



## Article

# Supporting searchers' desire for emplacement in Berlin: Informal practices in defiance of an (im)mobility regime

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4 **Supporting searchers' desire for emplacement in Berlin: Informal**  
 5 **practices in defiance of an (im)mobility regime**<sup>1</sup>

6 Fazila Bhimji<sup>2</sup>

7 **Abstract**

8 *The article traces the ways in which refugees in precarious legal and economic circumstances in Lagers (refugee camps) in*  
 9 *Germany participate in informal practices to reverse their displaced positions. More specifically, the paper demonstrates*  
 10 *how refugees work in conjunction with a Berlin-based solidarity group in order to find access to informally organized*  
 11 *housing outside of the formal bureaucratic state system. The study shows that refugees' engagement with informal structures*  
 12 *must be understood as struggles towards emplacement and formality. Much scholarship has discussed the economic aspects*  
 13 *of informality in the global South and post socialist countries. However, there is little discussion on how refugees may*  
 14 *engage in informal practices within the nation-state in order to find emplacement and achieve formality. The article*  
 15 *additionally demonstrates how informal acts are co-produced between citizens and refugees in the process of searching and*  
 16 *offering of living places outside state defined formal systems. Thus, informality needs to be understood as resistance against*  
 17 *displacement, struggles towards emplacement and formality. The study draws on ethnographic data and on-going*  
 18 *participation in a Berlin-based grassroots group, Schlafplatzorga, which supports refugees on an informal level with*  
 19 *temporary accommodation.*

20 **Keywords:** Berlin; informal practices; mobility regime

21 **Introduction: Informality and (Im)Mobility**

22 When I met James at Daniela's party, he told me that he had been searching for rooms in  
 23 Berlin for several months. James had an Italian nationality and was of Gambian origin and  
 24 had the rights to work and live in Germany. He had stayed at Daniela's place for a few weeks.  
 25 At the party, he chatted with the guests who were of various nationalities, ethnicities, and  
 26 sexual orientation and seemed at ease. I asked him how he knew Daniela and he told me that  
 27 he had met her through the solidarity group Schlafplatzorga. He pointed to the couch he had  
 28 slept on.

29 This vignette illustrates James' search for accommodation in Berlin through informal channels  
 30 and his refusal to contend with formal bureaucratic structures in order to find  
 31 accommodation. This article interrogates how refugees comprehend their acts in relation to  
 32 state powers and mobility regimes and which types of informal practices enable them to  
 33 traverse regimes of mobility.

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34 The concept of informality has been largely discussed in the context of explaining the  
35 differences between the informal and the formal economy. The informal economy has been  
36 primarily understood as “a process of income generation characterized by one central feature:  
37 it is unregulated by the institutions of society, in a legal and social environment in which  
38 similar activities are regulated” (Castells and Portes, 1989:12). Bromley and Wilson (2018)  
39 point out that in the neoliberal era, the persistence of the informal economy relates to the  
40 instability of labor markets that results from global environmental change, economic  
41 globalization, neoliberalism, financialization, rising socioeconomic inequalities and  
42 technological change. To this end Bromley and Wilson (2018) suggest that informality is a  
43 function of shifting economic and sociopolitical dynamics. Although there has been much  
44 discussion of the notion of informal economy, there has also been a focus on informality in  
45 the context of illegal organizations, kinship groups, interpersonal networks, as well as informal  
46 political and civic structures (Granovetter, 1973; Lomnitz, 1988; Shelley et al., 2007; Thelen,  
47 2011; Aliyev, 2015). The field of informality has been additionally understood to ‘take shape  
48 through the neglect, denial or challenge of a formal source of authority and rule-making,  
49 including the state and its prerogative to regulate a particular aspect of its social or economic  
50 life’ (Polese et al 2019:8). Polese et al (2019) point to cases in which state institutions do not  
51 regulate a particular exchange and interaction, so citizens mobilize in response to make up for  
52 this deficiency. Refugees’ accounts presented in this paper point to the value of understanding  
53 informal practices as insurgence against state power and involve struggles for emplacements  
54 and formalization, under conditions in which the state displaces them and neglects to care for  
55 their wellbeing, imposes internal border regimes and threatens them with deportation.

