alike - are not necessarily stable, but contingent in time and space (Musick and Wilson, 2008). We thereby document the empirical reality of a dynamic and hybrid relationship between volunteering and the non-profit sector on the one hand and contentious politics on the other, thereby connecting the strands of critical humanitarian and social movement studies.

Mapping Solidarities in Motion: The Contributions to this Symposium

The contributions in this symposium map-out the wide range of migrant support practices. They scrutinize the relational practices unfolding in acts of solidarity, including the normative contradictions and conflicts which are part of transformative encounters in contexts of status and citizenship related inequality. Often without claiming political change publicly, these

relational practices prefigure inclusive alternatives, and are at time disobedient toward exclusionary governmental policies. We thereby underline Featherstone's claim, that solidarity should not be understood as a normative ideal, but as a necessarily incomplete and contested practice (Featherstone, 2012).

Robin Vandevoordt and *Larissa Fleischmann*'s contribution opens the empirical section with an inquiry into the ambivalent temporalities of migrant support practices. While humanitarian action is often criticised for its focus on immediate needs in the present, social movements and political activists are usually thought to work towards a different future. Drawing on cases from Belgium and Germany, the authors complicate these clear-cut distinctions by investigating how grassroots initiatives supporting migrants navigate different temporalities, relating their actions both to the present *and* to the future.

Helge Schwiertz and *Elias Steinhilper* compare two cases of pro- migrant activism in Germany claiming the safe passage of migrants to Europe to develop the notion of 'strategic humanitarianism'. In this hybrid form, migrant support actors combine the strategic employment of predominantly depoliticizing, narrow and humanitarian framing with a contentious repertoire of action. It entails deliberately sacrificing a 'deep' politicization of fundamental critique against contemporary migration regimes in order to achieve a 'wide' politicization and broad consensus for progressive social change.

Inspired by Jodi Dean's understanding of the reflective solidarity of strangers, *Birte Siim* and *Susi Meret* explore how models of contentious and non-contentious civil society mobilization and engagement cope with inequalities and differences. Based on fieldwork in Denmark and Germany, the authors discuss how tensions and disagreements within groups involving both migrants and supporters can potentially develop into forms of reflective solidarity, aimed at reshaping the boundaries created by differences of race, class, ethnicity and gender.

Sonja Moghaddari scrutinizes the phenomenological experiences underlying the amorphous concept of 'solidarity' with a focus on its affective and emotional dimensions. Building on long-term ethnographic fieldwork within deportation protest in Germany, the author analyses resonance in four affective encounters. It argues that rather than communicating a political opinion, solidarity represents an attitude through which people explain their engagement in certain forms of affective and emotional exchange which are often just as ambiguous, challenging and contradictory as they are comforting and exciting.

In the last empirical contribution to the special issue, *Carlotta Caciagli* explores the role of solidarity in housing movement organizations in the Italian capital of Rome. Based on

extensive participant observation, the author documents how anti-eviction practices foster solidarity between migrant and non-migrant locals, contributing to the formation of a new collective subjectivity. This in turn, has an impact on the cityscape as it contributes to mapping alternative models of city construction.

Read together, the empirical cases document the hybrid and dynamic nature of migrant support practices, which navigate between the poles of humanitarian assistance and political activism. We hope, these insights provide empirical and conceptual flesh to an ongoing debate on migrant solidarity, but also embeds it into broader reflections on transformations of civic engagement in times of heightened political conflict or crisis.

By the time of finalizing this article, solidarity, including towards migrants, emerges anew as an important practice to alleviate the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis. We therefore believe that hybrid forms of engagement will remain relevant for understanding the pandemic and post-pandemic developments within and beyond civil society.

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Notes

ⁱ The two authors have contributed equally to this article.

ⁱⁱ The non-profit sector in many countries constitutes an important segment in the labour market. For instance, in Germany, the Christian so-called ‘free welfare associations’ are among the largest employers with more than 1.900.000 jobs (Anheier, 2005: 7).

ⁱⁱⁱ Human rights associations are particular in this regard, due to their more conflictual relationship with the state given the very nature of human rights as defensive mechanisms against the state.

^{iv} The links to Passy’s thought are apparent, yet, we prefer the secular term humanitarianism, which also often better captures the identity of actors operating in the field of migrant support (Roepstorff, 2019).

^v Such forms of action, which prioritize the satisfaction of basic needs including food, housing, and medical treatment, have an important resilient and less contentious dimension (Lahusen and Grasso, 2018; Zamponi and Bosi, 2018). Bayat has traced similar patterns of civic engagement, largely non-contentious and therefore in a strict sense ‘social non-movements’, in the context of the Arab uprisings (Bayat, 2013).

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