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Local Responses to Migrants: Rights, Resources, and Resilience

Comment on Homberger et al. (2022)

In 2016, the city government of Berlin decided to establish a Clearing Office for residents without health insurance and offer anonymous access to free medical treatment. The new program caters to a wide range of marginalized groups residing in Germany's capital, including undocumented refugees, temporary labor migrants, and the homeless population. Medical and immigrant rights activism in this field began in the 1990s, and the implementation of the new health care program was preceded by several years of roundtable negotiations, most importantly between civil society groups and Berlin's Department of Health (Holm and Lebuhn 2020). But how can we make sense of the sudden breakthrough in 2016? Was it simply a window of opportunity that emerged from the electoral victory of a left-leaning coalition of Social Democrats, Green Party, and Socialists in the same year?

The framework developed by Adrienne Homberger et al. (2022) offers a nuanced approach to better understand such ›local responses to migrants with precarious legal status‹. The Berlin case helps to illustrate the three interlocking dynamics their article focuses on. First, against the background of the ›long summer of migration in 2015‹ and the countless ›welcome initiatives‹ that emerged from it, the framework allows for an analysis of the changing relationship between Berlin's newly elected, progressive city government and the conservative national government (vertical multilevel governance). Second, it takes into account the strengthening of Berlin's position as a solidarity city and the exchange of best practice policies through European networks such as Eurocities (horizontal multilevel governance). Third, rather than taking the city as a unified actor, the framework sheds light on processes of cross-actor alliance building and conflicts within the city at large

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and the local administration in particular (governance and contestations inside municipalities); in this case, the frictions between the Department of the Interior (law and order) versus the Department of Health (provision of services for marginalized populations) and the role of NGOs and medical activists exerting political pressure but also providing citizen expertise.

But the article by Homberger et al. (2022) not only offers a valuable framework for the analysis of urban policies; it also avoids an ethnic-lens perspective still dominating much of urban and migration studies (Çağlar and Glick-Schiller 2018). Rather than looking at migrants as being ›deficient‹ or as ›ethnic groups‹ that need to be ›integrated‹ through special policies, it centers on the question of how actors and institutions respond to migrants' needs. Hence, implicitly it recognizes the co-constitutive relationship between migration and urbanization and establishes a conceptual connection to the most recent debates around urban citizenship, emplacement, and city-making (Cohen et al. 2022).

However, some aspects come to mind that may need further attention at the intersection of urban and migration studies. Even if we make a strong case for the notion of precarity, the connection to exclusion, borders, and labor needs more emphasis. The question of labor is crucial in migration studies, but in urban studies, scholars often lack attention to it (but see, e.g., Golash-Boza 2015). Much urban literature focuses on topics such as segregation, neighborhood effects, social networks, gentrification, and public space, while leaving issues around labor (markets) to other disciplines. Trade unions, for example, seldomly appear as actors on our horizon as urbanists, even though they play an important role in shaping local and regional labor regulations, are active players when it comes to local anti-racism campaigns, and run urban-based social services like legal advice for undocumented immigrants.

Also, during the Covid-19 crisis, many national governments monopolized pandemic-related policy making, while local-level actors were almost entirely excluded, especially during the beginning of the pandemic. This has prevented local organizations from gaining access to health decision-making processes and, consequently, voicing the distinct needs of those who rely upon them at the national as well the local level, especially migrants with weak or no access to public resources. Hence, for scholars interested in local responses to migration, an important lesson to learn from the Covid-19 crisis concerns questions how to strengthen the role of local public agencies and urban civil society actors with regard to crisis prevention and mitigation. Rather than national one-size-fits-all-solutions at the expense of marginalized communities, we need to develop a more holistic perspective of resilience that prioritizes access to local-level resources, is sensitive to place- and

group-specific needs, and supports bottom-up community organizing (Krüger and Lebuhn 2021).

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