

# We don't remember the O-Platz protest camp for the sake of it. Collective memories and visibility of migrant activism in Berlin

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## Abstract

The activists opposing border regimes in Berlin still vividly remember the migrant protest camp on Oranienplatz (O-Platz), a square in the neighborhood of Kreuzberg, a decade after its establishment in 2012. For them, the protest camp is the ideal type of mobilization against border regimes; the opportunity for racialized migrants to engage in politics and formulate grievances based on their own experiences of border regimes. O-Platz is remembered as a visible migrant grassroots protest in the backdrop of a history of invisibility of migrant struggles in Germany. In contrast, activists frame their mobilization after O-Platz as invisible and fragmented, despite the emergence of new networks and alliances, which, however, are not led by migrant activists. Collective memory bridges different movement phases and emphasizes the importance of visibility achieved by collective action centered around the experiences of subaltern groups, specifically racialized migrants with precarious legal status. I argue that memory work is crucial for countering the invisibility and erasure of grassroots migrant struggles in Germany. Memory work has an aspirational function as it transforms characteristics of past mobilization into aspirations for the present, especially in a phase where new

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players emerge, and the role of grassroots migrant activism seems fading.

**KEYWORDS**

aspirations, collective memory, invisibility, migrant struggles, politics, refugees

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In 2018, a new wave of resistance opposing radical right populist parties and movements and ever-tightening border regimes swept Germany. As of June, Seebrücke (Sea Bridges), a newly established grassroots network of activists, organized protests against the barriers imposed on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to conduct search and rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean Sea (Schwartz & Schwenken, 2020; Schwartz & Steinhilper, 2021). In October, a group of diverse organizations launched the coalition *Unteilbar* (Indivisible), which succeeded in mobilizing a quarter of a million protesters who took to the street to contest radical right populism (Perolini, 2021).

Despite the effervescence that these events produced in some activists' circles, the activists who mobilized in grassroots organizations opposing border regimes often framed the movement they were part of as fragmented and invisible. In their day-to-day activities, their regular meetings but also in informal discussions and interviews, activists often compared the mobilization in 2018 with the protest camp that migrant activists had set up on the public square *Oranienplatz* (O-Platz) in Berlin from 2012 to 2014 (Bhimji, 2016, 2020; Langa, 2015; Stierl, 2019). In the activists' narratives, many of whom participated in O-Platz, the protest camp appeared as the ideal type of mobilization against border regimes in which migrant activists formulated grievances based on their own experiences of border regimes, and became visible political subjects.

In this article, I seek to understand why memories of the O-Platz protest camp are so present in the mobilization against border regimes several years after its end. Specifically, I investigate the factors underpinning the memorability of the protest camp. By drawing on Rancière's notion of politics, which is inherently associated with visibility (1999), the protest camp constituted a grassroots mobilization in which migrant activists became visible and perceived as political subjects (Ataç et al., 2015). Against the backdrop of a history of migrant grassroots resistances that remained invisible, the protest camp is remembered because it constituted an eventful time in the mobilization against border regimes (Della Porta, 2020). Collective memories of O-Platz signal the importance of agency and visibility of migrant activists in the struggle against border regimes, which are the crucial characteristics for which the protest camp is worth being remembered. Thus, I bridge the literature focusing on the invisibility of migrant grassroots resistance with the growing interest in the role played by memory in social movements.

I argue that the memorability of the protest camp does not only stem from the frontline role of migrant activists but is also associated with the context of the mobilization in 2018, which was characterized by changes in terms of players (Jasper, 2014). I contribute to the study of memory in movements (Daphi & Zamponi, 2019) by emphasizing the role of collective memory in shaping aspirations for the present, in a context where activists identify discontinuity between present and past mobilization. My contribution emphasizes that memory can have an aspirational function in social movements, particularly in times of change.

To develop my arguments, the rest of this paper is organized as follows. First, I discuss the invisibility that characterized grassroots migrant struggles in Germany until O-Platz. Second, I briefly discuss the literature focusing on the interface between memory and social movements to identify the specific contribution of this article. Then, I outline the methods through which I collected the data that I present in this article. In the fourth section, I analyze the collective memories of O-Platz that the activists who mobilized against border regimes in 2018 embraced. I argue that activists framed O-Platz as a turning point and as a form of collective action led by migrant activists. In the fifth

section, I discuss the mobilization in 2018 by emphasizing the changes occurring within and outside the movement. I argue that collective memories of the past do not only signal discontinuity with the present but also have an aspirational function as they guide activists in their present struggle. I then draw some conclusions by summarizing and discussing my main findings, which focus on the connection between memorability and visibility and the aspirational function of collective memory.

