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Westfälisches Dampfboot, Münster, 2020

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- 1 This book, whose title translates as “Contested Right to Stay. Belonging, Mobility and Control in the EUropean Deportation Regime”, is based on a thesis written at the Department of European Ethnology of the University of Vienna, Austria. It results from several years of ethnographic field research: from 2015 to 2018 Sarah Nimführ completed various research stays in the field; five in Malta, one in Italy, and several meetings with research partners across the EU. The study explores the production of non-deportability and the effects of this condition on the life of refugees in Malta. It is not a work about transnational mobility and migration movements themselves, nor about the structures of the EU border regime, but a micro-analytic perspective on the arrival process, which in the case of non-deportability always remains in the “in-between”. Drawing on the ethnographic analysis of border regimes (as coined by Sabine Hess and Vassilis Tsianos) Nimführ explored the “interplay between the practices of the refugees and the practices of the migration controlling actors” (p. 22, all translations my own) – a co-production, not (only) of the border, but of a simultaneously located and imaginary in-between space that Nimführ calls the “limboscape”.
- 2 The term “limboscape” was used in 2013 by Xavier Ferrer-Gallardo and Abel Albet-Mas in a study on Ceuta as a “transitional zone” between Africa and EUrope. Nimführ’s limboscape, however, refers to a kind of virtual space that materialises at different sites of expression and is simultaneously effective as an imaginary space – different actors produce and experience it performatively. The “limbo”, a “deregulated geographical, legal, bureaucratic, social or mental space” (p. 57), as it repeatedly appears in migration studies, is here brought into relation with Victor Turner’s notion of liminality, Erving Goffman’s works on total institutions, and Arjun Appadurai’s *-scape* concept. “Limboscape” refers to the institutionalisation of a permanent liminal state – namely non-deportability – which is created by human actors and is perceived differently depending on one’s perspective. The methodological and conceptual clarifications outlined here are found primarily in the first two chapters.
- 3 The primary location of the researched limboscape, and thus the ethnographic field, is Malta. Even if the consequences of border-regime practices are particularly “intensive” here, the author sharply rejects the metaphor of the island as a laboratory. This is because the island and Mediterranean situation implies a number of specific features unrepresentative of similar developments in other locations on the EU’s external (Mediterranean) border. These locations must first be considered discretely and then as an interdependent network. In the case of Malta, these specificities concern all dimensions, from the obvious geographical ones (insularity) to the linguistic (Maltese–English bilingualism) and the juridical (international, national, and EU law). The

following chapters (especially chapter 3) list some of the most important dimensions identified in the study. These features are always already more than just context; they are part of the (co-)production of the limboscape.

- 4 Malta is an archipelago of islands. For those refugees who cannot be deported and who in many cases did not even necessarily want to reach Malta, the island's insularity makes it difficult to leave. Time and again it is compared to a prison, for example by the Senegalese Suma Diop, who stated: "You stay stuck on the island. To be in Malta is like being in prison" (p. 42). However, this restriction in mobility does not result from "natural" insularity, it is created by humans. It is interesting to note that Malta has been more of an emigration country in recent history, and that until the late 1970s the mobility of Maltese people was promoted by institutions such as the Emigration Department and aided by charitable organisations such as Malta Emigrants Aid (the latter now functions mainly as an NGO for immigrants, and has adapted to the direction of migration). Being in Malta can therefore entail different degrees of (im)mobility that can be enhanced or slowed more easily because of the insularity, but never entirely controlled. Another specific feature is that Malta, faced with immigration from a post-colonial continent, is itself a post-colonial state and only became a republic independent of the UK in 1974. However, this rarely results in special solidarity with migrants, but instead in a complicated perception of oneself and others (e.g. the islanders initially perceiving anything coming from outside as a threat), which is historically related to the central Mediterranean location. While earlier occupations, up to the last one by the British, are attributed largely positive connotations in retrospect, current migratory movements are perceived more as a threat. Nimführ quotes Matteo Scicluna, Chief General of the Maltese Detention Service, who describes the establishment of an African community as follows: "They started colonising – and I use that word cautiously – taking over particular areas of Malta themselves" (p. 139). Here, actual colonisation by foreign powers in the past and an experience of strangeness in everyday life blend together, which culminates in a stereotypical image. On a linguistic level, Malta is characterised by Maltese-English bilingualism. As a Semitic language with a Latin alphabet, Maltese was a potential obstacle for the anthropologist, while it is particularly easy for Arabic-speaking refugees to learn. English is attributed a high status as an educational language and is omnipresent as a *lingua franca* – not least in the tourism sector. This confers advantages on those who master it as a primary language or at least as a *lingua franca* (one third of the refugees who Nimführ met). As far as religion is concerned, the situation in Malta is at first sight monolithic: the homogeneity that seems to prevail because of the great weight of the Catholic Church is, however, only achieved at the price of ignoring the island's Muslim past and current religious diversity. The historical reference points are rather the landing of Paul the Apostle who, according to legend, brought Christianity to the island around 60 AD, and Roger the Norman, who allegedly expelled the Arab Muslims around 1091. Accordingly, the Catholic island community reacts to Muslims, but also to Evangelical churches, with reservations or even rejection, as Nimführ experienced several times. The Christian tradition was also mobilised as an argument in the EU accession process. Upon accession in 2004, Malta became part of the EU border regime, which provides the legal framework for current migration management and is intertwined with national legislation. In this respect, Malta's peculiarity is its smallness – the state maintains direct diplomatic relations only with a few African countries, and even fewer direct air connections. This makes the repatriation of rejected asylum seekers difficult and in

many cases impossible, as cooperation with other EU countries is fraught with many obstacles on a practical level.

