



# Toward a comparative anthropology of activism: activist identity formations in Germany and Uganda

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## Abstract

There is an ongoing debate in anthropology on the kinds of subject positions activists ascribe to the marginalized actors they encounter and the political consequences this brings about. Drawing from ethnographic research on refugee activism in Germany and transitional justice activism in Uganda, we revisit the respective debates on humanitarian activism, human rights activism, and political activism and argue to reframe the analysis. Instead of looking for the “right” subject position activists should ascribe to the people they engage with, the anthropology of activism should embrace a research approach that looks at the material conditions, in which activists and their subjects find themselves in and the kind of agency they are able to develop within these conditions.

**Keywords** Humanitarianism · Human rights · Political activism · European “refugee crisis” · Transitional justice

In every political space, there are people who see themselves as agents of change. In their activist practice, these actors do not only form their identity vis-à-vis the problems they fight against or the enemies that stand in their way, but also in comparison to other kinds of activists. In this article, we compare ethnographies of refugee activists in Germany and transitional justice activists in Uganda and analyze the processes of identity formation in which they are engaged. One of us has done research in Berlin, Germany investigating the reciprocal relationships activists established with asylum seekers living in improvised emergency shelters.<sup>1</sup> The other has investigated the activism around the transitional justice proceedings in Northern Uganda

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after the end of the military conflict in the early 2000s, particularly in the context of the war crimes trial against former Lord's Resistance Army commander Dominic Ongwen before the International Criminal Court.<sup>2</sup>

In our respective field sites, we met different types of activists: humanitarian activists, human rights activists, and political activists. We engaged in participant observation of their everyday practices and complemented our observations with narrative interviews about how they understood their work. What we found striking was how often our research partners developed self-understandings of their projects that explicitly distinguished between what they did as humanitarian activists, human rights activists, or political activists and the respective other approaches. These practices of boundary-making referred particularly to how they treated the people they engaged with and who were not activists themselves, but who should in some way benefit from their activist work—be it as patients, clients, collaborators, interlocutors, or future comrades. Do activists imagine them as suffering victims, as it has been analyzed for humanitarian activism? Do they conceptualize them as individual rights holders, as it is usual in human rights activism? Or do they see them as political subjects, as political activists would like to have it?

As we will review in this article, anthropologists have paid much attention recently to the kinds of subject positions activists imagine for the people they work with. Anthropological critics have argued that specific kinds of activism can do more harm than good by imagining people in the “wrong” kind of subject position. This analysis always implies that imagining people in other subject positions might make for “better” activism. We argue, however, that the project of finding the “right” subject position for activism is rather difficult. The first reason is practical, because we found that the different modes of activism heavily overlapped in practice: humanitarian activists spent time to help people find a lawyer for their asylum case; human rights activists spent time to attend a protest demanding political change; and political activists spent time to help people find a hot meal and place to sleep for the night. Nevertheless, these activists would insist that these things were not at the core of what they were there to do, but merely activities “on the side.” The second reason is conceptual, because, as we will show, the subject positions anthropological critics of one strand of activism imply as the “better one,” have often already been debunked as the “wrong one” by anthropological critics of another strand of activism.

Without denying that a focus on imagined subject positions in the research of activism is important, we propose to see them as a part of activist identity formation than as indicators of “good” or “bad” activism. The anthropology of activism should instead apply a practice-oriented approach which acknowledges that different material conditions often cause, if not force, activists to transgress the boundaries of their type of activism and take a practical approach that is more helpful for their subjects.

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<sup>2</sup> Jonas Bens fieldwork was part of a larger project on the affective life of international criminal justice that included ethnographic research both at the headquarters of the International Criminal Court in The Hague and in rural northern Uganda (Bens [forthcoming a](#)).

## Activist identity formations: the question of ascribing subject positions to marginalized actors

In this article, we propose a broad understanding of activism as the various modes of action that are directed to actively bring about change in the world. As such, activism can have very different forms and formats, be devoted to very different policies and politics, and directed to very different aims and goals. Anthropologists have made this specific mode of action an object investigation. There, one can broadly distinguish between the “anthropology of activism,” as we propose it here and the field one could call “anthropology *and* activism.”