## 2 | INVISIBILITY OF MIGRANT STRUGGLES IN GERMANY

Grassroots resistance contesting border regimes emerged in Germany already in the 1990s, when migrants living in asylum shelters organized themselves and engaged in collective action opposing their living conditions, in particular in Eastern Germany (Heck, 2008; Jakob, 2016; Odugbesan & Schwiertz, 2018). However, these grassroots struggles did not attract much scholarly or media attention (Bojadžijev, 2008; Karakayali, 2008).

Indeed, for a long time, migrants in West Germany were considered 'guest-workers' as the authorities had recruited them to overcome labor shortages from the late 50s without foreseeing that they would remain in Germany, reunite with their families, and/or have children born in Germany, and become part of the German society (Spicka, 2019). Without voting rights, migrants were often perceived as passive and lacking interest in political mobilization (Martin & Miller, 1980; Martiniello, 2005). The efforts made by hegemonic forces of silencing subaltern groups and making their agency invisible has resulted in the protracted lack of attention to migrant grassroots resistance (De Sousa Santos, 2001).

Only in recent years, a growing scholarship has focused on migrant grassroots struggles, particularly the protests of undocumented migrants in Europe and North America (Chimienti, 2011; De Genova & Peutz, 2010; Freedman, 2009; Nicholls, 2014; Nyers, 2010; Rosenberger et al., 2018; Siméant, 1998; Steinhilper, 2021; Stierl, 2019). Scholars have emphasized the agency exercised by migrants when engaging in collective action by challenging the idea according to which they live bare lives without the 'right to have rights' (Agamben, 1998). For example, scholars within Critical Citizenship Studies (CCS) have conceived migrants' struggles as instances where migrants exercise agency by transforming and expanding the notion of citizenship, and by constituting themselves as citizens, or those who have the 'right to have rights' (Ataç et al., 2016; Isin, 2008; Nyers, 2010).

Given their daunting invisibility, migrant struggles against border regimes can be conceived not only as a struggle for rights and recognition but also as a struggle for visibility (Ataç et al., 2015; Bhimji, 2016). Migrants engage in politics through organized collective action that has the purpose of making visible 'what had no business of being seen', which Rancière argues is the very core of politics (1999, p. 30). Rancière contends that politics is not the set of procedures through which collective consent is achieved and roles and responsibilities are established. He referred to the latter as police and argues that politics is antagonistic to police and involves breaking the police order where some parts have no parts (1999, pp. 29–30). Through collective action, migrants can potentially acquire public visibility and contribute to reversing the situation in which, as Arendt contends, they are publicly invisible but naturally visible (Arendt, 1958; Brambilla & Pöttsch, 2017).

In the German context, the invisibility of migrant grassroots mobilization has taken place in a context where institutional racism and the colonial past have been also regularly denied (Boehme, 2020; Boulila & Carri, 2017; El Tayeb, 1999). Migrant activism is thus important as it contributes to bringing to the foreground the role that colonialism and racism have had in building the German nation (Perolini, 2021).

Scholars have argued that the protest camp O-Platz in Berlin succeeded in breaking the invisibility of migrant struggles in Germany (Bhimji, 2016, 2020; Steinhilper, 2021). Following the suicide of an Iranian asylum seeker in Würzburg (Bavaria), activists marched to Berlin where they occupied Oranienplatz and transformed it into a protest camp until 2014. A few months after, they also occupied the building of the former Gerhart Hauptmann school in Ohlauer Straße, in the same neighborhood. Activists collectively demanded the end of restrictions on freedom of movement in Germany, the replacement of the food voucher system with a cash allowance, and the end of

segregated asylum shelters (Langa, 2015; Stierl, 2019). After the eviction of the protest camp in April 2014, some activists continued to occupy the former Gerhart Hauptmann school until the beginning of January 2018 (Azozomox & IWS refugee women, 2017).

