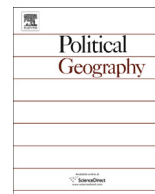




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Visibility in mediated borderscapes: The hunger strike of asylum seekers as an embodiment of border violence

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ABSTRACT

In 2012, two Afghan asylum seekers camped outside the Parliament building in Helsinki during a hunger strike that lasted for 72 days. Although the protest was very visible in the city space, the mainstream media and most politicians ignored it. This paper analyzes the protest and its mediation through the concepts of borderscape and visibility. Using methods of visual and discourse analysis, we examine the ways in which the hunger strike protest – and its mediation – negotiate the (in)visibility of borders. We show how the city can be a site for both policing and for politicizing asylum issues. In particular, we focus on the ways in which protesting asylum seekers embody borders and border control, making dis-located borders visible in spaces where citizens do not see them. The concept of “borderscape” is an example of the view on borders that sees bordering as a practice that disperses borders in physical and socio-political space. Moreover, we examine the mediated reactions of various agents, such as the Lutheran church, activists, politicians, and journalists, as well as the protesters themselves, focusing on visibility as social recognition. Our analysis of the hunger strike reveals the situated gaze of social actors. It shows how border struggles are situated within landscapes of politics of protection and politics of listening.

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Introduction

Bordering practices are increasingly becoming a part of peoples' everyday lives (see, for example, Bürkner, 2014; Johnson et al., 2011; Lahav & Guiraudon, 2000; Nicholls, 2016). This paper offers an inverted perspective: instead of demonstrating how bordering practices become part of the everyday through border enforcement and migration legislation, we explore a case in which asylum seekers themselves bring bordering into the everyday consciousness of citizens by a hunger strike protest in front of Parliament, at the centre of Helsinki, Finland.

This paper examines the ways in which the (in)visibility of borders is negotiated in urban space and in the media. We focus on how the protesting asylum seekers decide to disturb the everyday urban space and deviate from the expected behavior of non-citizens by embodying borders, and in doing so, make dis-located

borders visible in spaces where citizens do not see them. This view on borders follows critical border studies that examine bordering as a social practice (Bürkner, 2014) that disperses borders in physical and socio-political space as a complex differentiation process (Brambilla, 2015; Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002).

We distinguish two kinds of visibilities in protests in public spaces. First, there is the visibility of the protest in urban space. The city itself is a medium, a stage where the protest is performed. The buildings and monuments carry layers of meanings, and so the city offers various intentional and non-intentional references that also shape the protest. (See e.g. Darling, 2016; Dickinson & Aiello, 2016; Uitermark & Nicholls, 2014). Urban places represent both the formal and informal sphere, and can work as sites for counter-hegemonic struggle, but also as spaces of governmentality and control. Here, we conceptualize urban space in a way similar to what Jonathan Darling (2016) proposes, which is to follow Uitermark and Nicholls's (2014) perspective on how the city can be a site for both policing and for politicizing asylum issues. Second, there is the media visibility of the protest; the recognition of the protest in various kinds of mediated spaces (Cottle & Lester, 2011). In the present multi-platform media environment, we examine the interconnections and re-mediations between different media

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platforms (Couldry, 2012, pp. 16–19). In the re-mediation of a protest, those who share images and interpretations of it offer a situated gaze (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002; Yuval-Davis, 2011) to the issue of asylum or to the protest itself.

The hunger strike has become an increasingly common protest strategy within the so-called “immigrant protests”, political mobilizations that bring together migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, as well as supporting activists of majority background (Tyler & Marciniak, 2013). Asylum seekers and refugees in various border zones, such as Nauru, Calais, Paris, and Berlin have performed political agency by turning their bodies into vehicles of political claims. Most of these protests by non-citizens have been performed in spaces that are marginalized from the perspective of the everyday of the citizens. They take place in spaces that can be *seen and identified* as border zones: in detention centers or in more or less tolerated camps.⁴ The protest that we analyze here, however, disrupts the everyday order of the citizens not only by making the perceived state violence visible in the hungry and suffering body, but also by transforming the everyday of the city space – and more precisely a symbolic site in this space – into a visible border zone.

The protest began on the sole initiative of two Afghan male asylum seekers, Javad Mirzayi (34) and Gholam Siddique Abdullahi (36), who had received negative responses from the Finnish state to their asylum applications. They camped outside the Parliament building in Helsinki in a 72-day hunger strike in fall 2012. Their decision was not influenced by any of the actors that later offered their support in the form of demonstrations, human chains, speeches, and charity. Mirzayi and Abdullahi ended their protest shortly after the minister of the interior, Päivi Räsänen, finally came and talked with them in the protest camp (Interview Mirzayi, 25.4.2016).