Scholarship in the field of anthropology *and* activism is mainly concerned with the various ways in which anthropologists deal with role conflicts that arise from being both an ethnographer and an activist at the same time. Such scholarship has been labeled “public anthropology” (Lassiter 2005), “applied anthropology” (Bennett 1996; Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006), “practical anthropology” (Malinowski 1929), “advocacy anthropology” (Huizer 1996), “engaged anthropology” (Low and Engle Merry 2010), “activist anthropology” (Hale 2006; Speed 2006), “militant anthropology” (Scheper-Hughes 1995), or “action anthropology” (Schlesier 1974; Tax 1975), among others.<sup>3</sup>

Scholarship in the field of anthropology of activism is mainly concerned with activists and activist action as an object of research in its own right—beyond the question if the anthropologist him- or herself is personally involved in the activism. Work that has often operated under the label “anthropology of social movements” (Nash 2005), but also the “anthropology of humanitarianism” (Ticktin 2014) and the “anthropology of human rights” (Goodale 2009b) can be counted among this strand of research.

Surely, it is not possible to separate both approaches all-too neatly, as they frequently intermingle. Many anthropologists of activism are self-identifying as activists. Even those who do not see themselves as activists at least experience in their ethnographic practice that the boundary between investigating activism and engaging in activism is often difficult to maintain. In any case, anthropologists and activists mostly “participate in the same intellectual world” (Merry 2005, p. 240), constantly debating what has to be done to bring about what kind of change. Such a view follows the analyses of Antonio Gramsci of the role of “organic intellectuals” and their critical role hegemonic and counter-hegemonic movements (Gramsci 1971, pp. 1–25). Anthropological theorists of activism have mobilized such a Gramscian perspective to address the dilemmas of communication and representation that both intellectuals and activists face when they engage the problems of their interlocutors (see Smith 2014). Despite such overlaps, we see this article as a contribution to understanding the activist mode on a more general, conceptual level and as such situated in the anthropology of activism rather than the field of anthropology and activism.

Any kind of activism rests on some theory of action. To engage in the endeavor of changing the world as it is means to believe in the ability of individuals or groups to facilitate such change—at least to a certain degree. Activists believe that they

<sup>3</sup> For a recent intervention in this journal, see Susser (2016).

themselves have some kind of agency and they also assign certain agency to those people they engage with in the course of their activist projects—through helping, empowering, politicizing, or at least in some way interacting with them. At the same time, any human action is always subject to structural constraints. As Karl Marx wrote, people “make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”<sup>4</sup> As such, the question of how people can act, to what degree, and in what direction in any given circumstance is also a central question of any activist. That the dilemma between structure and agency determines human existence on a very general level is the social science’s “oldest and most legitimate intuition” (Latour 2005, p. 43).

As much as human action is thought as subjected to structural determinants, actors always come to the fore as subjects. How certain structures make people into certain kinds of subjects is hence a topic of central importance to social philosophy and social sciences (Althusser 1970; Bourdieu 1972; Butler 1997b; Certeau 1980; Foucault 1984; Ortnor 2006). Many refer to Althusser’s famous example for the interpellation of the subject: a policeman shouts “‘hey, you there!’ ... [and] the hailed individual will turn round. ... By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion he becomes a subject” (Althusser 1971, p. 174). How and in what way people are interpellated as subjects is a politically and morally contentious issue (Butler 1997a). In anthropology, this question has been discussed through the concept of *subject position*, a term that refers to “the figures used to describe individuals, and with which they are identified, whether or not they recognize themselves through them” (Fassin 2012, p. 202).

Activists imagine themselves and the people they engage with in some kind of subject position. In this article, we are concerned with three kinds of activism that have been widely discussed in the discipline recently: humanitarian activism, human rights activism, and political activism. By humanitarian activism, we refer to a kind of activism that is devoted to the alleviation and prevention of human suffering (see, e.g., Bornstein and Redfield 2011; Harrell-Bond 1986; Feldman and Ticktin 2010; 2012; Malkki 2015; Redfield 2012; Ticktin 2011). With human rights activism, we describe a kind of activism that promotes the implementation and enforcement of universal human rights for groups and individuals and helps people to fight for these rights (Messer 1993; Wilson 1997; Niezen 2003; Merry 2006; Tate 2007; Speed 2008; Goodale 2009a). With political activism, we mean a kind of activism that promotes a specific political agenda and distinguishes itself from other kinds of activism by explicitly framing its work as political (see, e.g., Edelman 1999; 2001; Paley 2001; Podgornik-Jakil 2019). Recent anthropological critiques of specific kinds of activism have taken up this idea and tried to highlight that some activists get it wrong by imagining the people they engage with in the wrong subject position.

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<sup>4</sup> “Die Menschen machen ihre eigene Geschichte, aber sie machen sie nicht aus freien Stücken, nicht unter selbstgewählten, sondern unter unmittelbar vorgefundenen, gegebenen und überlieferten Umständen” (Marx 1972, p. 115).

