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Refugee Arrival under Conditions of Urban Decline: From Territorial Stigma and Othering to Collective Place-Making in Diverse Shrinking Cities?

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Abstract: Places affected by urban shrinkage are widely depicted as left behind places characterized by decline and decay. Refugees are generally constructed as victims or ‘dangerous other’. Hence, place-making and negotiations of belonging in shrinking cities are accompanied by multiple layers of stigmatization. Despite this contextual factor and even though many questions related to inter-group relations in shrinking cities are still unanswered, refugee-centered revitalization of shrinking cities is being discussed among city officials, planners and in the scientific community. This paper investigates local discourses on urban shrinkage and refugee arrival as contextual factors for negotiations of place and belonging, and connects to previous studies on the stigmatization of declining cities and the othering of refugees. It uses Nayak’s (2019) concept of re-scripting narratives to analyze whether acts of re-writing apply not only to stigmatizations of place, but marginalized groups as well. The paper finds that while dominant discourses on place are contested and at times re-scripted by local actors, discourses which construct refugees as other are reaffirmed. Confirming previous findings according to which stigma was passed on to other marginalized groups, it concludes that there is a need to consider dominant discourses and their negative impact on social cohesion in debates around refugee-centered revitalization.



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1. Refugee-Centered Revitalization of Shrinking Cities beyond ‘Boosterism’?

In recent years, refugee-led revitalization of shrinking cities has become the focus of scientific debate [1,2]. The concept encompasses shrinking cities’ efforts to halt decline by welcoming refugees (ibid.) and merges two main debates: how to best tackle urban shrinkage on the one, and the growing importance of cities within so-called ‘migration management’ on the other hand. Since the local turn in migration management [3], cities have turned into increasingly important actors in multilevel governance, taking on a more active role, especially in the fields of refugee accommodation and ‘integration’—the latter being a term, which implies a mono-directional path to belonging according to which immigrants are expected to ‘integrate’ into a presumably homogeneous ‘host society’. Immigration societies, however, are heterogeneous, and emplacement of migrants in a given society is a multi-dimensional and multi-directional process. Authors working on refugee-led revitalization are increasingly focusing on the negotiations of belonging, which new forms of diversity bring about, and voice criticism over the underlying utilitarian rhetoric connected to the concept [4]. While high vacancy rates and a strong need for new inhabitants are a reality in most shrinking cities, considering refugee communities exclusively in terms of growth prospects for cities feeds into the dichotomous categorization of ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’ refugees, i.e., those who are ‘useful’ and those who are not, groups that are ‘deserving’ and those ‘undeserving’ of hospitality. Viewed through the lens of discourse theory, such narratives and representations play an important role in social group relations and socially sustainable planning concepts.

Representations of shrinking cities show strong forms of stigmatization. Their depiction is generally dominated by the idea of them as ‘losing out’, as “slum places” [5] characterized by low life expectancies and “shockingly high unemployment” [6]. However, some authors have put forward their often active civil society as well as their residents’ capacity to cope with shrinkage effects. One such way of coping can be found in what Nayak [7] refers to as—sometimes strategic—forms of contesting and “re-scripting” of such dominant negative narratives.

The discourse on refugees, in turn, is characterized by their securitization on the one and their victimization on the other hand [8]—especially post 2015 and 2016. In the European context, the summer of 2015 is discussed as ‘refugee crisis’, ‘crise migratoire’, ‘Flüchtlings-krise’. Derogatory terms which refer to the arrival of refugees via different routes who were pushed out of their countries of origin and sought asylum in Europe. After that “long summer of migration” [9], the European discourse took an increasingly anti-immigrant turn. Forcibly displaced people are often depicted as passive, which neglects the many ways in which refugees prove resilience and agency in shaping their environments—even under most precarious conditions (*ibid.*). Such representations also neglect forced migrants’ aspirations [10]. In contrast to this increasingly anti-refugee discourse, the summer of 2015 also moved some mayors of European shrinking cities to voice their willingness to welcome forced migrants. Altena in Germany and Riace in Italy are but two examples [11,12] of shrinking towns which presented themselves as welcoming places of arrival—contrasting their common depiction as places of departure.

Nonetheless, stigma of places and people are understood here as challenges to social cohesion at the local level as they nurture and are nurtured by dominant stereotypes, which affect places and groups negatively. Yet, previous authors have shown that active forms of contesting such stigmatization can and do occur, and that shrinking cities are often home to engaged civil society groups who contribute to such forms of contestation.

Given the above mentioned narratives on urban shrinkage and forced migrants, refugee-centered revitalization emerges as strategy, which must be discussed in relation to dominant discourses. While positive representations of refugees and their role in the urban development of shrinking cities exist [13], these are almost always selective and well in line with neoliberal rationales underlying contemporary discourses on urban development and refugee ‘integration’. In his research on German cities and their approaches to immigration and urban development, for example, Bernt (2019) [14] demonstrates how high-skilled migrants are generally seen as a resource while low-skilled or forced migrants are treated as social and welfare problems. This form of conditionality around welcoming forced migrants is object of increased interest within migration research. Conditionality forms an integral part of negotiations of belonging in capitalist societies, especially when arrival places are confronted with socio-economic decline. The latter poses risks for social cohesion and can potentially hinder socially sustainable forms of collective revitalization with forced migrants as *who* gets to belong and contribute is still widely defined by members of the so-called ‘host society’—long-term residents and local actors and decision makers.

Understanding cities as ambivalent places for migrants [15], this article starts from the assumption that dominant discourses on shrinkage and forced migration turn so-called ‘shrinking cities’ into particularly ambivalent environments for (forced) migrants. It takes the stigmatization of places [16] and the othering [17] of refugees as starting point for critical reflections on the discursive backdrop against which refugee-led revitalization takes place and argues that analyzing forms of stigmatization allows to understand processes of social group formations and negotiations of belonging. These, in turn, are important in identifying ways to overcome the ‘boosterism’ that currently dominates discussions on the role refugees play in revitalizing shrinking cities, which overemphasizes refugees’ aspirations for middle-class belonging [18], their contributions to local economies, and almost always erases their agency.