56 In the state assigned camps, such as in Germany, refugees experience ‘displacement’ which  
57 includes not only a range of mobilities including border-crossing migration, but also the  
58 increasing precarity of those considered locals who experience various forms of dispossession  
59 (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2015; Morell, 2014). Emplacement is understood as the social  
60 processes through which a dispossessed individual builds or rebuilds networks of connection  
61 within the constraints and opportunities of a specific city (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2013). To  
62 this end, the paper demonstrates how refugees who decided to locate to Berlin through  
63 informal networks contest displacement in assigned federal states and Lagers and struggle for  
64 emplacement.

65 The paper thus demonstrates that informal/’illegal’ actions of refugees should be understood  
66 as subtle resistance against the state stemming from people’s desire for emplacement, and to  
67 counter experiences of displacement related to ‘mobility regimes’ and everyday experiences  
68 of racism, bureaucracy and state power. According to Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013) a  
69 ‘regime of mobility’ is connected to unequal globe-spanning relationships of power. Thus a  
70 ‘regime of mobility’ in this study is understood as ‘confinements and modes of exploitation’  
71 (Salazar and Smart 2011) such that even when refugees manage to cross transnational borders,  
72 they find themselves in unequal power relations with the state because of Germany’s  
73 restrictive laws with respect to mobility within the state and exploitative conditions in camps:  
74 they thus experience multiple layers of internal border regimes (El-Kayed and Ulrike Hamann  
75 2018). Furthermore, many refugees who arrive from other EU countries and so called ‘safe  
76 countries’ experience deportation threats. Consequently, refugees try to find ways to move  
77 out of these camps using informal ways and means. While the state and official discourses  
78 criminalise such informal practices, we are of the view that informal practices need to be



79 understood as quests by refugees for emplacements and constitute resistance against  
80 restrictions on movement.

## 81 **Methodology**

82 The paper draws on ethnographic data from participation in a solidarity group,  
83 Schlafplatzorga (SPO), which has supported homeless refugees based in Berlin since the year  
84 2014. During the so called refugee crisis of 2015, the group lent support to the numerous  
85 solidarity groups which had sprung up in Berlin, but the focus of the SPO remained on  
86 supporting refugees who had arrived prior to 2015 who were homeless because of deportation  
87 threats and were affected by the Dublin rules.<sup>3</sup> The authors of this paper participated regularly  
88 in shifts where refugees approached the group in search for housing in Berlin in fund-raising  
89 activities, and also offered counseling to refugees with respect to immigration laws. The first  
90 author conducted interviews with 10 refugees in the year 2018 in order to understand the  
91 reasons they left their state-assigned *Lager* (camps) and came to Berlin. The interlocutors were  
92 from various African countries, since the majority of refugees who approached SPO were  
93 from these regions. One of the interlocutors selected was of East Asian origin because he  
94 frequently accessed SPO and had resided in various EU countries. The author acquired verbal  
95 consent of refugees she interviewed. To ensure anonymity during the data write up, all  
96 participants were given pseudonyms. We were conscious of our respective privileges in  
97 relation to the people we worked with and there were regular discussions of our multiple  
98 privileges during our participation in the group as activists and in my case in the dual role of  
99 activist/researcher. One author was a German citizen of white middle class background and  
100 the other author was a person of color and of migration background but had British and EU  
101 citizenship and a stable work situation. The first author spoke multiple languages such as  
102 French, Spanish, Urdu and some German, which facilitated connection with the people who  
103 came to SPO in search of accommodation. Several of the people who came to the shifts were  
104 also Muslims and this author's Muslim background also facilitated some levels of connection.  
105 The second author was a University student and a German and EU citizen, was well versed  
106 in English and had resided in Berlin all her life, which helped in furthering links since she was  
107 accustomed to working with people from various migration backgrounds and was active in  
108 several groups supporting refugees. We tried to minimize hierarchies through including  
109 refugees in social and political events such as by inviting them to parties, dinners, picnics and  
110 demonstrations but it proved difficult to include the individuals in the decision making  
111 process of the day to day running of the group since many of them because could not attend  
112 the weekly plenary meetings on a regular basis because of various personal commitments.  
113 However, there were some refugees who also participated as full members of SPO from time  
114 to time. Members of SPO referred to refugees as 'searchers' and recognized the fact that  
115 'refugees', and 'asylum-seekers' were state imposed categories and thus made a conscious  
116 decision not to use them in their everyday language. However, for the purpose of this paper,  
117 it was difficult not to employ such imposed categories and we decided to employ the term  
118 'refugees'<sup>4</sup> and 'people'.