This intense phase of mobilization against border regimes, dotted with the occupation of central urban sites, particularly Oranienplatz, was followed by the 2015 'long summer of migration', in which the soaring number of asylum seekers in Germany and Europe challenged the ability of the authorities to prevent the movement of people from seeking safety and better lives (Kasperek & Speer, 2015). While initiatives and groups part of the so-called "Willkommenskultur" (Welcome Culture), which embedded notions of solidarity for refugees, proliferated (Hamann & Karakayali, 2016), radical right populist parties and movements successfully mobilized racist frames against refugees (Rucht, 2018). After 2015, the authorities tightened border regimes; in 2016, for example, they suspended family reunification for people with subsidiary protection and resumed deportations to Afghanistan (Steinhilper, 2021).

Migrant grassroots mobilization after the eviction of O-Platz entered a phase of sedimentation (Della Porta, 2020) until mid-2018 when new actors emerged. In March 2018, the newly appointed German federal government introduced new restrictive asylum and migration policies (Perolini, 2021). Moreover, in June 2018, the newly elected Italian government relinquished the leading role that Italy had assumed until then to coordinate search and rescue operations in the central Mediterranean Sea, and adopted a new policy refusing disembarkation of rescue vessels, in particular, those operated by NGOs (Mainwaring & De Bono, 2021).

In the second half of 2018, new players contesting border regimes emerged. However, in contrast with O-Platz, these initiatives were not led by migrant activists. In July 2018, Seebrücke, a network of activists, organized large protests in several German cities demanding safe and legal routes and opposing the criminalization of search and rescue operations (Schwartz & Steinhilper, 2021). On 13 October 2018, Unteilbar, a large coalition of NGOs, trade unions, and grassroots organizations staged a large protest in Berlin to demand equal rights for everybody and to oppose the rise of populist radical right parties and movements (Perolini, 2021).

As I argue in this article, the memorability of O-Platz is associated with the visibility that the protest camp provided to migrant activists and their struggles; this association was particularly salient in 2018, a tumultuous time of change when activists perceived the role of migrants in the movement opposing border regimes as fading. Before developing this argument, I briefly turn to the literature on memory and social movement, which is important to understand how collective memories of O-Platz are shaped by the present, and to ground my argument regarding the aspirational function of collective memory.

### 3 | COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

In recent years, the interface between memory and activism has become more of a concern for scholars in both social movements and memory studies (Kubal & Becerra, 2014; Zamponi, 2018). Memory studies have developed an interest in activism and have contributed to explaining how social movements are remembered or forgotten over long periods. Conversely, social movement studies have approached memory as a cultural resource and have focused on the role of memory in stimulating or sustaining mobilization (Zamponi, 2018).

More specifically, three strands of research addressing the interface between memory and social movements have emerged: (a) 'memory of movements', which focuses on how movements are remembered; (b) 'memory in movements', with an emphasis on how memories of the past and memory work affect movements in the present; and (c) 'movements about memory', which analyzes how movements contest memories of the past (Daphi & Zamponi, 2019).

Collective memory is not the simple aggregation of individuals' memories but comprises 'images of the past' that social groups select, reproduce and commemorate through 'particular sets of practices' (Olick & Robbins, 1998, p. 106). Collective memory is thus socially constructed (Halbwachs, 1992) and inevitably selective (Schudson, 1995) and, as such, is not an automatic outcome of protests. Movements are mnemonic communities and memory plays a role in sustaining critical cultures and activities between cycles of protests (Zamponi, 2018; Zerubavel, 1996).

Activists' memories of past movements can contribute to the emergence of a movement in the present or sustain it over time (Zamponi & Daphi, 2014). Memory work may play a role in shaping the interpretation of past movements as retrospectively eventful as they are seen as turning points that produced critical junctures capable of mobilizing big waves of contention (Della Porta, 2020; Gillan & Emma Edwards, 2020; Sewell, 2005).

Past events may be remembered because they are newsworthy, dramatic, or politically relevant. However, as Armstrong and Crave have argued, other conditions are necessary to facilitate commemoration; these include for example, the organizational capacity of a movement for engaging in memory work or the resonance associated with a specific practice through commemoration (2006). For example, the Stonewall riots did not become central to gay collective memory because of the impact on the movement as similar protest events had happened before; its impact on the gay movement stem from the annual commemoration through a march (Armstrong & Crage, 2006).

Memories of eventful mobilization contribute to creating narratives of past mobilization that not only have an impact on the present but are also shaped by the present. Polletta has contended that movements' narratives integrate past, present, and future events and that narratives taking shape in the present imply memory work relating to the past (1998). As Haydu has more recently argued, activists pick from the past what is relevant and suitable for the present (2020).

