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Lessons in citizenship: What Syrians can teach Germans

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Too rarely does it occur to Westerners, worried about the erosion of their democracies, that refugees from Syria and elsewhere have valuable experience striving for civic values against authoritarian forces.

I: The German “gaze” on refugees: Deficient lives

In his critique of what he calls “humanitarian reason,” the anthropologist Didier Fassin writes, “The asylum seekers whose story is validated by a scar that testifies to the persecution endured, the illegal immigrants whose serious illness establishes legitimate grounds for obtaining documents […] all become, by the grace of humanitarian reason, simply a little more human for us. And this is no small thing, given the dehumanization of which they are frequently the object.”

However, Fassin continues, “the very gesture that appears to grant them recognition reduces them to what they are not—and often refuse to be—by reifying their condition of victimhood while ignoring their history and muting their words. Humanitarian reason pays more attention to the biological life of the destitute and unfortunate, the life in the name of which they are given aid, than to their biographical life, the life through which they could, independently, give a meaning to their own existence.”Didier Fassin, Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 254.

The logic Fassin describes informs the German “gaze” on those who fled from countries such as Afghanistan or Syria to Germany.The phrase “gaze on” was developed by critical theorists including Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. It draws attention to how the act of looking at “others”—colonial subjects, women, or migrants—shapes them in a specific way in the eyes of the (metropolitan, imperialist, male) observer. The “gaze,” in other words, constitutes a relation of power. Photos of refugees circulating on Facebook in refugee support groups show desperate children in overcrowded Greek camps pleading for help; they show refugees just saved from drowning in the Mediterranean, or those who did not survive the dangerous journey, most famously Alan Kurdi, the young Syrian boy who lost his life with most of his family while trying to reach Greece in September 2015. These are human beings in desperate need of aid. Their biological life deserves rescuing, irrespective of their biographical life. They might be heroines or murderers, but they do not deserve to perish in the ocean.

This humanitarian logic produces specific narratives about refugees. In December 2018, the leader of the German Green Party, Annalena Baerbock, gave a much-acclaimed and emotionally moving speech in which she addressed a common rhetoric treating refugees as mere numbers. We need, she said, to see individual human beings and their fate. To make her point, she told a story: a rescuing mission in the Mediterranean had found a boat just off the Libyan coast, carrying two women and a four-year-old girl (it's not quite clear who among them was still alive). The rescuers were surprised: the Libyan coast guard had supposedly "rescued" them, so why were the women still on the boat? One woman responded: We'd rather die in the Mediterranean than go back to the hell of Libya. We should, Baerbock urged her audience, imagine our own children on that boat. That way, we—that is, we Germans—would not talk about refugees as mere numbers, but would instead pursue a refugee policy guided by empathy.

As emotionally moving as the speech is, it is remarkable for how she tells the story of these two women. In fact, we do not learn anything about their lives prior to them facing the choice of returning to "hell" or perishing in that boat, at least until European rescuers come. We do not learn what made these women attempt to reach Europe's shores; whether they fled a war they had no part in; whether they had been political activists, or, though perhaps unlikely, whether they themselves had committed horrible crimes; we do not even learn where they come from. Their humanity is reduced to biological life, with no consideration for their biographical life. Only such ignorance of their lived life allowed Baerbock to liken them and the little girl to "our" children, to imagine us in their position. What we all have in common as human beings is a capacity to suffer, and this should stir empathy.

In Germany, refugees are rarely in such destitute situations.

Here, their biological life is no longer in danger. Once they arrive, a different logic governs the gaze on refugees and hence the stories Germans tell about them: these are narratives of deficient lives. It is a gaze that pays most if not exclusive attention to what is missing in the lives of refugees. And there’s a lot missing in their lives, or so it appears.

In the chaotic days and weeks of the fall of 2015, when the majority of Syrian refugees arrived in Germany, there was a lack of water, food, clothing, blankets, and places to sleep. Now that the situation has stabilized, other “deficiencies” have come to the fore, such as language skills or formal education insufficient for refugees to find employment. At the same time, refugees often lack proper accommodation,with many continuing to live in shelters. There is also the absence of their families still in Afghanistan, Syria, Turkey, and elsewhere. These are the central, practical problems faced by refugees, as frequently cited in surveys about the hurdles of integration.