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<sup>3</sup> The Dublin agreement (first signed in 1990) states that people have to apply for asylum in the first EU member state they reach. The Dublin rule were eased in 2015-2016 for Syrian refugees arriving from Greece, but it remained in effect for the refugees for many of refugees which SPO supported who arrived to Germany from countries other than Syria.

<sup>4</sup> See De Genova et al (2018) for the mobilization of the category of 'refugees'

## 120 **Mobility Regimes and Refugee Camps in Germany**

121 In Germany, refugees are assigned to the different Lagers (refugee camps) and  
 122 accommodations in particular federal states by the system known as *EASY* (Initial  
 123 Distribution of Asylum Seekers). Thus refugees, during the asylum procedure have no  
 124 autonomy in the selection of their place of residence when they first arrive to the country.  
 125 Each of the 16 federal states within Germany has considerable leeway with respect to the  
 126 types of law they wish to impose with respect to refugee rights. In this way, the states can  
 127 erect internal borders through control of their own districts (El Kayad and Hamann 2018).  
 128 For example, the districts can impose the law called *Residenzpflicht*, (residence obligation) which  
 129 restricts movement of refugees within German; this law is applied especially at the start of  
 130 their asylum procedure even after the refugee manages to cross various national borders.

131 Conditions in the Lagers are very difficult and people who reside there confront bureaucracy  
 132 on an everyday basis. Josiah Heyman understands bureaucracies as the following: “[...] they  
 133 are means to an end, ways of carrying out the work of shaping and controlling other human  
 134 beings. Files are records to track people and places; rules allow reference to legitimate and  
 135 consistent standards beyond personal or kin relations to justify what is often, in fact, raw  
 136 political calculation. [...] Bureaucracies are, above all, instruments of power.” (Heyman 2004:  
 137 488). To this end, through registrations at entrance on a regular basis, regimented mealtimes,  
 138 regulations of work in the Lager, and frequent controlling and tracking of people--which may  
 139 differ between the different types of Lagers across federal states and the different private  
 140 companies owning the Lagers-- power was imposed upon the individuals residing there. In  
 141 the case of refugee accommodation centres, the state delegates its’ power to the federal state,  
 142 the *Auslanderbehorde* (the foreigner’s office), the security guards at the refugee camps and the  
 143 local police, all of whom then have the power to govern immigrants’ lives. Thus, the  
 144 experience of staying at the Lager should be understood as an imposition of state power, the  
 145 contemporary novel character and intentions of which have attracted much discussion  
 146 particularly in relation to refugees (see for example Bigo 2002; Darling 2011; Walters 2004).  
 147 As Saltsman (2013) asserts state bureaucracies have thus rationalized increasingly oppressive  
 148 methods to regulate migration and as representatives of bureaucracies, authorities can  
 149 maintain the sort of rational-legal authority Weber describes; their institutional affiliation is,  
 150 in itself, a source of power built on a solid foundation of rules, policies, and best practices.

151 It is easy to apprehend the reasons that refugees try to find ways to defy their situation and  
 152 relocate to Berlin, especially given that certain sections of the city offer a different and  
 153 cosmopolitan experience. Furthermore, and consequently in Berlin, refugees are able to  
 154 informally network with the Left in German society, who support and welcome refugees; thus  
 155 they are able to ultimately find support in ways which could potentially help them to formalise  
 156 their status. Some refugees, upon having stayed in Germany for a certain amount of period,  
 157 are allowed to search for their own flats in the specific federal state to which they are assigned  
 158 and receive financial support for this. However, the process is rather complex, for even such  
 159 individuals and refugees are forced to contend with bureaucratic institutions and racialization.  
 160 As De Genoa notes,



161 Anyone concerned with questions of race and racism today must readily recognize that they  
 162 present themselves in a particularly acute way in the European migration context, haunted as  
 163 Europe's borders are by an appalling proliferation of almost exclusively non-European/ non-  
 164 white migrant and refugee deaths and other forms of structural violence and generalized  
 165 suffering. (2018:1768).