The underlying research question is whether a shared experience of discursive marginalization can be a source of collective contestation against dominant discourses. How do

local actors deal with the territorial stigma they are exposed to, and how do they confirm or counter marginalizing discourses on others? Are narratives about shrinking cities and forced migrants (strategically) re-written and do spaces of shared contestation among residents of a shrinking city emerge from that?

2. Shrinking Cities as Ambivalent Places of Arrival

By now it is generally accepted by the literature that shrinkage is a global phenomenon [19]. So far, little work has been conducted on how inhabitants are experiencing shrinkage and the daily lives of individuals who just arrived, ‘newcomers’—precisely refugees. Existing literature, which deals with refugee-led revitalization as strategy through which cities try to attract migrants in order to halt the city’s population loss, even if they may not be as well-equipped for accommodating refugees as growing cities, so far has focused on the U.S.-context. Indeed, the U.S.-Great Lakes region is home to numerous revitalization efforts, which focus on refugee communities. In Buffalo, NY, refugees are considered an essential factor in tackling the city’s population losses and curbing its economy [20]. However, not all citizens of shrinking cities believe international migration to be the answer; demographic decline is often linked to anti-immigrant sentiment based on a feared “loss of national identity because of lowered fertility and increased immigration” [21] (p. 33). There is, therefore, reason to underline possible challenges to the idea of refugee-led revitalization, especially when established migrant networks do not exist and the city is struggling socio-economically—common conditions in many shrinking cities. Shrinking cities characteristics influence the arrival structures and lives of refugees as well as their capacities to function [22,23]. Places confronted with shrinkage are often—though not always—characterized by high unemployment rates, low tax bases, and infrastructural difficulties resulting from often many years of decline. Following Fol and Cunningham Sabot (2010), I consider the “demographic, economic, social and urban dimensions of decline [as] inseparable [. . .]” [24] (pp. 3–4).

However, shrinking cities are also known for high rates of vacant housing, low costs of living and for being places of opportunity for alternatives to growth [25]. Research has furthermore shown that they are home to communities that care about their cities [26]. Their high rates of vacant housing can enable refugees to settle more easily in comparison to growing cities where accommodation is costly and scarce adding to local competition for affordable housing. However, while low costs of living and affordable housing can be pull factors and motivate forced migrants to arrive, accommodation has been found to be a short term process, which appears to be easier for shrinking cities to handle in comparison to social inclusion, a long-term process that has been found to be more difficult to achieve [27].

Finally, negative dominant representations of both urban shrinkage and forced migration form an additional and potentially complicating contextual factor to above mentioned material challenges and must therefore be considered. It is this dimension of arrival under conditions of decline this article focuses on. The next section introduces the two concepts of territorial stigma and othering as well as an overview on research that deals with their contestation. Before that, it briefly places urban shrinkage in the wider urban geography literature.

3. Looking at Urban Shrinkage and Refugee Arrival through the Lens of Discourse Theory

In the broader context of neoliberal governance, the accumulation of capital in some regions and by some groups is often fostered at the costs of other less empowered ones. In this pre-existing geography of power, some places and groups strive while others are seen as struggling to keep up.

Through what Swyngedouw (2004) calls the twin rescaling process of ‘glocalization’, economic activities become “simultaneously more localized/regionalized and transnational” and “institutional/regulatory arrangements shift from the national scale both upwards to supranational or global scales and downwards to the scale of the individual

body" [28] (p. 25). This description encapsulates well what can be observed in both, urban shrinkage and international migration: shrinking cities find themselves in a globalized economic network in which they are considered 'left behind'. As for migration, regulatory arrangements are increasingly made on supra-national level, after migration policy has evolved from tightly connected to national labor policies in the 1970s, to today's securitized understanding of migration management with its aim to protect national and regional borders [29]—a result from continuous securitizing discourses on forced migrants. For Çağlar and Glick Schiller (2015), power forms an essential element in their analysis of international migration, dis-empowered cities and the role of migrants in re-scaling processes. They understand power as "the differential access to resources including the institutional and discursive resources that shape life possibilities" [30] (p. 2). Within their scalar approach, they describe cities with regards to their position within national and global systems of hierarchy, which form a "continuum from top and up-scale (metropolitan) to low and down-scale (small and medium-sized)" [30] (p. 16), which allows for the inclusion of local opportunity structures related to the city's positionality. As low- and down-scaled cities, small and medium-sized cities are assumed to provide fewer or no migrant networks and smaller opportunities for employment or training.

The forms of constructing places and groups as 'outsiders' are conceptualized by Loïc Wacquant (2014) as territorial stigmatization [16] and Edward Said (1978) as othering [17]. Affected places and groups are often subject of ongoing discrimination and stigmatization. Carrying a stigma can be injurious for cities and their communities and have lasting effects [31].

Next, the two forms of stigmatization are presented in more detail and discussed in the context of urban shrinkage and forced migration respectively. In a following step, the literature on contestations to stigma will be reviewed. The concepts will then be applied to a single case study of a medium-sized post-industrial city in Germany, which serves as context for the study of how stigmatization is contested or reaffirmed within wider negotiations of belonging and diversity.