But refugees miss more in German eyes: important social or cultural skills they need in Germany, like being able to deal with a bureaucracy, knowing how to ride a bike, or how to flirt (I’m not making these up: there are projects for refugees offering training in all those skills). More fundamentally still, refugees, and especially those coming from what Lila Abu-Lughod has perceptively called “Islamland,”Lila Abu-Lughod, Do Muslim Women Need Saving? (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013). appear to lack an understanding of liberal, democratic, and essentially “Western” values. They lack tolerance vis-à-vis sexual diversity, they have no sexual education, and have never learned to accept women’s rights, to name but a few examples frequently mentioned in German discourse.

Such alleged “deficiencies” have given rise to fears regarding the “integration” of refugees. The German historian Heinrich August Winkler has written two famous volumes on Germany’s “Long Road to the West,” discussing how Germany—after aberrations from the path of good, Western democracies that resulted in two bloody world wars—became part of the Western community of liberal democracies in the wake of World War Two. At the height of the “refugee crisis” in September 2015, Winkler worried about “the “specific challenges” that the “integration of refugees from other parts of the world” would pose:

> “The peaceful coexistence of human beings from different cultures requires a common political culture—and this can only be the political culture of the basic law, the German version of the political culture of the West. This political culture above all includes the inalienable human rights, amongst them the freedom of religion and thought, and equal rights for men and women. These rights need to be trained [eingeübt] and internalized, and that from earliest childhood: an immense task that German educational policy now will have to attend to.”

Without saying it explicitly, Winkler implied that refugees from “Islamland” lacked a profound understanding and appreciation of such values; now, they had to acquire them. It is a story about refugees as cultural strangers who lived under undemocratic dictatorships and who are hence not yet fit to live in a democratic country. Tellingly, he doesn’t say a word about the Syrian revolution: for him, there’s only a “civil war” in Syria, one causing a “stream of refugees.”Heinrich August Winkler, “Deutschlands moralische Selbstüberschätzung”, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 30 September 2015 (online).

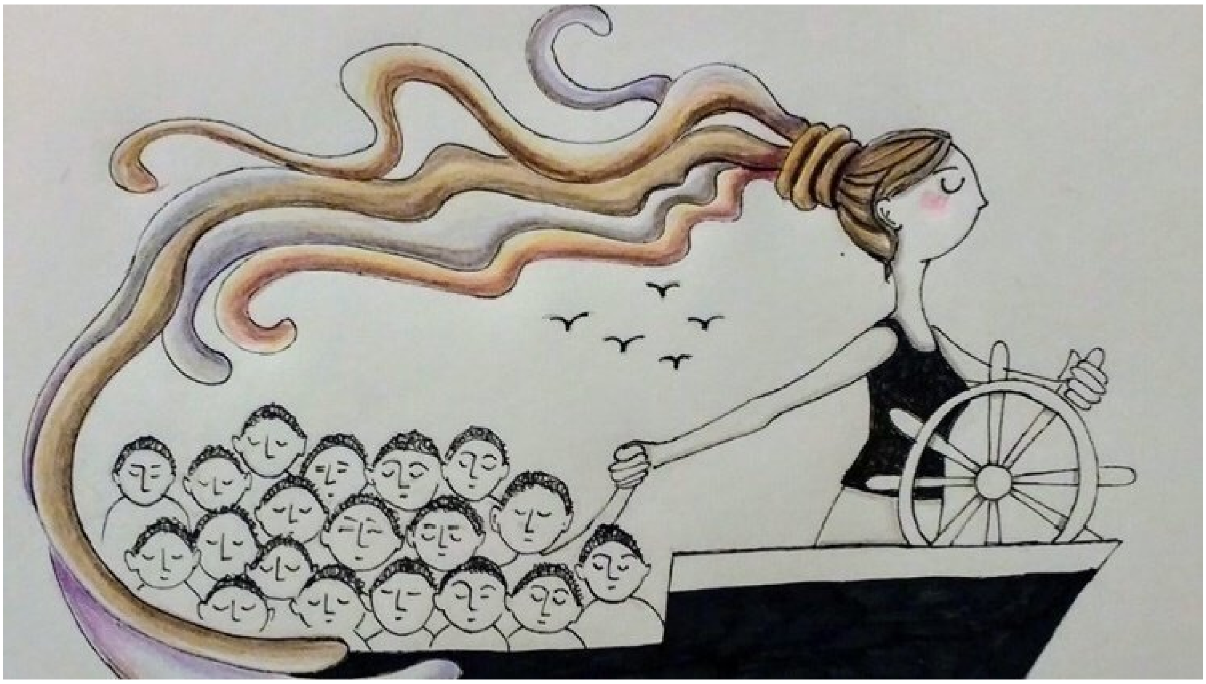
Importantly, such worries have not only been voiced amongst the radical right—Winkler for one is a long-time member of the Social Democratic Party—but also within circles supportive of refugees. One German volunteer recently commented on Facebook that refugees were “in need of integration,” and Germans should step up and support them in this regard.