We analyze the protest itself, as well as the re-mediation of the protest, with a mixed-method approach that includes analysis of discourses and visualities. In addition to media content, we have analyzed our research interviews with different actors who were involved in the protest, such as the protesters and their supporters. We argue that this approach, which combines ethnographic interviews with discourse and visual analysis, is crucial for capturing the power dynamics and the various intersectionally situated gazes of such protests. Listening to how various actors make sense of the protest broadens our understanding of the visibility of the protest and its mediation.

The dynamics of migrant- and refugee-led social movements are complex (Chávez, 2013; Moulin & Nyers, 2007; Tyler & Marciniak, 2013), and through three research interviews conducted in 2016, we examined the ways in which the interests of different actors came together. We interviewed one of the protesters, Javad Mirzayi an activist from the Freedom of Movement Network, and the key supporter from the Finnish Lutheran church.

Moreover, we examine how the mainstream media on the one hand embedded the framing offered by the migrants or their supporters into their articles, but on the other hand also re-framed the protest. The professional journalistic logic stresses equal treatment of both sides of a conflict. A protest, by definition, is a performance

of a conflict in which the protesters oppose something, or claim certain identities and social relations. However, through (re) mediation, the media (re)construct a conflict in a way which may or may not be in line with what the protesters intended (see also Cottle & Lester, 2011).

After first introducing the background of activism and social movements around asylum issues, we will give an account of the data and methods that we used in our analysis. Then, we will explore the places and spaces that became relevant in the protest. In addition to our own reading of the protest as communication in urban space, we analyze how others – those involved in the protest, and those mediating their view of the protest – understand the protest in this specific place. Last, we examine the intersectionally situated gaze of the actors who supported and contested the cause of the protest and its form, the hunger strike.

Our analysis shows how protests work as attempts to bring invisible border struggles (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Nicholls, 2016) into the consciousness of the everyday. Two kinds of politics are especially relevant for these border struggles: the politics of listening and the politics of protection. The supporters regularly listened to the protesters and engaged in conversation with them. This respected the protesters' agency and created a solidarity founded on human rights rather than humanitarianism. Important critical moments emerged from this practice of listening: those moments when asylum seekers disturbed the everyday understanding of bordering practices and when supporters not only offered humanitarian care, but also attempted to re-politicize the asylum issue. Therefore, the hunger strike intervened in what Nyers calls the politics of protection (2003) in ways that challenged the traditional understanding of who can be political and who has the authority to protect. The understanding of Muslim men as cultural others who do not qualify for protection dominated the politicians', the administrations' and the media's response to the protest. We identify an increasingly humanitarian rationale in the public understanding of asylum, which undermines claims to see political persecution as legitimate grounds for protection (Fassin, 2005).

Activism and social movements on the asylum issue – background

The Finnish Immigration Service makes asylum decisions based on laws that are drafted by the Ministry of the Interior and accepted by Parliament. In the case of negative decisions, asylum seekers have the right to appeal in court. At the time of their protest, the two Afghan men had appealed the decisions they had received from the Immigration Service, but the court had not yet given its decision.

When the hunger strike began, two groups mobilized and re-energized their own pro-asylum activism: a group of Evangelical Lutheran priests and a group of secular pro-asylum activists. These same groups had publicly advocated for asylum seekers in the past⁵ (Horsti, 2013; Pyykkönen, 2009). Despite the high social recognition of priests in Finland and successful activism in the past, in this case the activists' efforts failed to create a widely mediatized debate. Mainstream media journalists and most politicians remained silent or explicitly dismissed the protest. This is particularly telling because the protesters occupied a space on both journalists' and politicians' daily route to work: the main editorial office of *Helsingin Sanomat*, the most influential national newspaper, is across the street from the Parliament building.

² Kalle Kinnunen, Nuoren Suomen ääni Doxwise-sarjan videolla, Suomen Kuvalehti, blogit 24 October 2012. Media professionals edited Doxwise-documents with the young people for publishing online. The project is funded by the Nordic cultural institutions such as the Nordic Cultural Foundation (Norden), the Svenska Filminstitutet, Suomen elokuväsäätiö. The video produced by 'Joonas' was deleted from the site when the activists and journalists began asking the institutions about their position on the racist video. There is no mark on the issue in the Doxwise website.

³ It is worth noticing that Mirzayi himself identifies as an atheist.

⁴ There are examples of hunger strikes in other city spaces which are in many ways comparable to the case analyzed here, like for example Lampedusa in Berlin.

⁵ Asylum seekers first came to Finland in the early 1990s and the numbers have been comparatively low, 3000–4000 yearly until 2015 when 30 000 asylum seekers arrived.

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