166 In Germany, the non-white refugees come to be racialized when they are isolated in the  
 167 Lagers, when their movements are restricted within the state, when they face intense  
 168 securitization, when they encounter language barriers when the state insists that they speak  
 169 and understand German, but provides 'integration' courses to selected refugees with legal  
 170 status. Thus, these forms of blatant structural inequalities make the flat searches and  
 171 prolonged residence quite difficult for refugees within the federal state in which they are  
 172 registered. Furthermore, the difficult of obtaining a flat is further exacerbated by  
 173 bureaucracies. For example, in order to obtain a flat in Germany, one has to undergo several  
 174 steps including online registration and presentation of a 'SCHUFA', which is a score based  
 175 on the tenant's credit history and other documents.

176 Refugees additionally contend with the bureaucracy involved in seeking work in Germany.  
 177 Refugees have the right to work following some months of residence, based on their  
 178 individual circumstances and status. However, in order to obtain work, people need to first  
 179 find ways to comprehend the bureaucratic nature of finding work such as accessing vocational  
 180 training programs and German language classes. This proves to be difficult since they remain  
 181 isolated in the Lagers --which as mentioned are often located in far-flung areas and towns and  
 182 where anti-immigrant sentiments and fear of immigrants run high. Furthermore, it becomes  
 183 potentially difficult to find vocational training and employment in smaller towns where  
 184 refugees are put in competition with local residents.

185 Many refugees are threatened by deportation, since the Dublin agreement (first signed in  
 186 1990) states that people have to apply for asylum in the first EU member state they reach  
 187 (Bhimji 2016). People in such situations try to not be visible to state institutions, and therefore  
 188 they become dependent on informal housing and work possibilities, as the formal housing  
 189 and working opportunities are always connected to making their own place of residence  
 190 known to the state. Nevertheless, people are put under a lot of pressure to register with the  
 191 state and enter the bureaucratic system. In this way, the state is presumably able to govern  
 192 and remove the migrants. As access to housing in the formal way is only possible with papers  
 193 and registration, people are pushed into informality and very precarious housing or they have  
 194 to expose themselves to state power and contend with the power of bureaucracies. Thus many  
 195 people try to leave the Lager system and their federal state and try to live and find work in the  
 196 capital. However, to move to a different federal state entails an even more difficult  
 197 bureaucratic process. The individual has to justify why they need to move. For example, they  
 198 need to produce a work contract which in itself would be difficult if they had not lived in that  
 199 state. Furthermore, they need to show that a family member is living there already and they  
 200 additionally need to demonstrate to the authorities that they already have a place where they  
 201 could live. As Ang who encountered homophobia in his assigned federal state and came to  
 202 Berlin and who after a few years relocated to Malmö explained:

203 *Ang: There is a strange rule in Germany for moving from a city to another city. Asylum seeker can't move to*  
 204 *another city. Or I have to have an Ausbildung (it's a lower step than Studium) but I studied in Germany.*  
 205 *It's a strange situation. A guy who might have studied medicine also has to show a work contract. And for*

206 *moving this guy has to learn skill to work in Lidl (Supermarket). Moving from one part of Germany to*  
207 *another is harder than moving to another EU country.*

208 Despite the difficulties of relocating from one state to another, many refugees resist the Lager  
209 system and elect to reside in Berlin which they understand as multicultural and relatively open  
210 towards refugees. Many end up on the streets of Berlin and it is through networking in  
211 informal ways that they find accommodation and work. We highlight in this paper how people  
212 who decided to move to Berlin networked with each other as well as with members of a  
213 solidarity group such as Schlafplatzorga.

## 214 **Informal Endeavours and Solidarity**

215 Schlafplatzorga emerged following the refugees' protests and the occupation of Oranienplatz  
216 in Berlin and the subsequent occupation of a school building between 2012 and 2014. One of  
217 the main demands of the movement was the abolition of the Lager systems and the  
218 *Residenzpflicht* (the law, that people could not move freely inside Germany). Following, the  
219 state eviction of refugees from their different spaces which they had occupied during the  
220 protests, Berlin residents started to offer their homes as places for refugees. In October 2014,  
221 following the city's eviction of people who were involved in the movement, people who had  
222 actively supported the political struggles at Oranienplatz started to organize emergency  
223 solutions; by collecting contacts of people who could possibly offer a place in their flats or a  
224 couch for a few days either free of cost or for minimum rent. The work of SPO should be  
225 understood as expressions of solidarity with refugees. In contrast to large-scale humanitarian  
226 organisations, solidarity groups aim to be less hierarchical and try to develop horizontal  
227 relations with the people they support. In this sense, it contrasts both hospitality<sup>5</sup> and  
228 bureaucratic frameworks of assistance to immigrants and refugees distinctive of the  
229 humanitarian realm (Rozakou 2016). Rozakou comprehends solidarity in terms of 'sociality  
230 such that solidarity resonates with potent moral ideals of how society should be, and how  
231 people should relate with one another.'