Other pro-refugee organizations, by contrast, highlight different things that refugees miss: rights, a political voice and lobby. These organizations not only defend the rights of refugees, which is certainly admirable, but also frequently proclaim to “give a voice” to those without one. It seems not to occur to them that refugees might already have a voice actually worth listening to; that they might have a story worth being told that is about more than their misery.

The gaze on deficient lives, then, informs multiple discourses and practices. It is at the heart of the integration discourse that seeks to identify what refugees need in order to integrate into German society (language and cultural skills, employment, contact with Germans) as well as of discourses fearful of refugees because of their alleged lack of Western values. Perhaps most importantly, and most problematically, it structures the perspective of those supporting refugees. After all, “helping,” a concept central for the refugee-support movement, requires identifying “deficiencies” and “needs” and then providing a remedy. “Success stories” often thus present individuals who came to Germany with nothing: no clothes, no money, no German language skills; and then overcame all the obstacles. They learned German, they found an apartment and a job, and all of that with the help of German supporters. It’s a story of a deficient life rendered complete.

At times, such narratives are reminiscent of a colonial gaze and a mission civilisatrice: one German volunteer—an elderly man, in fact—once posted an anecdote on Facebook about young Afghan men who did not know how to masturbate, or so he claimed. They spent all their time in a fitness studio and just needed to relax a bit. Hence, he educated them about sex, because in Afghanistan, he wrote, they were still stuck in the 1950s and believed that masturbating might cause back pain, blindness, and other nonsense. At night, he alleged, one young man wrote to him of how often he had successfully masturbated—too much information, he commented. The German audience was amused, while Afghans and Syrians to whom I showed the post were outraged: as if they were so “backward” that they needed a German man to explain how to masturbate. With the help of Germans, the post implied, they might finally reach the civilization of the 21st century.

Replicating colonial imagery even more drastically is a drawing of Carola Rackete, the German captain of a rescue mission on the Mediterranean who faced criminal charges in Italy. It shows her as a mother, protecting African men, drawn like little children, with her long dreadlocks. White women saving brown men, one is tempted to say.



What, then, is the problem with this gaze on deficient lives? First of all, it is crucial to emphasize that the problems and the suffering are, in many cases, real, and that those supporting refugees—who include this author—have done impressive work in solving genuine problems. The work we, as supporters of refugees, are doing often makes a real difference, if I may say so with a bit of pride indeed. Not that this is to say the lives of refugees are actually deficient: it is in the German gaze that they appear to be characterized by deficiencies. Nor is it to say there aren't any other perspectives. Refugees also appear to be "valuable," because they can provide the labor force the

German job market requires (at least if trained properly). For some, refugees are a “cultural enrichment.” Notoriously, Germans praise Syrian and Afghan cuisine as a welcome addition, perhaps no surprise given the German culinary standards.

The focus on what refugees do not have and on what they need, however, prevents asking about what they do have; what they’ve accomplished in their lives prior to becoming refugees, what they struggled for politically, and what they perhaps still struggle for; it prevents asking what they have to say. All too often, seeing their lives as deficient lives means not seeing their lives as political and active lives. Of course, these are by no means mutually exclusive perspectives. People who fled from Afghanistan or Syria to Germany might face problems with learning the language, finding employment, getting the right documents, and so on, and might nevertheless be political activists with a voice. Yet to listen to their political voice would first require recognizing that they do have one; it would require recognizing that they have a political cause of their own that might, in fact, be relevant for Germans. Effectively, however, all of this is excluded from the gaze on deficient lives.

Indeed, the perspective of many well-intentioned German political education projects is the very opposite: refugees, whether from Syria, Afghanistan, or anywhere else, are considered blank sheets with no political experience, sort of politically-illiterate children who need to learn, from Germans, about democracy and the rule of law, something that does not exist in their home countries. Surely, they have nothing to teach that might be of interest to Germans (except delicious Syrian recipes). Frequently, Syrian friends explain to me what they have learned in Germany about politics and culture, things they in fact deeply appreciate as they have changed their thinking in a positive way. Yet when I try to reverse the perspective and ask what they thought Syrians might teach Germans in terms of politics, they are stunned by the very question: so utterly inconceivable does it seem to them that Germans might learn from Syrians (and, to be clear, I don't think this is a question ever asked in German discourse, so this is not a critique of Syrians lacking a good answer to my question, but rather of the pervasiveness of a German and Western discourse that is ultimately based on an assumption of political superiority).