More specifically, memory work involves the identification of continuities and discontinuities between past and present mobilization. Memories can point to similarities in the identification of the legacy of past mobilization but also differences among sectors of the movements or changed social and political contexts (Zamponi & Daphi, 2014). Narratives of past mobilization are important to understand the continuity between different phases of mobilization or even different movements (Amenta & Polletta, 2019). Mnemonic patterns taking shape in the present can be premised on the rejection or the adoption of characteristics of past mobilization; in some instances, activists' mnemonic patterns both reject some elements of the past while adopting others (Daphi & Zimmermann, 2021).

In this article, I contribute to developing the nexus between memorability of social movements and the visibility of subaltern groups, such as migrants with precarious legal status. I argue that memory work, specifically the aspirational function of collective memory, is crucial in countering the invisibility that has characterized migrant struggles for a long time. I contend that memory work transforms characteristics of past mobilization into aspirations for the present based on present needs that are, in turn, interpreted through references to the past.

## 4 | DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This article is based on the ethnography of the movement opposing border regimes that I conducted in Berlin between January and November 2018. The movement opposing border regimes in Berlin is heterogeneous as border regimes are complex systems that regulate the exclusion and disenfranchisement of migrants (Tsianos & Karakayali, 2010). Border regimes are not only shaped by states, supra-national or international institutions but also by migrants and migrant resistances (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015).

The mobilization against border regimes that had been spurred by the protest camp O-Platz, and which included also the occupation of several other sites, came to a definite end at the beginning of my ethnography. The last inhabitants of the occupied Gerhart Hauptmann school left the building on 10 January 2018, the day before the date set by the Berlin authorities for their eviction, and a couple of weeks before I embarked on my ethnography.

Specifically, I carried out participant observation with five grassroots organizations, including two migrant grassroots organizations. I chose these five organizations by considering several sampling criteria. I chose to reach out to two migrant organizations given my interest in the grassroots struggles of subaltern groups. Moreover, I sampled organizations according to the specific orientation of their grievances against border regimes, and I approached one network of grassroots organizations to study ties and alliances at the grassroots level. I participated in both day-to-day activities of these five organizations, including for example, weekly or bi-weekly meetings, as well as protests and other repertoires of contention in which they engaged, such as summer camps and outreach activities. Activists

referred to migrant grassroots organizations as “self-organized groups of refugees”. They also identify all migrants as refugees irrespective of their legal status. Migrants who mobilized with grassroots organizations often had precarious legal status. However, they identified themselves as refugees to contest classification systems and restrictive legal notions (Perolini, 2022). In this article, I use the term “refugee/s” to present my ethnographic materials as activists identified themselves as refugees. I use the term “migrant/s” when I discuss relevant scholarly literature as well as when I outline my analysis and draw conclusions.

The five grassroots organizations in which I conducted participant observation, as well as many of the activists who mobilized with them, participated in the O-Platz protest camp. However, my ethnography did not initially focus on memory work. During my participant observation, while carrying out a thematic analysis of my fieldnotes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify themes for qualitative interviews, I noticed that activists often referred to O-Platz. Thus, I decided to further explore the activists' narratives of O-Platz in the context of the 37 in-depth qualitative interviews that I conducted with both activists who mobilized with the five organizations under the focus of participant observation (15 activists), and activists who participated with 15 other social movement organizations, including not only grassroots organizations but also non-governmental organizations (23 activists). Individual interviews with activists are useful tools to analyze collective memories and processes of meaning-construction as memories reflect collective patterns of interpretation even if they are individually told (Zamponi & Daphi, 2014).

I identify all the activists mentioned in this article with a pseudonym to protect their security and privacy, and in compliance with their informed consent.

## 5 | O-PLATZ: AN EVENTFUL MOBILIZATION IN WHICH REFUGEE ACTIVISTS BECAME VISIBLE

In this section, I argue that the activists who mobilized against border regimes in 2018 collectively remembered the protest camp O-Platz as eventful (Della Porta, 2020). Specifically, collective memories of O-Platz emphasized the idea that the protest camp transformed the invisibility of grassroots resistances against border regimes in Germany. O-Platz was a movement in which refugee activists exercised agency by self-organizing and formulating claims against border regimes based on their own experiences. I contend that the visibility and frontline role of refugee activists are crucial characteristics ensuring the memorability of the protest camp.