3.1. The Territorial Stigmatization of Shrinking Cities

Territorial stigma goes back to urban sociologist Loïc Wacquant and his comparative analysis of the French *banlieue* and the U.S.-American *ghetto*, in which he defines territorial stigma as "a consequential and injurious form of action through collective representation fastened to place" [16] (p. 1278). Wacquant builds on Erwin Goffman's concept of stigma (1986) [32] and Pierre Bourdieu's work on symbolic power and capital (1991) [33] to analyze the construction of urban marginality. While the urban marginality Wacquant writes about is heavily racialized, Nayak (2019) [7] shows how territorial stigma can equally affect predominantly white neighborhoods that are characterized by forms of socio-economic deprivation—a frequent reality in shrinking cities, which tend to be poorer than growing ones and, at least in the European context, less multicultural.

Essential to Wacquant's concept is that "the stigmatized neighborhood symbolically degrades those who live in it and they degrade it symbolically in return" [34] (p. 69). Predominantly exercised through ongoing negative representations of places in the media and public discourse, places are being 'demonized'. As denigration of places, "territorial stigma is closely tied to, but has become partially autonomized from, the stain of poverty, subaltern ethnicity (encompassing national and regional 'minorities', recognized or not, and lower-class foreign migrants), degraded housing, imputed immorality, and street crime" [16] (p. 1237). Most importantly for the context of this paper, the negative mental representations of places impact cities and their inhabitants in two ways: it negatively influences their sense of place and belonging; and it affects the "the beliefs, views, and decisions of state officials and, through them, [. . .] public policies" [16] (p. 1275). Some authors criticized Wacquant's concept for ignoring the agency of those affected by it and for undermining the role racism plays in the French *banlieue* [35–38]. However, as mechanism

of power, it is a relevant concept to study the representation of shrinking cities and their inhabitants and how they are affected by negative representations.

Places affected by shrinkage often suffer from a bad image, which focuses on high unemployment, poverty and—especially in the U.S.-context—high crime rates [39]. The depiction of shrinkage—while differing nationally—moves generally between shrinking cities as ‘losers’ or as promising laboratories for post-growth planning [5,25]. As “slum places” [5], shrinking cities are depicted through their most negative traits: decline and decay. Shrinking cities, according to media reports, are places of the past and subject to a discourse, which makes their imagination as livable places difficult.

However, instead of rejecting belonging as suggested by Wacquant [34], many shrinking cities contest negative stories told about them in the news. Indeed, despite the economic challenges one may face in shrinking cities, studies show that shrinkage does not necessarily lead to a low life satisfaction [40] and that “[...] population decline does not have to be a bad thing if we plan for future uses” [41]. Nevertheless, previous studies have shown that territorial stigmatization preceded drastic measures of redevelopment, measures which often came to the disadvantage of already marginalized residents. Larsen and Delica (2019) find that territorial stigma is not simply a consequence of mental representations, it is produced. This has wide-ranging consequences for shrinking cities. To Larsen and Delica

It is integral to contemporary neoliberal governance of social insecurity as currently in fashion across Europe, arguing that demolition and (re)-privatization are the only economically and culturally viable solutions for dealing with the spatialized consequences of contemporary urban and advanced marginality, at the cost of social need and social justice. [42] (p. 558)

This is in line with Wacquant et al. to whom territorial stigma is not given, but the hurtful and intended act of collectively representing a place [16]. By that, it forms part of the social reproduction of “inequality and marginality in the city and, beyond [...]” [16] (p. 1278), and influences the spatial environment individuals have to navigate.

These dominant representations form part of the local context and, through that, play an important role in refugee arrival processes.

3.2. The Othering of Refugees and other Forced Migrants

Othering is part of the day-to-day lives of a majority of marginalized groups, such as refugees. As “linguistic and structural mechanism”, it has “powerful implications not only for immigrants and their families but also for all our notions of justice, social change and a just society” [43] (p. 4). Understanding processes of othering is of major importance for urban planners as these processes help understand wider inter-group relations and how to improve social cohesion. In other words, when othering informs how we see and plan our urban environment, understanding the processes behind can contribute to socially sustainable practices.

Going back to Edward Said, the notion of *othering* originated from his work *Orientalism* (1978). To him, “[t]he very construction of the ‘other’ [...] is premised upon the difference between the Occident and the Orient” [44] (p. 56). Societies construct identity out of a “dialectic of self and other, the subject ‘I’ who is native, authentic, at home, and the object ‘it’ or ‘you’, who is foreign, perhaps threatening, different, out there” (ibid.) (p. 122).

Othering mainly affects groups and individuals who are seen as ‘different’ from the white norm, even though it can equally affect individuals and groups who differ in their lifestyles [45] (p. 160). Being no static, singular experience, othering can also be based on class and gender. For refugees, this means that being from an economically stable background or being able to provide proof of a certain educational attainment allows them to assure “white residents that they are not ‘scroungers’ of state benefits, but instead are net economic contributors to the community” (ibid.) (p. 165).

Analyzing discourses on forced migration through the lens of othering, it becomes evident that refugees are constructed as other through their criminalization on the one, and their victimization on the other hand. Both, securitization and victimization, are almost

always gendered. What is more, refugee media discourses all too often use stigmatizing language to imply uncontrollable masses of people entering Europe to legitimize exclusive politics [46]. Whereas common speech on ‘illegal immigration’ suggests wrong-doing on the side of refugees, criminalization of migrants through practices and speech can vary. While the explicit and overt illegalization and criminalization of refugees is visible and materialized through practices such as detention and deportation, so-called racial profiling of migrantized individuals falls under more covert forms of criminalizing refugees. These practices follow their discursive construction as either criminals or victims. Forcibly displaced people, according to this dominant narrative, are either threatening cultural norms or are stripped off their agency as passive victims. This understanding neglects the many ways in which refugees prove resourcefulness and agency in shaping their environments—even under direst conditions [8].

How are the above narratives challenged? The next section presents the literature seeking to answer this question.