II: Humanitarian reason and solidarity

"Our growing political awareness is closely linked with the Algerian revolution, which makes us receptive to the contribution of the Third World to the socialist revolution," wrote Jean-Philippe Talbo-Bernigaud in the first issue of the French leftist magazine Partisans in September 1961.Jean-Philippe Talbo, "A propos de la génération algérienne." In Partisans 1 (1961), Septembre–Octobre, pp. 146 – 148, quoted in Christoph Kalter, The Discovery of the Third World: Decolonization and the Rise of the New Left in France, c. 1950-1976 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 201. His words point to the fundamental role that so-called Third World politics played for the radical student movement of the 1960s. Students eagerly read Frantz Fanon's The Wretched of the Earth; they chanted

“Ho Ho Ho Chi Minh!” in support of the Vietcong fighting imperialism. To be sure, these solidarity movements were in many ways deeply naïve and can hardly serve as a role model for the present.

Yet the difference today is noteworthy: It is hard to imagine anyone would claim that the Syrian revolution has shaped political awareness in the West. No text written by a Syrian revolutionary has turned into a “bible” for Western activists in the way that Fanon’s book has. Chanting the name of “Alan Kurdi,” arguably the most famous (and dead) Syrian refugee, would simply be absurd. He might serve as an icon of the suffering of refugees, just as starving Biafran babies were once an icon of Third World misery, but not as a political idol.See Lasse Heerten, The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism (Cambridge: Cambirdge University Press, 2017). While students in the 1960s were eager to listen to political voices from what is now called the Global South, Syrians’ political voices in Germany are usually rendered inaudible. Their demonstrations attract only few German supporters (unless they’re about Kurdistan, but that’s a different story). This is arguably the effect of a humanitarian logic, whether it pays attention to biological lives or to deficient lives. It is a logic that has closed the space for political solidarity.

The challenge then is to disrupt the constraints of this logic; to develop narratives (and modes of communication) that see more than deficient lives; that pay attention to biographical lives and hence to political dreams and struggles, without simply ignoring the very real suffering. Given the pervasiveness of a humanitarian (and, for that matter, human rights) discourse, but also of an integration discourse that at best ignores the politics of those who fled from Syria or Afghanistan and at worst considers those politics dangerous because they might be divisive inside Germany, it is an immense challenge. But doing so might render political lives visible and political voices audible. It might provide the basis for genuine solidarity that moves beyond merely providing (humanitarian) help or support with integration. To accomplish this we need to start telling those stories.

III: Personal interlude

At this juncture, I need to briefly address my position as author of these lines. For it is indeed an odd position. The critique of the German gaze that merely sees deficient lives is, obviously, targeting a German audience, though it is arguably a more general Western gaze (at least English-language publications suggest this). Telling the stories of those who fled Syria and Afghanistan in a way that does not prioritize what is missing in their lives would be an intervention into a German discourse. In a way, then, Al-Jumhuriya might seem to be the wrong place to publish such a critique. After all, not many Germans, I'm afraid, will read it. What then is the point of turning to those stories here? In a way, I'm seeking to provide an answer to the question I've asked a number of Syrians: What might Germans learn from Syrians (and, for that matter, from Afghans and others)? It's perhaps a bit paradoxical or even arrogant: A German telling a Syrian audience what kind of lessons their stories from the revolution might teach Germans. Yet I hope that providing such a mirror, as it were, is a worthwhile exercise.

IV: Narratives of citizenship (and trash)

“It was like a huge wedding,” a Syrian friend from a small town in the vicinity of Daraa recalled of the early days of the revolution, after the regime forces had retreated from the town. It was a complete “tohubohu”—a word he looked up and translated—in the streets as everyone came out to celebrate and dance; men and women, the elderly and children. It was a happy chaos, and stunningly orderly. Once Assad’s forces had retreated, residents kept their city clean in the most literal sense: after demonstrations and celebrations, they cleaned up. If there was an accident, there was no need to call the police as people found solutions by themselves. Trust reigned in the streets. My friend’s cousin owned a store back then. During those days, he could leave it unlocked without being afraid that thieves would steal from him. Perhaps best of all, the omnipresent fear of speaking one’s mind freely had gone. Truly, these must have been happy days.

