

Non-Citizens: Political Representation of Migrants in the Aid Context

The subject matter of this dissertation is representation of migrants in the context of discourses and practices of aid organizations. I understand representation primarily as a function: the act of representing; while aid to migrants covers the support activities of the non-governmental sector. Aid is therefore an action rooted in the will of citizens rather than legal regulations or administrative practices. In this thesis, I reflect on the extent to which the aid environment promotes a wider representation of migrants in the public sphere.

The thesis is ethnographic in nature. I conducted my field research in the Warsaw community of non-governmental organizations. It covered participant observation at one of the support points, interviews with employees of several different organizations, and analyses of texts created in the aid contexts. Most of the research material is focused on people acting on behalf of migrants; I supplement this type of material with case studies which reveal the perspective of clients.

I realized my field research between autumn 2018 and summer 2020, i.e. between periods of increased public attention to migration and refugee matters. This spike of interest was also associated with more frequent hate speech or cases of abuses of power on the part of the state institutions governing migrations. Thus, I am studying the middle period; moreover, I am interested in “middle cases”: practices and events that were frequent, rooted in routine, and often not drastic enough to trigger a public reaction.

Following the postmodern reflection on the social and cultural bias of anthropological research, I rely on autoethnography as a tool of reflexive control of my observations. In particular, I treat participant observation as the observation of participation (including my own participation). In the period under study, the aid community was aware of the importance of broader representation of migrants in the public sphere. Nevertheless, within this environment, limitations related to class divisions, language and the nature of aid discourse can be pointed out, which made it difficult to publicly express the experiences and interests of migrants. Such limitations included, in particular, the difference between the internal and external circulation of knowledge in aid organizations, which manifested itself in hiding a part of the solidarity of the aid community (and therefore also some of the needs of the aid clients). Class divisions permeated the aid community, typically unnoticed. They usually overlapped with divisions between Polish activists and migrants working in the aid context, with the situation of the latter group being more precarious. The representation of help and people in need was also dominated by a perspective which I link to bourgeois culture due to its axiology and the type of social imagination associated with it.

I also emphasize the humanitarian features of the ethos of the aid community, according to which matters of saving health and life took priority over matters of justice. This type of depoliticization, which does not foster a fuller representation of foreigners in the public sphere, is often described in Western literature by the concept of bare life. However, in this work I consider depoliticization in the context of the threat of violence from the state and its citizens that accompanied aid activities. From this perspective, depoliticization turns out to be a tactic to reduce the exposure of migrants to this type of violence.

The dissertation consists of four chapters. In the first one, I lay out my theoretical and methodological perspectives. I discuss the main concepts and research methods I employ, as well as the axiology they assume. In the second chapter, I deal with the category of foreignness, the use of which can be treated as a Polish peculiarity against the background of the broader English-language discourse on migration. In the chapter, I reconstruct the meaning of the term “foreigner” in relation to the categories of citizenship, class and nation, and then try to compare this reconstruction with the

profile of clients of the support point where I conducted most of the research. The next chapter is devoted to the question of what assistance to foreigners is in the social practice. I am looking for answers by analyzing the aid ethos, self-narratives of aid workers and their testimonies about clients. I pay most attention to the differences between migrant and Polish aid workers, which sometimes overlap with class differences. The work ends with a confrontation of previous observations with the stories of migrants to whom aid activities were directed. One of them concerns a Ukrainian family trying to legalize their stay in Poland, the hero of the other is a young Egyptian refugee looking for a way to leave this country. The chapter ends with a reflection on the opportunities and forms of political mobilization of migrants in Poland.