The critique of humanitarianism has highlighted that humanitarian activism is characterized by imagining the people they engage with in the subject position of the suffering victim. Anthropological critique has highlighted that this kind of subject position has the tendency to degrade people into passive receivers of aid and to deny their agency. Many observe that humanitarian activism tends to make invisible the reciprocal and unequal character of the relationship it establishes. Although humanitarian activists conceptualize their help as altruistic and that they do not want something in return, the beneficiaries are implicitly required to show docility and gratefulness to their caregivers and accept the status quo (Fassin 2012).

Human rights activists tend to imagine the people they engage with as individual rights holders. Anthropological critics have observed that such a “legalistic” (Shklar 1964) conception can ignore other aspects of their social and cultural identity. Being first and foremost the holder of individual rights and freedoms is not necessarily in accord with the actor’s self-perceptions. As Sally Engle Merry describes that when women go to court to claim their rights, this subject position can create conflict with “her other subject positions as partner/wife, member of a kinship network that usually includes her partner’s family as well as her own, along with other subject positions such as ‘local,’ Christian, and poor” (Merry 2006, p. 185).

Political activists actively reject both the position of the passive victim and the legalistic approach of human rights activism as similarly dismissive of people’s self-conceptions. They instead see the people they work with as autonomous political actors and conceptualize them as their new allies in a common struggle. While they are convinced that political activism is the right solution to bring about positive change, the subject position they ascribe to the people they engage with create conflicts similar to the other forms of activism, particularly when these people do not want to become politically active (Podgornik-Jakil 2020).

While insightful analyses of these different kinds of activism are plentiful, surprisingly little has been written about the relationship they have to each other. Anthropological studies of activism have revealed how activists draw on historical memories and political imaginaries in order to form their identity (see Narotzky 2014; Kurtovic and Sargsyan 2019). Connecting to these insights, we content that investigating the process of activist identity formation particularly in relation to other kinds of activism is an important project for the anthropology of activism. As such, it becomes visible that processes of boundary making between humanitarian activists, human rights activists, and political activists are key to understand these identity formations.

## Refugee activism in Berlin

In the context of the “refugee crisis” of 2015/2016, hundreds of thousands of migrants entered Europe, many of them fleeing from the Syrian civil war (Kasperek 2017). Through the “Balkan route,” crossing the Mediterranean Sea in the Aegeis, and then crossing Greece and the Balkan countries on land, people traveled to wealthier and asylum-friendlier countries such as Austria, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, and Britain—while by far most of the asylum seekers applied for asylum

in Germany. Beginning in the summer of 2015, the city authorities in Berlin, Germany, decreed the use of sports halls as emergency shelters to cope with the sharp increase in the number of asylum seekers during the “refugee crisis.” The emergency shelters were officially framed as a humanitarian response to prevent involuntary homelessness.

At that time, private Berliners began to set up non-governmental organizations and non-formal associations taking on the task of providing asylum seekers with basic amenities, medical help, and various forms of assistance. One organization we encountered in early 2016 in the north-western district Moabit was called Moabit Hilft (Moabit helps). When we first encountered a white woman in her forties who played a major role in Moabit Hilft, she introduced the goals of the organization to us by showing us through the facilities: a kitchen and a few rooms filled with commodities of daily life: toothbrushes, toiletries, and diapers. Private people and businesses donated such things to the organization, and one of their main tasks was to distribute it to newly arrived refugees. In the “elevator speech” she said to deliver to all those people she showed around in the organization, she made clear that she saw Moabit Hilft as a temporary and provisional organization. They provided basic services which should usually be provided by state institutions. Only in this exceptional situation in which the state is either not able or willing to act, they had to step in. She stressed this so much, she said, because there was a real danger in Moabit Hilft’s approach. Their humanitarian work—paradoxically, exactly when it was extraordinary successful—could even disincite the German state to step up its efforts to help refugees and expand its efforts to provide housing and economic services to newly arrived refugees. She said that because of this perceived danger, she was insistent to stress that Moabit Hilft was only there temporarily.

In a longer conversation, our interlocutor revealed that in order to be able to do their humanitarian work, she had to insist that “politics” had to stay outside of the organization’s walls. It would sometimes happen that people would start discussing politics during the work of the organization, mostly the refugees themselves who had left a politically volatile region only to learn that some of the political fault lines from which they thought they had left behind, re-emerged when they met other migrants in Berlin. The leading figures of Moabit Hilft had a strict rule: No political discussions in the house! The resulting conflicts would hinder the practical work of the organization. If people had to fight over politics, they had to do it elsewhere. As such, the activists at Moabit Hilft consciously addressed the refugees only at a certain time in their life when they were in most need of help and aimed at disregard their political agency, even saw it as threatening for pursuing their activist agenda. In that sense, they were classical humanitarian activists.