When I told the story to other Syrian friends, they were not surprised. I’m certain it’s a story familiar to many Syrians. In particular, the seemingly trivial act of picking up trash and keeping the streets clean received attention. (And it’s especially noteworthy from the German perspective, because in 2015 our media was full of reports about refugees unfamiliar with Western standards of cleanliness and complaints of young men trashing everything and refusing to clean toilets and showers in the shelters were they lived.) A young man from Hama, for example, explained how back in Syria he used to throw garbage into the streets because he “hated them” so much—the regime, the elites, society, this remained unsaid. At his school, by contrast, he kept things clean (apart from a picture of Assad in a book that he tore out, which got him in trouble with the principal, who nonetheless made sure the issue went no further). In Germany, he’s stunned how university students scratch words into tables and chairs, not caring about public property.

Another friend recalled how, before the revolution, local university students once gathered to clean up their neighborhood. It was nothing particularly political; there was no critique of Assad’s regime.Yet, the very same evening, secret police turned up at their houses. The state, and only the state, was supposed to keep the city clean, and if the state wasn’t doing this, then nobody could. Daring to take matters of public services into their own hands, these students had crossed a line by assuming the state’s responsibilities. They didn’t need to formulate any explicit critique of the regime to challenge its authority.

In fact, the matter of trash has played a crucial role in revolutions throughout the “Arab Spring” and beyond. A third Syrian friend told me about a text written by an Egyptian activist that was spread via Facebook before the wave of revolutions had reached Syria. Throwing trash into the streets was common in the Middle East, my friend explained. But with the revolution under way, the Egyptian author argued, this had to stop. The streets, the cities, the countries were now their streets, cities, and countries, and people should take responsibility for them. They should no longer act as mere subjects of regimes not caring for what happened around them, but as citizens having a stake in the “common good.”

And the matter has not gone away. In Lebanon, a country plagued, according to Western media, by a permanent garbage crisis, protestors in the fall of 2019 started taking matters into their own hands. The morning after the demonstrations, people took plastic gloves and garbage bags and roamed through the streets that were still covered with trash from the previous day’s demonstrations. The “unimaginable” happened: “They cleaned up,” a German newspaper reported. Later on, NGOs in Beirut not only offered first aid and legal support, but also “quick introductions to waste sorting. For a while, this really resulted in parents with their children gathering rubbish in the area, separating and reusing it—cigarettes for an NGO that is producing surfing boards with them, bottle caps for another NGO using them to build wheelchairs. In the evenings, there are debates in open rounds. It is as if, in downtown Beirut, a model society en miniature has developed that gives an idea of what could be, and also of what once was.”Lena Bopp, “Proteste in Beirut: Zurück in die Moderne,” Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 11 November 2019 (online). It’s a vision of a better society that appeals beyond Beirut and beyond the Middle East.

Such accounts are reminiscent of another “carnival of revolutions,” those peaceful “revolutions with a human face” that brought down communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989. In the years leading up to the revolutions, local initiatives had begun campaigning for the public good, against environmental destruction, against new factories that polluted local rivers, but also against public drunkenness. For the regimes, these were difficult challenges. The initiatives did not openly question the legitimacy of communist rule; in fact, they were concerned about the very same issues the regimes claimed were on their agenda (for, surely, communist regimes did not want their citizens to be constantly drunk). In contrast to Syria, the regimes did not employ security forces to break up these initiatives, perhaps a sign their authority was already crumbling. When the revolutions began, there a similarly celebratory feeling in the streets. In Prague, James Krapfl reports, people left their cars unlocked without being afraid they might be stolen; money that was lost in the streets was returned; and “strangers kissed one another on Wenceslas Square.”See Padraic Kenney, A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002); James Krapfl, Revolution with a Human Face: Politics, Culture, and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989-1992 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), p. 18.

What, then, is the relevance of picking up trash, and why is this something Germans, or other audiences in the West should take an interest in—for surely such stories won’t be news for readers from the region (though they might be for Germans)? After all, Germans are notoriously obsessed with public order and cleanliness and will need no education in such matters.

In these seemingly small and trivial acts, however, a particular mode of being in and engaging with the world shines through, namely being a citizen.