Other aspects of O-Platz are, in contrast, less prominent in the activists' collective memories; these include, for example, divisions between refugee and German activists, as well as among refugee activists themselves. As collective memory is not a mere mirror of the past for it is socially constructed and inherently selective (Halbwachs, 1992; Schudson, 1995), I argue that collective memories of O-Platz are partly shaped by the present and constructed as aspirations for the present struggle against border regimes. Thus, remembering O-Platz as a mobilization that broke the invisibility of grassroots refugee struggles is closely associated with the aspiration that activists nurture for their current mobilization.

The mobilization of O-Platz was different from previous grassroots organizations that took place mostly in asylum shelters, which are usually located in rural areas or in city suburbs. The protest camp took place in Kreuzberg, a working class, migrant neighborhood that became the centre of activism after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Hochmuth, 2017). In interviews, refugee activists explained that their mobilization in the protest camp was empowering because they formulated grievances themselves, based on their own experiences of border regimes, which, in turn, changed public perceptions.

Joanne, a refugee activist from Kenya who mobilized with International Women Space, a women-only social movement organization that emerged in the context of the occupation of the Gerhart Hauptmann school (Azozomox & IWS refugee women activists 2017), explained to me that the protest camp had already been set up when she arrived in Germany. She joined O-Platz when she moved from an asylum reception centre in Brandenburg to Berlin. When I asked her to tell me the main achievements of the protest camp, she emphasized: “We [refugees] got a face,

we took a space. The O-Platz movement changed German history because refugees became visible for the first time.”<sup>1</sup>

Brice, another refugee activist who had participated in the protest camp from its outset, also referred to the notion of visibility when I asked him about the main achievements of O-Platz. Brice explained:

I think that Oranienplatz changed the public perception of refugees. Refugees started to be considered as people. The media started talking about us. We had been struggling against the *Residenzpflicht* [restrictions on freedom of movement for refugees] since 1998 but no one talked about our struggle before.<sup>2</sup>

When I spoke about O-Platz with German activists, I realized that they also considered the protest camp as exemplary because of the frontline role that refugees had played. Heiko, a German activist involved in the struggle against border regimes for many years, emphasized that the protest camp had changed the public perceptions of refugees. Heiko pointed out:

During O-Platz, the main demands were formulated by refugees themselves and not by supporters or German groups. The media listened to refugees and reported about their demands. Refugees were the main actors in the protest camp, not the supporting groups. This was different from before; I think that this empowered refugee activists.<sup>3</sup>

Heiko evoked the connection between refugee material experiences and claim-making as a crucial aspect of O-Platz. Activists interpreted the frontline role of refugees in the struggle as closely associated with claim-making. In interviews, activists explained to me that refugees in O-Platz formulated the main claims against border regimes and that German activists supported them. In their views, the main claims against border regimes had to be grounded in the oppression faced by refugees because of border regimes. The connection between claim-making and the collective experiences of racialized refugees is an important aspect of grassroots anti-racism (Lentin, 2008; Perolini, 2021). For example, when I spoke to Joanne, she explained that the main claims formulated during O-Platz challenged the isolation of refugees who lived in remoted shared accommodation. She explained:

We couldn't live the *landkreis* [district] where we lived, let alone work. Breaking isolation was crucial because most shelters were in Brandenburg and people had to walk 30–45 minutes to get to the closest bus stop. We didn't receive money but food vouchers that we couldn't even use in all shops and we couldn't use to pay for medicines or transport. The main demands were the abolishment of the *Residenzpflicht* [restrictions on freedom of movement], the abolishment of the food voucher system, access to employment and access to German courses which were crucial to break isolation. Nowadays [in 2018], there are many platforms, but refugees are not there, they remain a 'thing'.<sup>4</sup>

The activists' collective memories of O-Platz foregrounded the frontline role of refugees and the visibility that the protest camp provided for their collective claims, contrasting decades when their resistance remained invisible (Bojadžijev, 2008; Karakayali, 2008).

Collective memories of O-Platz focused on the unifying element that, according to activists, characterized that movement, which is the role played, and the visibility achieved, by refugees. While in interviews activists referred to some of the divisions that emerged in the protest camp, these were not directly mentioned or openly discussed in meetings, protests, or public events.