3.3. Contesting Stigma: The Role of Community and Sense of Belonging

In his work on the stigmatization of deprived neighborhoods, Nayak (2019) explores the still understudied ways in which place-based stigma is contested by residents and individuals familiar with the place. He demonstrates “how critical respondents may temporarily shift, displace and reconfigure stigma through a strategic re-scripting of place” [7] (p. 929). Examples of such acts of challenging territorial stigma were found in Camden, England [47], Toronto’s Regent Park in Canada [48] and France’s Saint-Etienne [5]. These findings emphasize the agency of residents in challenging the bad image created of their places of residence. Oftentimes the narrative is shifted towards local solidarity networks in reaction to external stereotyping based on class and lifestyle [49].

Nayak (ibid.) finds that some residents transfer negative attributes to other groups in the city in an attempt to free themselves from the stigma. In some cases, such transfers are directed at racialized residents and groups—a support for Wacquant’s (2007) claim that stigma of place and stigma of ethnicity are mutually reinforcing and therefore often difficult to consider independently of each other. Prescribing to place a powerful role in group formation and inter-group relations, Blockland (2001) develops Doreen Massey’s conception of place further in her work on place, networks and collective memory. She “acknowledg[es] that the identities of places are articulations of relations that include some but exclude others (whether categorically based or not), or relations in which the access to sites of place-making is at least unequally distributed” [50] (p. 280). In later research, her and Schultze argue furthermore that “while interactions in and discursive constructions of places may create a dominant place identity, such identities may also be contested and provoke a sense of exclusion and *uncommunity* (Williams 1989) or non-belonging.” [51] (p. 245). By introducing the concept of public familiarity, they aim to develop the concepts of conviviality from migration studies and belonging from urban studies further (ibid.) (p. 251). In describing forms of dis-belonging in transforming urban neighborhoods, Blockland and Schultze show how residents attach various meanings to certain places which underwent neighborhood transformation (ibid.) (p. 255) and how these can create belonging or dis-belonging among newcomers and long-time residents. According to them, residents’ relation to the urban settings they navigate is marked by a sense of familiarity, as residents acquire knowledge on their social environments. This familiarity becomes the “setting for practices of in- and exclusion” (ibid.) (p. 260). However, while public familiarity forms the backdrop against which forms of in- and exclusion take place, the authors understand it as “value-free” (ibid.). Above mentioned works are considered fruitful in capturing the ambivalence of diverse urban environments.

4. Analysis

4.1. Methodology and Data

Haase et al. [52] (p. 96) write that “[t]he analysis of discourses is most significant in the context of issues that are highly contested, and subject to varying interpretations.” Urban shrinkage, they continue, “is such an issue.” I argue that the same accounts for the arrival of refugees—not only since 2015. Given the aforementioned socio-economic challenges shrinking urban environments pose for inclusion, and considering that shrinking cities and their inhabitants as well as forced migrants deal with strong forms of stigmatization, the analysis seeks to investigate whether attempts can be identified in which actors practice what Nayak (2019) refers to as strategic re-scripting of place and whether this form of rejecting stigma is also found in other marginalizing discourses, such as with forced migrants. The underlying question is whether dealing with one’s own forms of stigmatization can lead to more differentiated engagement with the stigmatization and marginalization of others, or whether residents of shrinking cities pass the stigma on to other marginalized groups.

The discourse analysis follows multiple steps in the course of which national discourses on the city under investigation will be analyzed in a first step. Following that, a second steps looks more closely at local narratives to see how dominant discourses are being contested or reaffirmed. In a final step, local narratives about refugees will be analyzed through the lens of othering in order to learn whether marginalizing narratives on refugees common for the current discourse are challenged or confirmed.

The material included in the analysis are 25 pieces from national and regional media outlets (articles as well as audio-visual content). As the current discourse on forced migration in Germany is inextricably linked to the long summer of migration in 2015, this year was used as temporal limit in the article search via Google News. The key terms used in searching for the articles were “urban shrinkage” and “refugees”. Arthurson et al. [53] (p. 1336) suggest that “media is a key medium through which distinctions of class and territorial stigma are shaped, imposed and reproduced”. As basis for analyzing local discourses, material from 20 semi-structured interviews with local actors and other material produced at the local level (open letters, audiovisual materials, Facebook posts by local politicians and the city’s website) are used. Additional material such as social media posts and open letters were included if they were explicitly mentioned in the interviews and therefore considered important by local actors. The interviews were conducted by the author in the course of thesis research on refugee arrival under conditions of decline between July 2020 and October 2021. The semi-structured interviews were held with local actors at the nexus of urban development, refugee arrival and social cohesion, that is social workers, urban planners, politicians and actors in education and the social housing sector. Informal conversations with residents with and without forced migration backgrounds were included as well. The participants were selected through a snow-ball sample.

To set the scene, a contextualization will provide insights into immigration into Germany and changes in the country’s border and immigration politics since 2015. Understanding representations of Pirmasens as city of arrival further necessitates a look at its trajectory of economic growth and decline on the one hand, and the broader socio-political context of the post-2015 period, on the other hand. Providing this context of the growth and decline of the medium-sized ‘shoe city’ as well as processes Germany’s long summer of migration, builds the cultural, socio-economic and social context against which local discourses can be understood. Contextualization, in that sense, serve as first analytical step.

4.2. Contextualizing Refugee Arrival and Urban Shrinkage in Pirmasens, Germany

4.2.1. The Arrival of Refugees in Germany during the ‘Long Summer of Migration’

The summer of 2015 marked the beginning of increased numbers in refugee arrivals in Germany. According to the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees in Germany, 2016 was the year with the highest numbers of applications for asylum in Germany with a

total of 745,545 applications. The majority of applicants in 2015 and 2016 came from Syria (266,250 applications) and Afghanistan (127,012 applications). From 2017 on, a majority of applicants came from Syria and Iraq [54].

Asylum seekers in Germany are distributed across the country's regions in accordance to a distribution key ("Königstein Key"). The calculation is conducted on an annual basis and based 1/3 on the population, and 2/3 on the tax revenues of a region [55].