Among the definitions of citizenship listed in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) is: “A legally recognized subject or national of a state, commonwealth, or other polity, either native or naturalized, having certain rights, privileges, or duties.” [Emphasis added.] In democratic polities, these rights and privileges include, most importantly, the right to vote and to be elected and thereby to participate in the political decision-making process. As critics have noted, citizenship in this sense has an exclusive dimension. Not all those who actually live in a country are its citizens. It is another “deficiency” of foreigners yet to be “integrated” into German society.

Indeed, refugees and asylum seekers are in such a precarious situation precisely because of their lack of citizenship: in the countries they fled from, they are treated not as citizens but as opponents of the state; in the countries they are fleeing to, they are not citizens and hence do not enjoy the protective rights of citizens, such as not being deported (they have this right, though, as refugees). The blue passport that recognized asylum seekers receive symbolizes this situation: they cannot get the passport of their country (and applying for such a passport would be considered placing themselves under the protection of the state they fled from, meaning they would lose their refugee status), but they do not get the passport of the country they fled to either until they fulfill the requirements for naturalization.

However, there is also a deeper meaning of citizenship that goes beyond a mere legal understanding. Speaking about citizens and citizenship invokes an ideal of being involved in the public good as a member of a community—as the OED puts it, citizenship is “Engagement in the duties and responsibilities of a member of society.” Acting as a citizen is thus more than just casting a vote every couple of years or dutifully paying taxes on time. It means taking an interest in public affairs and considering how individual actions affect the common good, the polity. This makes people acting as citizens dangerous for totalitarian dictatorships of whatever guise. And this makes picking up trash an act of claiming citizenship precisely because it intrudes into the responsibility of the state that denies citizenship by its very nature.

V: Lessons in citizenship

“Talking to strangers” and developing “political friendships,” especially with those coming from faraway places, can be a deeply democratic practice, the philosopher Danielle Allen has argued. It may open our eyes to a world beyond our own.Danielle Allen, Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). What is it we might learn from talking to strangers?

In the first instance, the answer might be rather straightforward: it shows that “we are all human,” as a popular slogan puts it. Talking to strangers might be a way to overcome racist attitudes and prejudices by becoming aware of a basic and shared humanity. Perhaps encounters between Germans fearful of Muslim refugees and those refugees themselves might really change attitudes. Yet the slogan is as trivial as it is popular. After all, Vladimir Putin, Bashar al-Assad, Kim Kardashian, Horst Seehofer, and Elizabeth Warren are all human beings; neither mythical monsters nor semi-gods. Pointing out a common humanity is a triviality that obscures existing political differences.

There is, then, more to be learned from such interactions. They show how “our” lives—in Germany, in Europe, or in the West—are connected with the lives of “strangers.” But the question remains how we talk to strangers; what gaze we employ; and what kinds of connections come into sight. Paying attention to what is missing in refugees’ lives may shed light on how “we” bear responsibility for at least some of their misery—by denying them rights and access to public services, by selling weapons to belligerents, by causing political and social upheavals around the globe, by placing them into prison-like camps at the borders of Europe, and so on. It may reveal that we do not live up to our own ideals and obligations, be they humanitarian or Christian. In light of the very real suffering, this is no small thing.

Yet, in such a perspective, strangers—or, to be more precise, those who fled Syria (and other places) to Germany (and other places)—remain a mere mirror for “our” faults and shortcomings. What they have done, their struggles, their dreams, the way they have engaged with the world, remain out of sight and meaningless. This, then, brings us back to the question raised earlier: what is it that Germans (and arguably others in the West) might learn from Syrians?

As much as the question reversed the perspective, so does the answer. From the perspective of the German integration discourse, it is Syrians (and others who fled to Germany) who need to learn from Germans about democracy and liberal values. In the German gaze, they appear politically and democratically illiterate; at best, there are some liberal Syrians who are already “like us,” who don’t need to learn much, but who surely can’t teach “us” anything either.

Stories about picking up trash in the revolution—and I'm certain there are more stories to be told—reveal the contrary. They provide a sense of what acting and living as a citizen under adverse circumstances means: taking responsibility for the community, in seemingly small and trivial acts. There are good reasons for avoiding any form of idolization. Yet, there is something deeply inspiring and encouraging in these stories. At a time when many in the West worry about the imminent collapse of Western democracies, the revolutions in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere provide a lesson in citizenship for anyone around the globe.

These stories from the Syrian revolution are about the very opposite of "deficient lives:" they show those who ultimately fled to Germany not as people in desperate need of "us" saving "them," but as people with a cause "we" might share. They show them as active citizens engaged in their polity. Such stories do not call for our empathy or even pity, but for admiration and even solidarity.

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