Indeed, O-Platz was marked by divisions among refugee activists and tensions between a frontline role conceived for refugee activists and a more supporting, behind-the-scenes role for white German and European activists

(Fontanari & Ambrosini, 2018; Stierl, 2019; Ünsal, 2015). As Tamara, a European activist who had been living in Berlin since before O-Platz, told me:

I learned [during O-Platz] that while white Europeans are supporters, refugees are the actors of the political struggle. This is still the dominant discourse nowadays. [...] The idea is that the power of decision and visibility should lie with refugees.

The division of roles between refugee activists and “supporters” is contested by scholars and, in some instances, activists themselves as it rarely accounts for more complex power dynamics associated with race and citizenship status (Ünsal, 2015). In interviews activists, especially German and European activists, expressed critical views regarding the division of roles between refugee activists and “supporters”. However, in the collective memories of O-Platz, as evoked in meetings, protests, or other repertoires of contention, criticism of power dynamics operating beyond the roles construed for refugees and German or European white activists did not stick out.

Divisions among refugee activists were equally mentioned only as a background in interviews when I asked activists their opinions regarding the reasons that contributed to the end of the protest camp. Refugee activists who mobilized in the protest camp included people who had claimed asylum in Germany and had different chances of obtaining protection status because of their countries of origin, as well as activists whose asylum claims had been rejected, and thus had precarious legal statuses. These differences were not only associated with distinct claims but also with different repertoires adopted in the context of the mobilization (Stierl, 2019). In addition, refugee activists also included ‘Lampedusa people’ who had claimed asylum in Italy, and who had moved to Germany. These activists were at risk of being expelled to Italy or the EU countries where they had claimed asylum (Fontanari & Ambrosini, 2018).

The collective memories of O-Platz foreground some characteristics, namely the centrality of the experiences of refugees and their frontline role in the mobilization, rather than others, such as the divisions among activists according to their nationality and/or legal status. This does not mean that activists are unaware or uncritical of some of the problematic aspects of O-Platz; they indeed refer to them in interviews. However, O-Platz is mostly remembered by activists because of the visibility of refugees against the backdrop of the invisibility of refugee grassroots struggles in Germany.

I contribute to the literature on collective memory in social movements by arguing that a mechanism that explains the selective adoption of characteristics from past mobilization (Daphi & Zimmermann, 2021) is the emergence of aspirations for present struggles that are shaped by both past mobilization and present circumstances. In view of the processes associated with the construction of these aspirations, some characteristics of past mobilization are not salient in collective memories.

Specifically, collective memory transforms the frontline role that refugee activists played in O-Platz into an aspiration for the present mobilization against border regimes. Indeed, while activists frame O-Platz as an eventful mobilization, precisely because it interrupted the invisibility that had characterized refugee struggles, they do not perceive their present struggle as providing the same visibility to refugees. As activists aspired for the struggle against border regimes to be centered around the experiences of refugees, they construct collective memories of O-Platz that foreground that specific aspect of the protest camp.

As I will further argue in the next section, the perceived discontinuity between O-Platz and the movement after the eviction of the protest camp is associated with the emergence of mnemonic patterns that have an aspirational function for activists.

## 6 | AFTER O-PLATZ: DISCONTINUITY AND INVISIBILITY OF REFUGEES

As I discussed in the previous section, the activists who mobilized against border regimes in 2018 remembered O-Platz as a movement led by refugees. In 2018, as discussed in the first section of this article, changes occurred both



within and outside the movement. I argue that the first half of 2018 was a phase of sedimentation, in which the legacy of the ruptures that took place during the protest camp was stabilizing (Della Porta, 2020). This sedimentation was followed by a phase of increased social movement activity in which new players emerged. However, refugee activists did not have a frontline role in these new organizations and initiatives, which contributed to generating a feeling of frustration and discontinuity between past and present mobilization (Barassi & Zamponi, 2020). In a context where they perceived their opposition to border regimes as fragmented and invisible, activists relied on collective memories of O-Platz as a resource and a strategy to generate aspirations and seek guidance for their current struggle.

