

About the refugee movement in Kreuzberg/Berlin

Napuli Langa

Abstract Based on the experiences of a longstanding involvement, the article describes the emergence of the refugee protest march and bus tour to Berlin as well as the occupation of the Oranienplatz and a school building in Berlin-Kreuzberg. With demonstrations, direct actions and hunger-strikes, the visibilisation of refugee struggles was thereby linked to interventions in public and political discourses. The article stresses the importance of self-organised protest, solidarity networks and non-hierarchical structures and it discusses also the tensions within the struggle. Furthermore, it connects current refugee struggles to histories and structures of colonialism, racism, capitalism and imperialism.

Falling into a trap and beginning to struggle

This is Napuli Paul Langa. I am from Sudan and I would not like to mention which part of Sudan I came from, South or North, all of this is just politics. I would like to share with you my entry into and my experience of the refugee movement at Oranienplatz, Berlin. When I came from Sudan, traumatized from being tortured for 4 days because of my activism there, I had escaped from the intelligence services and I left everything behind: My work as a human rights activist in the *Sudanese organization for Nonviolence and Development* (SONAD) and my studies at *Ahfad University for Women in Khartoum*. I left to save my life from the government and it took long to come to Germany. So when I arrived in Germany and applied for asylum in Braunschweig – that is exactly when I fell into a trap. I realized that I lost my rights and dignity

when I sought asylum – it is better not to seek asylum in Germany, though you would have problems.

I saw that people were going crazy in the *lager*, which is located in the middle of nowhere, so I decided that I will not end this way. I was asking several questions that no one among us in the *lager* could answer. Then I suggested “let us all come together to discuss and find answers to these questions”, in order to put an end to all the problems we have in the *lager*, for example the obligation of residency, privacy, food and so on. That is why I came to join the *Refugees’ Bus Tour* right after one month of my application for asylum in September 2012. This motivated me a lot to fight from my heart, to see change happen.

So from different *lagers* or camps in Germany we came together through our local discussions or actions that were thinking about how to end the food voucher and isolation system that is a product of capitalism. We declared that we intend to fight the laws and policies that violate our freedom and dignity. Responding to the suicide of the Iranian asylum seeker Mohammed, refugees had built the first protest camp in Würzburg in early 2012 where he had died. Then other camps followed in other cities and after that the movement started to move from Würzburg to Berlin, by foot and through a bus tour. I myself joined the bus tour which visited dozens of *lagers* throughout Germany in order to inform other refugees about the movement. We were able to expose the isolation of refugees, and we invited them to leave their *lagers* or camps to join our bus tour and the march to Kreuzberg in Berlin. The refugees covered a distance of 600 km in 28 days. In Potsdam the bus tour group met with the group that had walked and went together from there to Berlin. The march reached Berlin on the 6th of October 2012. From that time I became much more communicative also because of the bus tour group. They recommended that I should make speeches or talk to people, and since then I often gave speeches.

Oranienplatz Resistance

From there we continued our resistance with our tents at Oranienplatz in Kreuzberg, Berlin. It is well known that Oranienplatz is regarded as the political symbol of the struggle in the street, also to be visible. Anyhow, after thirteen days of the movement, the group started to have different opinions on political strategies. The group who organized the hunger strike went back to Munich, South Germany, where the group called themselves Non-Citizens.

The other part remained in Oranienplatz, committed to keep Oranienplatz as a politically vocal point. Although the group split, both groups are strongly connected to each other.

The success of Oranienplatz visibilized our struggle, especially in the public, and gave us the power to negotiate with the government officially, which before then was not possible. We stood up to be visible and it happened. We stood for our rights and we opened the tents to everyone.

We organised many actions: we occupied a vacant school, we occupied Brandenburg Gate, we went on demonstrations and hunger strikes, we occupied the tree at Oranienplatz, we occupied the roof of the school at Ohlauerstrasse, we occupied the parliament in the district of Kreuzberg, we occupied the federal office of the *Green party*, we occupied the church, we occupied the UN office, we occupied embassies. We also distributed flyers on a daily basis, and our story occupied the media during these actions. We became subject to police brutality and many people were arrested and we responded by organizing spontaneous demonstrations at the prisons in which our friends had been arrested, for example after the action at the Nigerian embassy.