Politically, the German government appeared rather open towards refugees in 2015. Optimistically, Chancellor Angela Merkel stated during a press conference that summer: "Wir haben so vieles geschafft. Wir schaffen das!" [56]—We managed so much. We can manage this, too. This statement followed her decision to not close national borders to forced migrants attempting to enter the country, especially from Austria. Seemingly in contrast to her statement in the summer, first measures were soon taken to tighten German asylum law. The so-called "Asylverfahrenbeschleunigungsgesetz"—asylum procedure acceleration law—which extended the list of so-called safe countries of origin, included benefit reductions, and legitimized deportation without prior announcement, entered into force on 24 October 2015. Not only did the law aim at speeding up process, it would make claiming asylum increasingly difficult. Only some months later, an additional tightening of the German asylum law, the so-called "Asylpaket II"—asylum package II—was agreed upon which entered into force on 17 March 2016 [57,58].

Hence, while locally the much praised German *Willkommenskultur* ranged from welcoming refugees at train stations to accommodating them in private homes and other forms of volunteering—10.9% of the German population claimed having been active in volunteering for refugees in 2015 [59]—the aforementioned restrictions at the federal level were well in line with increasingly hostile attitudes among the population.

Partly in response to that, cities all over Germany joined welcoming networks to take action at the municipal level. Many shrinking cities expressed their willingness to welcome forced migrants, arguing based on readily available housing due to demographic decline [60]. Some, however, had to call for different measures. While housing was readily available in many declining cities, some saw themselves unable to welcome large numbers of refugees. The mid-sized city of Pirmasens is one such city and forms the setting for the analysis of different forms of stigmatization, how they are being contested by local communities, and how they relate to each other. Such an approach demands knowledge of the "historical-geography of regions, towns and neighborhoods" [7] (p. 929). The next section will therefore present the city's trajectory of growth and decline and how it links to the city's difficulties in refugee emplacement.

4.2.2. Urban Shrinkage and Refugee Arrival in Pirmasens: A Short Overview

Other than the spectacular places well-known for their urban decline, such as Detroit in the U.S., Saint-Etienne in France or Leipzig in Germany, Pirmasens tells a different, but very typical story of the many 'ordinary' places confronted with urban shrinkage. A medium-sized city of little more than 40,000 inhabitants in 2020 [61], Pirmasens used to be well-known for its mono-industrial shoe manufacturing and as home to a large U.S. military base. The globalization of the local industry in the course of the 20th century took a toll on the city's economy and positionality: from one of the major places of shoe manufacturing in Europe and the world, the city today works on re-establishing its place in the wider landscape of shoe trading. All large factories have closed by now and the city's economic development agency counts on bouncing back through small-scale fabrication. It is safe to say that the city's importance has decreased significantly. When the military bases shut down in 1997, the city took another hit and population decline took off as the second major economic income factor broke off. Urban shrinkage took hold and Pirmasens is today suffering from high poverty rates, widespread commercial vacancies and empty apartments. In 2018, 18.1 percent of the city's population lived on social security benefits [62]. Due to its trajectory of urban decline and these pronounced shrinkage effects, the city is confronted with a bad image—especially in national media.

The low costs of living and availability of affordable housing became pull factors for secondary migration from neighboring regions, which lead to Pirmasens becoming home to much more refugees than designated by the national distribution key, that is 3.35% of refugees versus 0.99%. Pirmasens, then, is not only an example for urban shrinkage, but also for the local action taken in migration management. Large parts of social inclusion efforts for refugees were integrated in city-wide activities organized by an awarded local network, and planners acknowledge the role refugees play in reviving vacant housing. Being able to house refugees in vacant spaces was mentioned several times in interviews—at times with pride, as there was no need to improvise refugee housing by building tents, container villages or appropriating sport halls. However, refugee-centered regeneration has not entered any planning documents and the city achieved a federal decree to stop secondary immigration in 2018 as local actors felt increasingly overwhelmed with the task of refugee inclusion. Regarding its stigmatization in media outlets, the ‘refugee stop’ in 2018 motivated further reports on the city’s socio-economic difficulties.

The next section looks more closely at the discursive practices which contribute to the territorial stigmatization of Pirmasens.

4.3. Territorial Stigma and Othering: Contesting Marginalization or Reinforcing It?

4.3.1. The Representation of Pirmasens in the Media vs. Local Forms of Re-Scripting Place

A look into national and local media shows predominantly negative representations of Pirmasens. The city is regularly discussed in context of economic decline whereby its industrial past and the effects of deindustrialization are mentioned in numerous pieces [63–66]. Reports on the city’s decline are rarely value free and often derogatory. One such example is an article in the national *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ) in which the author writes: “In the shop window three dead flies, a dead bee, a pump, dust. In front of it, a bench. [. . .] Behind curtains in the shop window next door a sign ‘For rent’. The sign pale from the sun” [63]. The close description of dead insects reinforces the image of decay that so often dominates reporting on shrinking cities. In a later section, the author describes the efforts of the local actors in showing her parts of the city they deem worth visiting and wonders, whether they “wan[t] to prove or reject something” (ibid.). She quotes their words “no city is beautiful everywhere” to state that “Pirmasens is beautiful nowhere” (ibid.). The assumed lack of attractiveness is a reoccurring issue: in a televised report on poverty in Pirmasens, the moderator introduces the reportage with a reference to Remarque’s *All quiet on the Western Front*—*Im Westen nichts Neues* in its German original title, by saying “Im Westen nichts Schönes” [64]—nothing beautiful on the Western front. The city is depicted as undesirable place for living, run by people who appear unwilling to see the problems so evident to journalists who arrive in the city “like war reporters” [63]. That the city suffers from a bad image is in itself a theme treated regularly in articles. In the same piece, the author writes about the city’s efforts “maybe they did what they could. But what’s in it when the main narrative about the city in Germany does not allow for corrections?” (ibid.), describing precisely what territorial stigma does to places: their negative image becomes so dominant, that imagining them differently becomes increasingly difficult, almost impossible.