232 The aim of SPO was to provide solidarity with refugees who wanted to free themselves of the  
233 formal category of the term 'refugee', which in Zetter's (1991) understanding is in itself a  
234 bureaucratic identity. The decision by the mediating crew to start this work was from the  
235 group's perspective influenced by the 'common struggle' such that people were not so much  
236 random "poor" refugees anymore but rather 'comrades' with very different privileges. Thus,  
237 the group formed the anti-racist view that some of the initial motivations came from a  
238 different perspective than (just) an idea of "helping" "poor" people. Thus, an informal group  
239 Schlafplatzorga was formed. This group continues to function to date.

240 SPO is a group that has yet to attain and indeed debates the value limitations of having formal  
241 NGO status. The members of SPO include young people, University students, as well as the  
242 'searchers.' Members are recruited during demonstrations, University orientations, during  
243 fund-raising activities and by word of mouth. The working structure of SPO was and  
244 continues to be relatively simple and informal. There is an opening hour three evenings a  
245 week, for people who are searching for a sleeping place for the same night, or for those who  
246 may simply need information. Two to three members of the group are generally present, who  
247 contact potential hosts, to find out if they could offer a room for the people who are searching.

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<sup>5</sup> See Didier Fassin's (2012) discussion on 'Ambivalent Hospitality' and protection of one's own 'hospitality.'



248 If there is an offer, then people are mediated there. The aim of SPO among other things is to  
 249 build a community, obtain financial resources, and provide information to searchers and  
 250 support them with accommodation. The group also collaborates with registered non-profit  
 251 groups. In some instances, refugees also tried to raise funds informally. In one instance,  
 252 Angela and the people she was residing with set up regular Facebook nail-art events with food  
 253 and drinks, which became instantly popular. In other instances, members of the group (on an  
 254 informal level), sell summer cocktails in parks. To this end, the work of SPO needs to be  
 255 understood as taking place “in spite of the state” (Polese et al 2019) such as when the state  
 256 does not care sufficiently about people’s well-being and racializes them. Consequently citizens  
 257 intervene and mobilise in order to make up for state neglect and deficiency (Polese et al.  
 258 2017a; Polese and Morris 2015).

259 There were some regulations within the SPO with respect to issuance of public transportation  
 260 tickets. However, SPO’s work was directly connected to the needs formulated by the searchers  
 261 which eliminated some of the bureaucratic power structures. At the same time, there was the  
 262 disadvantage that individuals within Schlafplatzorga yielded substantial power with regard to  
 263 decision making such as whom to mention in a plenary and where best to invest their efforts  
 264 and energies.

265 Now we turn to explain how refugees made decisions about leaving their Lagers and how they  
 266 networked with the group and its members.

### 267 **Leaving the State Assigned ‘Lager’**

268 Refugees, the majority of whom were men from countries such as the Gambia, Senegal,  
 269 Mauritania, Mali, Chad, Kenya and Cameroon and in some instances Afghanistan, Pakistan  
 270 and Iran heard about SPO and the shifts through word of mouth upon arrival in Berlin and  
 271 in some instances even prior to their arrival in their camps. However, the asylum status of the  
 272 ‘searchers’ as they were termed by the SPO members tended to vary. Refugees’ decisions to  
 273 leave their camps need to be understood as actions which pursued the dynamics of ‘survival  
 274 tactics and a strategy of enrichment’ (Polese et al. 2018). Such practices demonstrate refugees’  
 275 endeavours towards emplacements in Berlin and resistance against displacement, which they  
 276 experienced in their state assigned Lagers.