Underlying all these actions were three demands: Abolition of the *lagers*, abolition of the obligation of residence (“Residenzpflicht” in German language), which forbids us to leave the city where we are accommodated so that refugees are to move only 40 kilometers and not more, and the cessation of deportations. We had great impact on *German Parliament* and the *Committee on Internal Affairs* were forced to meet with us because of our hunger-strike. During the meeting, the two major right wing parties spoke out against our demands.

However, there were also some members of parliament supporting human rights and our demands. From 2013 to 2014, the obligation of residence was loosened in some federal states, whereby for example those who seek asylum in Berlin can now travel in Brandenburg, too.

The Occupied School

We used the occupied school at Ohlauerstrasse and Oranienplatz for the recognition of the refugee movement as a political institution. We worked to bring more refugees to join our struggle and to expand it. Right here there are things that are important, but not urgent and then there are important things that are urgent: our struggle is both, important and urgent.

We have managed to enlarge our solidarity network. We received a lot of support from the German society in terms of food, clothes, financial and legal support. For example, there are students giving free German classes to refugees at the occupied school in Kreuzberg, and there are doctors and lawyers.

When we occupied the empty school, it was six o'clock in the morning. The former mayor of the district Kreuzberg, Berlin came and he stopped the interference of the police and gave us 3 days. After 3 days our stay was extended to 2 months and he came up with a plan that we should cooperate with several organizations for this project. We said no, if they are in solidarity with us they should not think to come to the school. The purpose of the occupation was the very cold weather and we had families and sick people who needed to be in a warm place. So we organized the school as a place for sleeping, and everything concerning our political activities should take place at Oranienplatz. A few weeks later we had the problems with the police mainly due to violations of the residence obligation which we broke by ignoring it. We thought "let them write to us hundreds of letters". Some of us were deeply threatened to be deported. Although there was this threat, the movement had no fear of it, some had already been deported to where they had first landed because of Dublin III.

Lampedusa in Berlin and the Eviction of Oranienplatz

Around March 2013 a group from Lampedusa arrived in Berlin. Lampedusa is an island in Italy where the peoples who are escaping from Libya are put before given the permission to stay in Italy, that's why we called them "Lampedusa".

Lampedusa is a synonym for Europe's borders, for the immigration rules and regulations of the *European Union*, for the European policy on asylum, for the colonial heritage which established a global, geopolitical and social divide that becomes obvious there. The immediate consequences of this historical development are the boats from the African continent that arrive almost every day.

Lampedusa is also a synonym for the borders which continue within the *European Union*. Each country has its own national policy on asylum, whose laws and restrictions restrain the rights of refugees. Lampedusa is not only a synonym but also a concrete place where the life-threatening consequences of

European policy on asylum become very obvious. But the Lampedusa activists do not accept this treacherous situation.

The clearing of Oranienplatz tents that took place on 8th of April 2014 was not done as voluntarily as claimed by politicians or the Senate, that is obvious. The Kreuzberg district mayor, Monika Herrmann, and the Senator of Integration of the State of Berlin, Dilek Kolat, had affirmed that the Oranienplatz refugees had agreed to the voluntary evacuation – but this does not correspond to the facts, the refugees argue the opposite.

On 18 April, the refugee camp was evicted from the Oranienplatz/ Berlin-Kreuzberg. According to an agreement between the Senator Dilek Kolat with a part of the refugees, mainly the group of Lampedusa who had already moved from Oranienplatz to a Caritas house in Wedding.

They were cheated to believe and sign the agreement with Dilek Kolat, hoping that they would have everything which was written in the agreement as she had told them. She said that if you remove the tents in Oranienplatz then I will apply what is written in the agreement. So there were clashes with us, the refugees who were staying in Oranienplatz and wanted to stay.