As the city’s deindustrialization drove early decline, there is extensive reporting about long-term unemployment. While some articles write about the stories behind the workers losing jobs due to closing factories [65], others describe the struggles and individual tragedies behind the long-term impact of decline in rather condescending forms:

“[. . .] one shoe factory after another built down its machinery and built it back up elsewhere. All untrained workers had to see for themselves where to go. Since then, they remain at home, cash in HartzIV and have kids, who are very likely to also stay at home and cash in HartzIV.” [67]

The use of the term ‘HartzIV’—a derogatory term for what is officially called *Arbeitslosengeld II*, social security benefits in Germany—reveals the classism and reinforces dominant class-based stereotypes of the ‘lazy’ or at least ‘comfortably’ unemployed. This pejorative tone is reflected in other pieces as well.

Residents and actors in Pirmasens suffer from this bad image. Negative reports in the news where a reoccurring topic in interviews conducted with local actors which appear to practice strategic forms of re-scripting. Forms of re-scripting include the emphasis on the local civil society and community, nostalgia for the city's glorious industrial past as well as efforts to assign Pirmasens a more positive image as livable mid-sized city. On several occasions, such re-scripting was launched by discussions about the urban shrinkage that took place since the shoe manufacturing industry globalized. Upon questions about his stance on urban shrinkage, a local town planner responds:

"[. . .] we have shrinkage processes. And we have had shrinkage processes. That's not the worst word, but we call this process *structural change*, because it is a process of change. It's not just that something falls away, but that something new is created through transformation." (Interview June 2020)

This narrative is in line with the city's marketing based on movement and dynamism inspired by its topographical situation on several hills, which has inspired the revitalization of a major former shoe factory—the *Rheinberger*—into a museum dedicated to motion and physics, named *Dynamikum*. The rehabilitation was funded by the federal program *Stadtumbau West*. This idea of dynamism is put in context to its current development and the aspirations attached to it. Upon being asked where he sees Pirmasens in 10 years, said town planner replies:

"So, I see Pirmasens already now and in 10 years, of course, much stronger, as an urban center of the Southwest Palatinate. [. . .] in the past we have described it with the term 'renaissance of the middle city', and I think that still applies today." (Interview June 2020)

This future oriented vision on the city is widespread among local municipal actors in planning and the administration, yet paradoxically contrasts an equally widespread notion of nostalgia for the city's (industrial) past, well captured in the following quote in which Pirmasens' 'brand' is attached to two things from the past: its shoe industry and second league football club:

"It is still a brand, because no matter where, if you ask people, they say they associate Pirmasens with shoe manufacturing. And the second topic would be the soccer club, FC Pirmasens, which used to play for the Southwest Palatinate Championship. In the same league as Kaiserslautern, by the way. Until 1970, they were even in the second Bundesliga." (Interview June 2020)

Both the current and the former mayor use outreach extensively to challenge the negative image. One such example which gained public attention was an open letter written by the former mayor in which he criticized the "Pirmasens bashing" and proposed to coordinate future visits by journalists and lead them to the "unsightliest, darkest and decay and decline most impressively documenting neighborhoods of the city", stop the care of public green spaces two months before such visits "for most efficiently achieving the hoped for images", and to stop reporting on any positive developments taking place in the city, "so as to avoid an all too positive impression in contrast to intended destructive conditions in the city" [68]. His letter followed an article quoted previously in which the journalist from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* writes in detail about the decay in the city. Interestingly, a second article written by the same author in the same newspaper in June 2021 painted a more sympathetic image and made no use of the widespread sensationalism [65]. Some media outlets took the mayor's open letter and used it to further feed into the stigmatization by describing the local reactions to negative reporting as a "wall of silence" [67].

Other attempts to contest the negative image suggested by the media where based on the civil society which is described as helpful and the city's inhabitants which are described to form a strong local community. As the head of a local civil society network describes:

"Yes, this city is quite strange. I am also a newcomer: I come from Berlin. And, um, I've been living here for 35 years now. This city is always portrayed badly by the outside world. But if you talk to the people here, they are very committed

to their city. [. . .] Otherwise we wouldn't be where we are. And when I see our large network: It includes almost all institutions that have something to do with people aged from 0 to 100. [. . .]" (Interview July 2020)

The local community is credited with the success of the network, which was awarded at the federal level for its efforts in creating opportunities for children and youth from disadvantaged families. Since 2015, the network emerged as important strategic actor in the arrival and welcoming of refugees.

Interview participants with forced migration biographies tended to express themselves favorably about the city. On the one hand, all participants praised the city for its peace and quiet, especially for families: "I think we will stay in Pirmasens. Maybe it's unusual after a year, but I want to stay here. I love Pirmasens: this calmness, the nice people." (Interview May 2020). The calmness mentioned by the respondent is part of a larger theme around quality of life which frequently emerged from the interviews. A member of the local economic development agency explains:

"The original Pirmasenser would say that we are in an absolute fringe zone. As a negative term: we are here in the middle of a dense forest, no one can find us, and the only thing nearby is the 'poor France'. And indeed, Lorraine-Alsace is not the most prosperous region in France [. . .] but then people come from Syria or China and they advertise Pirmasens, in their language. They for example set up a crown model in which Pirmasens is in the middle. What emerged from their model is, that Luxembourg is at our doorstep, Brussels, Karlsruhe, Strasbourg, and Paris as well. So, they think in completely different scales." (Interview June 2021)

While the quote reflects the internalized stigma of long-term residents, it also confirms what interviews with newcomers revealed: that the effects of urban shrinkage were not something they had recognized until visiting other cities. This can be seen in the following example of a young respondent stating:

"When I slowly went to other cities, I saw the society, the shops and realized 'Wait, where was I before? This is Europe!' Then sometimes you joke 'Oh, now I'm in Europe!' [laughs] And not only I see it like that, but others see it that way too." (Interview May 2020)

Some expressed unhappiness due to their limited capabilities to function. In these cases, Pirmasens was considered a good place to be in for the time being, especially for respondents with children, due to a high perceived safety and the low costs of living. Upon asking where they saw themselves in some years from the time the interviews were conducted, several respondents expressed considering leaving Pirmasens at one point or another due to limited job opportunities. This confirms the literature stating that shrinkage can encourage the emergence of arrival spaces [69].