277 The following paragraphs illustrate some of the reasons refugees offered for leaving their  
 278 Lager and arriving in Berlin and seeking support of the organisation SPO:

279 *Lamine: I decided to find a steady place where I could live and to move out from the ‘Heim’. Because I am an*  
 280 *activist doing a lot of activity. So for during those six months, I thought Berlin could be the best place for me*  
 281 *and from there I tried to contact this association Schlafplatzorga. I was motivated to be in Berlin, Berlin is*  
 282 *big. Berlin is multicultural. You are really isolated in the camp. So this is what inspired me to leave the ‘Lager’*  
 283 *and I say that okay, ‘I cannot leave the ‘Lager’ legally because I was not allowed to leave then- but then I*  
 284 *broke those so called rules.*

285 *Angela: We were at a workshop at the University and saw that they had a table with flyers up showing that*  
 286 *had accommodation for refugees. We reached out to Beatte and her colleague. They told us that they could help*  
 287 *us with temporary accommodation for a day or two or a few days in Berlin. We were with the ‘Stop Deportation*  
 288 *Group’ and then we had a table where we were selling cocktails and so they had a table right opposite us and*  
 289 *this is how we came to know SPO.*



290

291 *Mohammed: Until I was in Berlin I was in a small town. I heard SPO about through a friend. It was boring*  
 292 *in the camp. You have nothing to do only eating and sleeping. I wanted to change that life and so I came to*  
 293 *Berlin.*

294 *Omar: So the situation in the Lager is a bit complicated. There is no respect. There is also nothing there in*  
 295 *Frankfurt Oder that people can do. So everybody who is registered there is coming here to find a job and live*  
 296 *here. And I personally also came here to look for a job. There is also much racism there. So the people in*  
 297 *Frankfurter Oder, they are in a box that they judge people. They don't feel comfortable with migrants.*  
 298 *Especially when you have a black skin. They behave in a real bad way. It's not like the people in Berlin. They*  
 299 *are more cultivated and open-minded. They know migrants from different time. They know people of different*  
 300 *colours.*

301 Thus, the people decided to come to Berlin to escape racism, to avoid deportations, to find  
 302 work and to build connections and access and construct networks. But what is significant here  
 303 is that none of the refugees went through any of the formal bureaucratic processes to relocate  
 304 to Berlin from their federal state. Consequently, they did not try to find residence or work  
 305 through formal means. They made their own way to Berlin, where they could potentially find  
 306 work, possibly avoid deportations, bureaucratic powers, racialization and confinement and  
 307 seek support of various groups. Such practices demonstrate refugees' subtle acts of defiance  
 308 rather than overt forms of protests towards the state (see Scott 2012). Many of them  
 309 understood their actions as 'illegal', but nevertheless considered it necessary in order to acquire  
 310 basic rights and to formalise their status.

311 The excerpts thus demonstrate that the actions undertaken by refugees should be understood  
 312 as struggle against the state's bureaucratic power, which limited the movement of refugees  
 313 from one state to another and thus which ultimately resulted in their displacement. In  
 314 addition, refugees relocated to avoid deportations in their respective accommodations and  
 315 federal state. As it became increasingly difficult to attain recognised status in Germany,  
 316 refugees were increasingly threatened with deportation. Deportation can be to the refugees'  
 317 country of origin or if they faced Dublin regulations then they would be most likely to be  
 318 deported to the first European country to which they had arrived in which they were likely to  
 319 have been fingerprinted. Thus, in order to avoid deportations, several refugees left their  
 320 respective federal states and Lagers, came to Berlin and in this context sought support of  
 321 SPO. Thus, the refugees sought protection in the federal state, Berlin.

## 322 **Networking and Mobility**

323 The refugees, who formed part of this study, networked informally with the solidarity workers  
 324 in order to further their objectives regarding finding longer-term accommodation in Berlin  
 325 and acquiring formal status. Thus, the searchers' networking abilities played a significant role  
 326 in their access to resources through SPO.

327 For example, Mohammed --who always seemed to have a place to stay--told me that the  
 328 people whom he stayed with were very friendly and came to resemble a family. He said to me  
 329 with confidence, 'they cannot tell me to leave and I can always stay there'. Similarly, Abudul  
 330 Rehman managed to find a permanent place through his networking efforts and ultimately  
 331 managed to stay at the same place for several years.