On that day, at round 2 pm, I could deny the clearance by occupying a tree for five days. The police and security services prevented me from all attempts to contact or to be supplied with food. They prevented hunger strikers also from sleeping during the night. I demanded a conversation with the integration Senator, Dilek Kolat, from the SPD to point to the promises. The promises were, for example, the toleration of the Lampedusa group, the transitional housing to Berlin, and the stopping of deportations, which were the reasons for refugees to accept the offer of the Senate. We also demanded to bring back our meeting place and the info point to Oranienplatz which they told me that it is impossible. After all I succeeded to bring the meeting place back.

But Dilek Kolat did not respond to our claim for an unlimited right to stay. The Senate declared that the promised review of individual cases would begin only after the clearance of Oranienplatz – which was not possible for me to accept. At that moment we mainly demanded to get back the political space for refugees that we had at Oranienplatz. At the same time, we divided ourselves for the transnational march to Brussels.

The Freedom March to Brussels

The idea for the march to Brussels started take shape in spring and summer of 2013. Two of us went on a transnational tour to six European countries. We started from Oranienplatz/Berlin on June 26, 2013. During the whole tour we experienced no real obstacles. We passed through Germany, Austria, Italy, France, crossed Switzerland, again France, and then Belgium. On Wednesday the 10th of July, one of the supporters joined the tour in Brussels. We then briefly visited the Netherlands and went back to Berlin. We wanted to collect common demands from refugees in EU-countries, for examples, against Dublin II and III, deportations, *Frontex* and so on.

Until May 18, 2014, the group of activists believed that if a small group can do it, we can do it all together as well. So we went on a six-week march over more than 500 km. Our *March for Freedom* started in Strasbourg and while we were crossing the borders of Germany, France, Luxembourg and Belgium, we examined the key institutions of the EU asylum policy on-site.

The march quickly formed a band, every day marching through at least two villages, and for a while we were accompanied by two ponies. Even if people did not always knew at the beginning what we wanted, they soon understood it without words that our goals were their goals. We come from war zones bringing no problems. In the villages of Alsace-Lorraine, Saarland, Luxembourg, and Wallonia we met friendly people who made their public spaces, community centers and halls available to us. About thirty times we changed the cities with tents, kitchen and luggage. The convoy consisted of six or seven vans. We left every place cleaner behind than we had found it.

The march was a traveling conference. We moved from town to town on a daily basis and sometimes we marched together with the local people from the villages. In our camps we held information events, we showed documentaries and we danced or practiced how to survive police raids unharmed.

Besides some harmless flirting with Members of the *European Parliament*, it came to police attacks, arrests, and detention. After attempting to attend a conference of EU Interior Ministers in Luxembourg, we spent an entire day providing victims of pepper spray attacks and dog bites and trying to free arrested activists. In Brussels we held a sit-in outside the police station, after several protesters were arrested in front of the German embassy.

We want the freedom for work, to go everywhere without permission. For example in Brussels there was this family from Romania that paid a truck-driver 1000 euros in order to be smuggled into Belgium - even though they

may actually travel freely as EU members. But because they are homeless, their government gave them no IDs. Belgium may at any time arrest them indefinitely.

Colonialism and Imperialism

All these problems above have to do with colonialism, capitalism, racism, and imperialism, as well as the *Berlin Conference* of 1884–1885 which formalized Europe's claim of Africa. European powers arbitrarily divided up Africa between themselves and started administrating their new colonies. Seventy years later they bequeathed to native Africans countries that looked remarkably different from how they looked in 1880. These countries are the poorest in the world today.

To judge the impact of colonialism on development in Africa simply by looking at outcomes during the colonial period is a conceptual mistake. Post-independence Africa looked nothing like it would have done in the absence of colonialism. Indeed, in most cases post-independence economic decline in Africa can be explicitly attributed to colonialism because the types of mechanisms that led to this decline were creations of colonial society. In Africa we had three types of colonies:

Those with a centralised state at the time of the scramble for Africa, such as Benin, Botswana, Burundi, Ethiopia, Ghana, Lesotho, Rwanda, and Swaziland. Those of white settlements, such as Kenya, Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and probably Angola and Mozambique as well as colonies which did not experience significant white settlement and where there was either no significant pre-colonial state formation (like Somalia or South Sudan) or where there was a mixture of centralised and un-centralised societies (such as Congo-Brazzaville, Nigeria, Uganda and Sierra Leone).