Generally, Pirmasens is described by respondents with forced migration biographies as well as local actors as welcoming city with a strong local community and high quality of life.

Do these shared forms of contesting the city's territorial stigma give room for contesting negative representations of refugees as well, or is stigma passed on from long-term residents to newcomers or other marginalized groups, as observed in previous studies? The next section carefully seeks to answer this question.

4.3.2. Local Narratives on Refugees: From *Willkommenskultur* to 'Refugee Stop'

While there appears to be a strategic re-scripting of the unfavorable image of the city imposed by the media, dominant narratives on refugees are largely confirmed by local actors. The othering of (forced) migrants emerged from a number of the interviews, particularly around their supposed willingness to engage in employment. This main theme around the 'integration through the workplace' paradigm dominates German public discourse on refugee inclusion and was frequently reaffirmed by interview participants. A second theme evolves around cultural differences and negotiating new forms of diversity.

Talking about cultural differences and individual cases of families refusing their childrens' attendance to Christian activities in the Kindergarden, one respondent said

"As I said, in 2016 people came who really fled the country. They wanted to start over. That means that mother and father also put themselves behind learning the language. They were at the Advent caroling, they watched their children sing *Wir sagen euch an, den lieben Advent*, because that is our culture and we are in Germany. In 2018 came people whose children are not allowed to go to church with us. [...] But we want to show mutual respect and now we have parents who often impose even more burdens on us. [...] So they don't get involved with inclusion at all." (Interview November 2020)

Paradoxically, the parents' refusal to accept Christian practices imposed on their children is presented as refusal to 'integrate'. This echoes the dominant discourse in Germany in which (forced) migrants who adapt culturally and economically are deemed 'integrated' and frequently used as exemplary cases. Such exceptionalism also emerged in an interview with the local economic development agency, in which the interview participants refer to a newcomer as a "flagship Syrian" (Interview June 2021).

While actors at the municipal level present themselves as welcoming, negotiating cultural difference is deemed a "burden" and oftentimes connected to the so-called 'refugee-stop', a federal decree that permitted Pirmasens to refuse recognized refugees unless they were related to already residing refugees or had job offers in the city. This federal decree emerged as individual theme and was mentioned in all interviews, for example:

"Our schools were no longer able to absorb this, our kindergartens, and that was the point at which we also spoke with our state government. There were several talks where we spoke with kindergarten teachers and teachers: where are the limits? What do we have to do? And then we were able to simply apply for the immigration ban, because the numbers were simply exorbitantly high and we said we could no longer tolerate it." (Interview June 2020)

In another interview, one educator remembers:

"[...] for Pirmasens it was just that in 2016/2017 there was still this euphoria, this charity, and this wanting to help. [...] In 2018/2019 there was often this change of municipality, where the people, these refugees, I say, became very picky and said, nah in [names nearby town] everything is overcrowded, we prefer to go to Pirmasens. There were these demands, which people with little education, who live here, are not allowed to have." (Interview November 2020)

What emerges from the section is that forced migrants and refugees are denied agency in their decisions where to settle, something which was reinforced by the decree which received wide support among local actors. When refugees are spoken of more favourably, such positive representations at times take a performative shape: the success of refugees becomes a means to placing the city itself in a positive light, such as in the following example where the efforts by an education coordinator is implicitly praised via the success of a young apprentice:

"For example, we have one who is now doing an apprenticeship in the butcher's shop, and in the butcher's shop it went like this: he had two German apprentices who didn't work so well—a lot of missed days, etc.—and when he joined, they noticed: 'Oh, he's always there, he is working and working. He may have problems and can't express himself very well in German because it's not his native language. But he is very hard-working and we have to step up so that we can keep up with him.' He pulled them along. [...]: So that can also be a perspective for Germans." (Interview June 2020)

What furthermore emerged from the analysis is, that ascribing forced migrants a role in place-making is strongly dependent on their ability and willingness to 'integrate' socially and especially economically. Accordingly, one decision maker answers upon questions concerning refugee-centered revitalization that "[t]he influx of refugees is good

for Pirmasens if the newcomers contribute something and do not burden the authorities [...]” and concludes: “[...] as mayor I can hardly say to my citizens that the refugees have helped us. They would kick me out of town.” (Interview June 2021).

While no interview participant mentioned racism explicitly, many touched upon the socially conflictual situation, which emerged after 2015. Implicit in the above statement is a resentment among long-term residents against newcomers. Besides the decision maker, other interviewees equally described how residents reacted to increasing numbers of refugees in the city and the potential conflicts based on perceived limited resources such as jobs:

“[...] everybody can count one and one together. And I think there are of course people who [said]—when I worked at the job center—‘They take away our jobs!’ and then I ask them ‘You have been unemployed for 10 years. Who took away your jobs?’ [...]. But I think that if you have an above-average number of newcomers in this area, and these are not the first tranche, many of whom were academics, but the longer the newcomers came, the less educated the people became.” (Interview July 2020)

This section exemplifies once more the ways in which well-educated and trained people are presented as unproblematic in the context of social and economic ‘integration’, whereas unqualified long-term residents and newcomers are depicted as a burden and problem that needs to be dealt with. At the same time, the section represents discursive moments in which common stereotypical readings of refugees are challenged: instead of affirming locals’ fears about employment losses, the networker emphasizes that the refugees are not blame for their local issues of long-term unemployment or the lack of job offers.