332 Networking with solidarians meant joining them in their social events, Küfas (solidarity  
333 dinners) solidarity parties, in some instances accompanying them to demonstrations and  
334 supporting the group with doing shifts. It was in such social and political encounters that  
335 many of the refugees managed to informally network with the people they stayed with. As  
336 some of the interlocutors explained to me:

337 *Lamine: It was nice because it was kind of community to me. Because earlier I was in the Lager and it was a*  
338 *different experience. Since I came here, they could form a kind of community for me. A solidarity community*  
339 *for me. They asked me my problems and helped me with a lawyer. They organised everything for me and even*  
340 *the cost of the lawyer was managed. They organised Soli-Küfa for me. It was a kind of community and*  
341 *collaborating together. I could move freely.*

342 *Alif: When I went to the workshop to the bike I found Jon and Hörst. I also lived with them. I lived with*  
343 *Jon at the Wagonplatz. It is an interesting place with several anarchists living there. Because when I came here*  
344 *I didn't have a stable place. Just living with friends from one place to another. I really loved to live in a Wagon.*  
345 *It was a spontaneous way of living I would say so. So the group that are living there are 12. The main group*  
346 *of the society they are having. And now I am in Neukölln with Hörst.*

347 *Abdul Rehman: Now I am staying in Neukölln in a long-term situation. I have been staying there for two*  
348 *years. I met the host through Betty. I have my own room. And there are two cats. I feel very comfortable there.*

349 Wilson (1998, 2009) recognises the dynamic aspect of social ties such that weak ties may  
350 develop into strong ties. The refugees who participated in the SPO group also developed  
351 strong and weak ties with their support network which changed over time such that in some  
352 cases strong ties weakened when refugees either relied less on their support network or  
353 strengthened over time because of mutual interests or even increased reliance. In this way,  
354 these informal social encounters between refugees and members of the SPO group helped  
355 the people to find more suitable and longer-term accommodation and many of them were  
356 able to avoid deportations and find longer-term solutions. Many people learned through  
357 various informal networks about various possibilities and worked with lawyers, received  
358 informal counselling, studied the German language outside the formal 'integration course',  
359 and entered into particular arrangements with citizens in ways that did help transform their  
360 lives in some instances. In some instances, they entered into romantic relationships with  
361 citizens, got married and received formal status. Thus, the refugees managed to

362 evade the formal system and resist the bureaucratic procedures of the asylum process in the  
363 German state. More significantly, it was through networking that they were able to defy  
364 prolonged stay in the Lagers with possible deportation threats upon rejection of their asylum  
365 cases. In some cases, participation in informal channels additionally helped refugees formalize  
366 their status, which they may not have been able to do so if they had continued to stay in their  
367 Lagers in their respective federal states. In this context, informality should be regarded as a  
368 social mechanism, which served to develop alternative trajectories of and for refugees living  
369 in Lagers in ways such that it enabled them to access services, accommodation, and work  
370 opportunities.

## 371 **Conclusions**

372 This article has demonstrated that refugees' decisions to leave the Lagers can be understood  
373 as stemming from desire for employment and formalisation of residential status in relation to  
374 and defiance of displacement related to mobility regimes and confinement and racialization.

375 De Genoa et al (2018) have noted that migrant/refugee struggles in Europe are polarized  
 376 around two on-going phenomena: on the one hand, the increasing criminalization of refugees  
 377 as refugees and, on the other a politics of “incorrigibility.” The state understands refugees’  
 378 actions with respect to leaving their Lagers as breaches of law for which they could be  
 379 potentially penalised, but in this context, we consider refugees’ so called ‘illegal’ acts as  
 380 struggles for emplacement and in defiance the state’s aims to displace them. In this context,  
 381 informality denotes a character and domain of practice which potentially facilitate  
 382 emplacements, formalization, and lead to alternative life trajectories. The study has  
 383 additionally demonstrated that refugees networked with an informally organised solidarity  
 384 group, such that citizens and refugees together came to challenge state imposed formal  
 385 systems. In this connection, it is evident that informality and formality need to be understood  
 386 as ‘co-constructed practices’ between citizens and refugees in their anti-racist struggles  
 387 propelling them toward emplacements and formality. Nevertheless, as a word of caution it  
 388 needs to be recognised that refugees’ precarious statuses did not necessarily always diminish  
 389 since they ultimately ended up relying on the solidarity activists’ generosity and political will  
 390 to support them and to some extent hierarchies were thereby reproduced.

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