As ethnographic fieldwork in refugee shelters in Berlin revealed, providing the subject position of the suffering victim for people not only allowed for certain activism to play out effectively, but also brought conflicts to the fore. These became obvious when employees and volunteers in emergency shelters talked about “taking care of their refugees,” envisioning themselves as patrons for shelter residents, but were not able to keep up the idea that they did not expect specific behavior in exchange for their help. As long as asylum seekers remained docile and grateful and

participated in social activities provided in their shelters, they were treated respectfully, even friendly, by the humanitarian workers employed in the shelter. But the bad living conditions in the shelter and the existential precarity during the asylum procedure provoked opposition. One specific conflict concerned a young family who even had to leave the shelter because of a fight over the living conditions. When leaving the shelter, one employee in front of the entrance added patronizingly: "It's not Germany's fault that suddenly there are so many people here and that there are plenty more waiting to come. They can't just expect to live anywhere they want." Many asylum seekers living in emergency shelters often talked about the fact that their requests were mostly overheard and that they felt like animals. A young man from Afghanistan summed it up staying in an emergency shelter for over a year: "Since arriving in Germany, we have been obeying the law, but for once it would be nice, if we were heard."

Other kinds of refugee activists in Berlin were exactly addressing these problems. During the summer of 2015, particularly professional lawyers and law students began to set up law clinics in order to help refugees fill their asylum applications and to help them navigate the legal intricacies that are presented by the German welfare system. Their aim was to help people claim their rights under the Geneva Refugee Convention and the other relevant human rights treaties guaranteeing refugee rights. In the course of the ethnographic fieldwork, one of us accompanied a 17-year-old asylum seeker from Iran to one of these clinics. We met a fresh law graduate from one of the Berlin universities. She was waiting for a placement in the obligatory 2-year-clerkships a law graduate has to undertake before being allowed to take the final exam in order to practice law.<sup>5</sup> As the waiting period in Berlin is quite long, she had decided to do activist work in one of these law clinics to help refugees claim her rights. She was very critical of pure humanitarian work and pointing out that it would be very important to communicate to asylum seekers that they were not simply passive receivers of aid, but had rights, too: "My work is not only to help people, but also to build a consciousness for them and for society as a whole that Germany must provide services to them, because it is legally bound to respect their human rights. They are not simply guests in a foreign country, often, they have the legal right to stay here. They should claim it confidently." For her, the kind of subject position she assign to asylum seekers was making all the difference. It was at the core of her identity formation as a human rights activist rather than a humanitarian activist.

Yet another brand of refugee activists in Berlin again particularly rejected this idea of asylum seekers as individual rights holders. They founded the initiative Lager Mobilisation Network as their response to the unsuitable emergency shelters for asylum seekers, which were set up by the city's authorities. The majority of activists were part of the left-wing extra-parliamentary activist scene in Berlin, which has been directly engaging in political activism with asylum seekers and other

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<sup>5</sup> In Germany, this is called the *Rechtsreferendariat*. After the clerkship of 2 years, young lawyers take the Second State Examination, comparable to the bar examination in common law systems, and are allowed to practice law as an attorney, state attorney, or judge.

minorities for decades.<sup>6</sup> They viewed not only the humanitarian responses enacted through organizations such as Moabit Hilft as inadequate to solve the issues the newly-arrived asylum seekers were facing, but also the promotion of liberal human rights. The word *Lager* (German for “camp” or “warehouse”) in the initiative’s name refers to a specific political framing of refugee camps, indicating that the activists were interested in engaging in political activism with the asylum seekers staying in emergency shelters.<sup>7</sup> It was not enough to deliver aid or improve the conditions in these camps. They had to be done away with and replaced by direct and collective political action.

One political activist often complained about the inefficiency of the human rights approach in Germany: “The state and the civil society often say that asylum seekers have human rights. In the end, they do not have the right to work, to apply for an apartment, or to go to school. Exactly the concept of citizenship excludes them.” It appealed to these activists to go beyond human rights into the realm of politics proper, they did not see the legalistic approach as an effective way to bring social change because it did not sufficiently account for people’s understanding of themselves and their lives. Lager Mobilisation Network held its first assembly in a community office, which became their weekly gathering space in one of Berlin’s neighborhoods in mid-November 2015. To indicate the type of work the initiative was interested in doing with asylum seekers, the activists published their first report to distinguish themselves from other forms of activism:

We invite the so-called refugees living in Lagers to be part of our group. Our aim is to talk to our new freedom fighters about why the Lager system is shit and why we need to mobilize against this inhumane system... [The refugees] are human beings like everyone else, so let solve this global crisis together... The so-called refugee-crisis is a political crisis.