5. Discussion

While narratives and stereotypes about refugees were confirmed in some cases, they were challenged in others. What appears clear from the analysis is that challenging the stigmatization of refugees is not pursued in the same strategic ways, contesting territorial stigma is.

The paper hypothesized that post-growth cities form an ambivalent space for forced migrants due to the intersection of different marginalizing discourses. The interviews and first scans of media reports draw the picture of a city that is struggling: with shrinkage effects, its negative image, and the arrival of newcomers and their inclusion since 2015. What emerges from the analysis is that negative representations of Pirmasens are contested while the marginalization of refugees and forced migrants are regularly reinforced. Pirmasens represents well what Nayak (2019) [7] described: territorial stigma is contested and at times re-scripted and often transferred to marginalized and racialized groups. In her work, Leitner (2012) finds that, while the relationship between white and non-white workers is characterized by the perception and depiction of non-whites by whites as threat, individuals with a higher economic status would tend to perceive immigrants as “asset, filling unskilled, low-paying jobs in local industries, as potential customers in their stores, and adding to the local tax base [...]” [70] (p. 836). This rationale paved the way for discourses centered around boosterism related to refugee and immigrant arrival as reproduced by economic elites. This rhetoric focuses on newcomers’ contributions to the local economy and, according to Leitner, “downplays cultural and racial Otherness while being a “discourse of racialized tolerance” [70]. What emerges from interviews appears to reflect Leitner’s findings: while positive economic performances of refugees result in an emphasizing of positive effects at the local level and a relativizing of racial and cultural differences by the economic elites and decision makers, they also become a condition for who belongs and who does not. In shrinking cities that aim at keeping up at the global scale, economic performance and creativity turn into criteria for access to place-making and belonging.

The shrinking city, then, builds the context to complex negotiations of place and belonging. Following Teun van Dijk, social conflicts are never context-free:

“Cultural differences that may give rise to communication conflicts are not merely discursive, however, but may have to do with different *contextual* matters, such as cultural knowledge, attitudes and ideologies, norms and values, power relations between and various roles of participants, as well as setting and other properties of the social situation that are relevant for the appropriate accomplishment of discourse as a social practice.” [71] (p. 147)

Part of this context are the very discursive practices that construct shrinking cities as ‘left behind’ places and (forced) migrants as others. In the mid-sized city of Pirmasens, tolerating and contesting marginalizing narratives form part of local negotiations of place and belonging. About the spatial character of belonging, Trudeau (2006) writes that belonging is “central to understanding the social control of space. [. . .] Thus, to belong to a polity is also to belong to its associated places. [. . .] The politics of belonging (and exclusion), then, play a significant role in the production of social spaces such as landscapes and place” [72] (p. 423). Contesting the territorial stigma becomes a way for residents to negotiate their membership to the established or outsiders.

While the findings hope to contribute to more awareness for the power of discourses in planning, it is not without its shortcomings: a first one lies in the non-representative character of the study. As a single case was analyzed qualitatively, the paper does not claim to offer generalizable findings. A further challenge lies in the media analysis, which through the search items of ‘shrinkage’ provoke a pre-selection of articles which deal with the negative impacts of the process.

First results from this analysis underline previous findings that “the performative enactment of re-scripting reveals how residents are not simply engaged in the doing of stigma, but have the potential to be pivotal in its undoing” [7] (p. 946). They also reflect how collective memory, as Blokland shows, can inform identity formation and bonding. In the case of Pirmasens, a city with a strong post-industrial identity, the nostalgia for the heydays at times conflict with new diversity and changes in the city [51]. In the debate around refugee-centered regeneration, notions of entrepreneurialism, urban development and ‘integration’ intersect. In the case of Pirmasens, too, group attributions are made based on the intersection of perceived socio-economic, ethnic or national backgrounds.

6. Conclusions

This paper showed that while actors in Pirmasens actively re-scripted the story told of their city and pursued changing the narrative, stigmatizing discourses on forced migration were at times reaffirmed through discriminatory generalizations and forms of cultural racism.

This finding is shedding light on the complex dynamics that shape negotiations of place and belonging in shrinking cities that receive forced migrants. Strong local identities combined with experiences of territorial stigma create a challenging environment for forced migrants in a place that struggles with its representation in the public discourse. As commonly found in previous work on territorial stigma, agents pass their stigma on to yet more vulnerable groups—here, refugees. Concerns about socio-economic issues influence who gets to belong and who does not, and refugees’ acceptance in the case study analyzed here is strongly based on their economic performance or ability to socially and culturally ‘integrate’. Those two elements are common in the German public discourse, but gain particular relevance in the context of urban shrinkage where municipal budgets are low, employment opportunities few, and unemployment rates high. Efforts to tackle common stereotypes against forced migrants emerge from some interviews. However, these generally consisted of individual success stories. Though well meant, such framings are dangerous as they feed into the narrative of emplacement as single-direction process, and erase the systemic barriers most forced migrants face upon arrival—especially, when the cities they arrive in are confronted with urban decline.

What becomes clear, then, is that own experiences of stigma must not necessarily lead to solidarity with other groups targeted with stigmatization. Such findings expose a greater need to consider dominant discourses and their negative impact on social cohesion in debates around refugee-centered revitalization if the strategy is to contribute to socially sustainable development in shrinking cities.

A question thus far unanswered is whether contesting territorial stigma contributes to re-scaling processes and whether cities who commit to non-discriminatory stances towards (forced) migrants succeed better in including the latter in re-scaling processes.

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