As discussed in the previous section, activists tend to focus on the achievements and the unifying elements of the mobilization associated with O-Platz. In contrast, they refer to the current movement against border regimes as fragmented and invisible. In an interview, Rita, a German activist, emphasized the divisions along the lines of nationality and legal status among refugees. She told me:

I think there are now different movements. For example, there are Syrians who don't fight for shelters or against the *duldung* [one precarious residence status] but for family reunification. There are Afghans who fight against deportations, people from West Africa who don't have any chance at the moment to get protection status. We have lots of claims and lots of movements on different issues.<sup>5</sup>

As I emphasized in the previous section, while similar divisions to those evoked by Rita emerged also in the context of O-Platz, the activists' collective memories of the protest camp did not embed them. Moreover, while alliances among groups of activists who held different legal statuses emerged in 2018 (Perolini, 2022), activists tended to emphasize only the fragmentation marking their mobilization. For example, Anne, a German activist who engaged with a grassroots refugee organization, told me in an interview:

Now we are in defence mode. It's mainly about organizing small actions, it's invisible... there are no big events or struggles. The *Welcome United* annual march [in September] is a big event... but I am not sure that it's a continuous struggle.<sup>6</sup>

Activists emphasized that refugee activists did not have the same frontline role that they used to have in O-Platz. For example, Joanne, a refugee activist who participated in the protest camp, explained:

Nowadays [in 2018], there are many platforms but refugees are not there, they remain a 'thing'.<sup>7</sup>

In 2018, as discussed in the introduction, the tightening of border regimes in both Germany and Europe stimulated the emergence of new coalitions of activists and social movement organizations. These coalitions staged large protests in the second half of 2018 and succeeded in attracting the attention of the media and policymakers. However, activists considered that the role of grassroots refugee organizations, and of refugee activists themselves, was less prominent in these networks and alliances than in O-platz. These perceptions were partly due to the increased role of larger and more mainstream organizations; for example, *Unteilbar* was an alliance of many diverse organizations including human rights organizations and trade unions rather than a network of grassroots refugee organizations (Perolini, 2021). Similarly, new grassroots networks of individuals opposing the ever-tightening border regimes in 2018, such as *Seebrücke*, were not led by refugee activists (Schwiertz & Steinhilper, 2021).

Activists had concerns about the role of refugees in the phase of increased social movement activity that occurred in the second half of 2018. For example, the discussion that took place in one of the preparatory meetings ahead of the protest *Unteilbar*, which I attended, pointed to such concerns. In September 2018, the Berlin chapter of *Seebrücke* held a preparatory meeting with the purpose of organizing an anti-racist bloc for the upcoming protest *Unteilbar*, scheduled for 13 October. As stated on social media, the purpose of the preparatory meeting was to create a bloc composed of "anti-racist and migrant initiatives" to "oppose deportations, exclusion and racism".<sup>8</sup>

Activists mobilizing with five grassroots organizations attended the meeting; no refugee activists were present. Lena, a German activist who facilitated the meeting, stressed the importance of reaching out to grassroots refugee organizations so that they would join the bloc and make speeches at the protest. Another participant suggested that refugees should be openly encouraged to March at the front of the bloc. The comments about the role of refugee activists in the anti-racist bloc stirred some debate at the meeting. Tamara, one of my key informants, expressed her bewilderment. She emphasized: "It sounds as if we want them there just to give a visual impression of diversity. We are also assuming that people from those groups are non-white and so visible."<sup>9</sup>

Another participant reiterated that it was important to avoid a "white-only anti-racist bloc". Tamara responded by emphasizing that any such occurrence should rather prompt a reflection about the role of refugees in the mobilization against border regimes. The suggestion of openly encouraging refugees to join the frontline of the bloc was eventually discarded. However, Lena committed to further liaising with grassroots refugee organizations to ensure their participation in the anti-racist bloc.<sup>10</sup>

The discussion that took place at this meeting suggested that the role of refugee activists in the movement remained an important concern after O-Platz, in a period when new social movement organizations and networks emerged. The legacy of O-Platz, specifically its role in providing visibility to the refugee grassroots resistance against border regimes, did not dissipate after the eviction of the protest camp; it continued to permeate the mobilization against border regimes precisely through collective memories of O-Platz that foregrounded that characteristic of the protest camp. Activists made use of memory as a collective resource with a view to adopting characteristics of the past O-Platz mobilization (Daphi & Zimmermann, 2021) and transforming them into aspirations for the current mobilization.

Adopting characteristics of O-Platz, in particular the frontline role played by refugees, was also a strategy to maintain the close association between the oppression that refugees faced under border regimes and the claims that they collectively formulated. Indeed, the claims formulated by new players in 2018, in particular Seebrücke and Unteilbar, differed from those formulated by grassroots organizations and reflected different interpretations of the main grievances against border regimes. Seebrücke made claims for safe and legal routes for refugees to reach Europe and framed the hindrances imposed on NGOs, which I discussed in the introduction to this article, as an attempt to criminalize search and rescue operations (Schwartz & Steinhilper, 2021). The coalition Unteilbar framed its demands against border regimes through the idea of the right to asylum, which does not entail the opposition to any restriction on freedom of movement (Perolini, 2021). In contrast, grassroots organizations grounded their claims against border regimes in the experiences of racialized refugees; they contested restrictions on freedom of movement and called for the right to stay, a component of unrestricted freedom of movement (Perolini, 2020, 2021).