- 5 On the basis of the EU framework, refugees can attain three legal statuses: recognition of asylum status (granted to 6% between 2002 and 2018), subsidiary protection (43%) for one year and renewable, with freedom of movement within the Schengen area and work permitted, and rejection of the asylum application (32%). In addition, there is a country-specific Temporary Humanitarian Protection (THP) Status, which is not harmonised throughout the EU (16%). A Maltese peculiarity was that until 2016 migrants who had entered the country illegally could be detained in a detention centre for 18 months (before 2004 even for an unlimited period). This was unique in the EU and only comparable with practices in Australia. In 2016 the admission procedure had to be redesigned: instead of “detention centres”, the arrivals are now placed in “initial reception centres”, although some research partners claim this is a different cover for similar conditions. The author explains in detail the reasons for non-deportation and the peculiarities of the Maltese THP that was reformed in 2010 and 2018. The core of the work, however, is not these categorical sophistries but the “experiential spaces of everyday organisation in the limboscape”, as the main chapter (chapter 5) is entitled, which consists of more than 100 pages. It describes everyday life in the detention centres, the housing problems after release (between the “open centres” and private housing), the difficult access to education and further training, health as a privilege, religious everyday practice from Ramadan to Rastafari, personal relationships, and finally the political mobilisation of both Maltese civil society and the migrants themselves. A separate chapter (chapter 6) is devoted to the complex migration movements away from Malta. These include mainly leaving the island with borrowed documents, but also returning to continue an apprenticeship after a successful transition to Spain. The concluding chapter 7 “Doing limboscape and embodied limboscape” summarises the results of the ethnographic research. It emphasises the productivity of the border regime, which is not purely repressive, but rather aims to make economic (and “secondary” political) use of the presence of non-deportable refugees and their permanently liminal and precarious status.
- 6 To investigate the living conditions of non-removable refugees in Malta, Nimführ conducted interviews with 22 refugees. Most of them came from West Africa, about half of them were women, and at the time of interview they had been living in Malta for between two and 14 years with an unexecuted deportation order. She also spoke with 27 protagonists from 21 institutions, from NGOs to state authorities. Three research partners among the refugees, with whom intensive contact was maintained over a long period of time, proved to be particularly important informants: Buba Sesay, Ebrima Jawara, and Gabriel Samateh. Their stories, as well as those of two others, are described in chapter 4, where the reasons for and background to their migration are also depicted. Nimführ has even co-authored texts with some of her research partners, as reflected in a brief chapter entitled “On the necessity of collaborative knowledge production” at the end of the book. Besides collaborating in the research process, the author originally intended to write the thesis as a polyphonic text, a kind of multi-column hypertext with notes, reflections, and comments from the research partners. This was not achieved, due to some combination of a lack of time, technical means, and illiteracy. Once again it becomes apparent that the task of producing ethnographic knowledge not only collaboratively, but also of reflecting that collaboration in the form that the final publication assumes, as propagated already in Clifford’s *Writing Culture*, is

sometimes difficult to achieve. In terms of polyphony, Bob Marley song lyrics, inserted as “intermedia” between the chapters, loosen up the academic prose. On the one hand, they refer to moments that Nimführ spent together with the research partners and in which, for example, the informant Ebrima opened new perspectives on the research topic through his interpretation of the texts. On the other hand, they refer to the importance of the Rastafari Movement for many refugees in Malta, which provides them support and hope in the limboscape.

- 7 Finally, a few remarks on the language: the unpleasant abundance of typological errors and the often uncertain or inaccurate use of the German subjunctive contrasts with a very conscious and creative diction, when Nimführ constantly refers to the informants as “research partners”. This distances her from traditional anthropological terminology. In addition, the spelling of “EUropean”, which already appears in the title, is a pragmatic solution for referring to EU specifics beyond Europe as a continent or idea. Some linguistic details are German-specific, for example the spelling *Flucht_Migration* to denote the continuum between “taking refuge” and “migration”, but also the debate over whether the established noun *Flüchtling* (refugee) or *Geflüchteter* (someone who has taken refuge) is more appropriate. The author chooses the latter, but without presenting it as the final solution to this much discussed terminological question. This very conscious use of language once again reflects the author’s self-conception, who considers herself an activist and worked for the NGO Malta Health and Welfare Organisation alongside the field research. The intended separation of NGO work and research, as she lucidly explains, was not always easy and sometimes led to misunderstandings in the field. However, these difficulties are not relevant for the validity of the results. If Nimführ claims that a neutral, objective observer position is not possible, then this is a social science truism. However, she emphatically formulates that it is also undesirable, and refers, among other things, to Pierre Bourdieu’s claim of committed and critical scholarship as part of emancipatory practice. The potentials of ethnographic knowledge production are reflected on lucidly. The claim that by understanding the conditions in the limboscape we can influence them – and in the best-case scenario, change them – always runs the risk of providing the authorities with insights into informal knowledge and practices. This “Foucauldian trap” of engaged anthropology may reveal the limits of ethnographic criticism and engagement, which are not only inevitably inherent to the research process and the final publication, but imply, similarly, the reader’s ethos.