In the former, the assumption that the patterns of pre-colonial development could have continued, if there would not have been colonialism is sufficient to argue that these countries would be more developed today without the European colonialism. Colonialism not only blocked further political development, but indirect rule made local elites less accountable to their citizens. After independence, even if these states had a coherence others lacked, they had far more predatory rulers. These polities also suffered from the uniform colonial legacies of racism, stereotypes and misconceptions.

Self-Organised Protest

Right now we achieved a lot with regards to our three demands but our struggle will never stop until we are satisfied. Oranienplatz and the school are one thing. The occupation of Oranienplatz was forced to end, the school was evicted in a way and the promise from the Berlin Senate was a lie. They lied to silence us, but on the other hand they pushed our movement to be known more, so now it is in the media itself.

In the refugees movement we do work through certain structures. For example, we do not have power over one another or so-called leaders. It depends on, for example, the refugee group meetings that made the decisions; open meetings in which everybody shares whatever ideas they have; supporter group meetings; financial groups; media groups; infrastructure groups; action groups; legal groups; kitchen groups and so on. This principle of voluntary participation makes it easy for everyone to choose in which group she/he fits in.

We had difficulties as well in our movement due to clashes of different interests, either strategically or tactically, as well as different demands, from several sides: between refugees and refugees, between refugees and supporters, and between supporters and supporters. These clashes gave the government the chance to try to divide us. For example, with the Lampedusa group at Oranienplatz it became clear that the asylum seekers in Germany face different situations. The politicians used this for their divide-and-rule strategy at Oranienplatz, just like politicians did it in the colonies in Africa, as I mentioned above. In particular, even though the *Green party* has been talking the good things and against police actions, in terms of the refugee struggle at Oranienplatz they did not walk their talk at all. At the end, they ordered the police to evict Oranienplatz.

Of course, problems among us in the movement have been solved through meetings, discussions, resolution groups or with close friends if possible. Even though we did not solve all the problems above, the mentioned methods have been very helpful. In general, the refugees and the supporters are like sisters and brothers in my point of view. In understanding that together we have to fight against the system, we take each other's hands and walk hand in hand.

For example, refugees are aware of what the EU does, including Germany. Ask for the reasons why people flee! Clearly it has a connection to imperialism and capitalism. The asylum laws are racist and colonial. Fight these laws. And not only in Germany, fight Europe wide, fight together also with the working classes and social movements and so on.

We learn a lot from the past. Right now we try to communicate strongly

to unite all refugees together, refugees in different places or *lagers*: Collect phone-numbers, emails, use internet pages together, exchange and empower one another and build up infrastructure, focus on the political fight, organize conferences, workshops and so on. The struggle for human rights has to be based on the development of social relations.

Look at animals that were displaced during the first civil war and the second civil war in south Sudan. Animals ran to the neighboring countries automatically. What about human beings then?

Sudan is an example. The colonizers brought to Sudan selfishness, hatred, fight and divisions, which pushed people to go into exile. You can see now, we are refugees. But we fight this to the end.

From my experience there is always a possibility, nothing is impossible. Gandhi said: "be the change you want to see in the world". So for you right now and right here do not be part of the problem. Rather, oppose!

I call upon us, my sisters and brothers: Let us fight together for every one of us to have the right to live, not just to survive.

Autor_innen

My name is Napuli Paul Langa, I am a Sudanese, I studied Art & Development Studies and I have worked as a facilitator of nonviolence, alternatives to violence, gender issues and human rights. I stood up for the rights of Refugees at Oranienplatz and I am the head of *Blacks and Whites Together for Human Rights* in Berlin.

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