Collective memories of O-Platz are constructed selectively in the present; a tumultuous present, as new players emerge in the contestation of border regimes, which follows a period of sedimentation after the eventful O-Platz. I contend that the selection of characteristics of adoption of past mobilization is premised on the specific challenges faced by activists in the present. Following Daphi and Zimmermann (2021), I argue that activists adopt characteristics of O-Platz through processes that transform those characteristics into aspirations for their present struggle against border regimes. The characteristics that they choose to adopt, as well as the processes that transform them into aspirations, are shaped by perceptions of, and challenges marking, the present struggle.

In 2018, activists perceived the frontline role of refugees, the main legacy of O-Platz, as fading away rather than stabilizing. They responded to the evolving role of refugees in the mobilization against border regimes by constructing and evoking collective memories that provided guidance and aspirations for their current mobilization. Memories of O-Platz are not imbued with nostalgic feelings that constrain present mobilization, they rather become aspirations for both the present and the future.

## 7 | CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I have made two main arguments that contribute to explaining the role of memory in social movements. First, I have contended that the memorability of a movement can be associated with the role that subaltern groups, such as racialized migrants with precarious legal status, play in it. Activists collectively remember the protest camp O-Platz as an eventful mobilization (Della Porta, 2020; Gillan & Edwards, 2020; Sewell, 2005). O-Platz was eventful because it interrupted the history of invisibility that had characterized migrant grassroots struggles in Germany. O-Platz is remembered as the mobilization where migrant activists collectively formulated demands against border regimes based on their own experiences, and exercised agency by assuming a frontline role that became visible to mainstream sectors of society.

Second, I have argued that collective memory is a resource that activists deploy to respond to present circumstances, challenges, and needs. I thus contribute to explaining the mechanisms through which memory work selects specific characteristics of past mobilization and how this selection is associated with present patterns of mobilization. The memorability of O-Platz is enhanced by the activists' perceptions of their present mobilization. Specifically, activists remember O-Platz as a mobilization led by migrant activists in a context where they perceive that the legacy of O-Platz, centered around the visibility of migrants as political subjects, is fading. Activists select characteristics of past mobilization that could work as aspirations for their current and future mobilization. Memory work does not limit itself to signaling a discontinuity between past and present mobilization; it also transforms characteristics of past mobilization into aspirations for the present that could address, and possibly transform, that perceived discontinuity. By drawing on Daphi and Zimmermann (2021), I called these mnemonic patterns of "aspirational adoption" to emphasize the role that characteristics of past mobilization may play in the present and how a tumultuous present may, in turn, shape memories of the past.

O-Platz was not the first grassroots mobilization that migrant activists led in Germany. However, scholars and activists have emphasized that O-Platz shifted the perception of migrants from passive and invisible actors to political subjects. O-Platz was inherently political, as it made visible what had no place of been seen, that is the political subjectivity of precarious migrants (Rancière, 1999); this is why activists remember the protest camp. As activists strive for ensuring the visibility of migrant grassroots struggles after O-Platz, memory work plays a crucial role in providing guidance to their collective efforts to be seen and remembered as political subjects.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has stated explicitly that there are no conflicts of interest in connection with this article.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Interview with Joanne, 20 September 2018.
- <sup>2</sup> Interview with Brice, 29 August 2018.
- <sup>3</sup> Interview with Heiko, 24 August.
- <sup>4</sup> Interview with Joanne, 20 September 2018.
- <sup>5</sup> Interview with Rita, 30 August 2018.

- <sup>6</sup> Interview with Anne, 29 August 2018.
- <sup>7</sup> Interview with Joanne, 20 September 2018.
- <sup>8</sup> I am using the terminology included in the Facebook event for the meeting. Further information about the meeting can be found here: <https://www.facebook.com/events/258602414860613/>.
- <sup>9</sup> Ethnographic notes taken on 28 September 2018.
- <sup>10</sup> Ethnographic notes taken on 28 September 2018.

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