The activists not only suggested that their primary work was a common political struggle with the residents of emergency shelters, it also portrayed asylum seekers as “freedom fighters” assigning them the position of autonomous political actors.

In the assemblies that followed, the local political activists vocally criticized the ways in which humanitarian organizations and NGOs worked with asylum seekers. Rather than working with asylum seekers directly on equal terms, these organizations were patronizing them and would exclude them from decision-making processes in their organizations. In contrast, the activists saw direct-action and activist work with the asylum seekers living in the shelters as the only solution to improve

<sup>6</sup> With left-wing political activism, we are referring to the tradition of political activism that strives for egalitarian political, economic, and social justice. With non-parliamentary political activism, we are referring to political activists who predominantly work independently of political parties and have no interest in joining them or using mechanisms of parliamentary democracy to pursue their political activities. Rather, they see self-organization and anti-hierarchical forms of organizing at general assemblies as their means of achieving political change for anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-sexist, etc. causes (Graeber 2014; Juris 2012).

<sup>7</sup> The term “*Lager*” is often used to name concentration camps during the Nazi period. The state avoids using this term to designate refugee facilities and uses a more neutral term: shelter (*Unterkunft*).



their precarious living conditions. They expected that by inviting the shelter residents to their assemblies to talk about common issues related to life in emergency shelters and plan collective actions, the residents would eventually become active political subjects.

These political activists nevertheless encountered their own set of shortcomings. Even though there were occasions, when asylum seekers organized protest actions in front of their shelters with them, the planning of such actions was often not the main reason why the residents joined the assemblies. Indeed, the residents viewed these as their chance to get acquainted with the locals and wanted to solicit help with their individual asylum cases or personal issues in a country that has excluded them. A case of one family from Serbia, which regularly attended the assemblies, suggested this predicament. Serbia, as a state directly neighboring the European Union is seen by the German institutions as a secure country, and the German state usually does not accept asylum claims from Serbians. Facing immanent deportation, some family members attending the assemblies regularly, stated that they are mainly interested in acquiring legal help and had no interest in getting involved in large-scale political projects. While the activists were thinking one step ahead, long-term political activism was not able to solve the asylum seekers' immediate problems. Despite the activists' inclusive and egalitarian intentions, structural conditions and different worldviews prevented a sustainable relation that would lead to a collective political action.

It became clear that the kind of subject position these different refugee activist groups in Berlin—humanitarian activists, human rights activists, and political activists—assigned to the people they worked with was a central point of differentiation in their identity formation. They were convinced that their approach and their assignment of subject positions was the “right” one, although in their practical work, it became often clear that the everyday needs and experiences did not necessarily conform with the subject positions, activists had assigned to them. Quite similar tensions between activist identity formations and the assignment of subject positions came to the fore during ethnographic fieldwork in northern Uganda.

## **Transitional justice activism in Northern Uganda**

In the course of the armed conflict in northern Uganda between the Lord's Resistance Army and the Ugandan army, which lasted from the mid-1980s until about 2006, many people were displaced. At one of the high points of the conflict in the years 2002 and 2003, about 1.5 million people, nearly 90% of the population of northern Uganda, were forced to live in internally displaced persons camps under severe conditions (Dolan 2009). During this time, international humanitarian aid organizations—World Food Programme, UNHCR, the Red Cross—basically took over the supply with food and health care for the general population. Not unlike the humanitarian activists described in the context of the refugee activism in Berlin in 2015, the people working inside these humanitarian organizations heavily insisted that they took no political stance for either of the fighting parties in the context of an ongoing civil war. Their only goal was to provide much needed aid to suffering

civilians. Many argued embarking into wider questions of human rights and politics would have made such an engagement impossible.<sup>8</sup>

The ethnography on which this article is based was undertaken ten years after the dissolution of the internally displaced persons camps. At that time, international human rights activism had practically vanished from northern Uganda. What had remained, however, was the memory of a time of hardship and degradation that came from being dependent on humanitarian aid workers—frequently led by *muno* (white Westerners in the local Luo languages). Narratives against humanitarian activism still have much currency among people in the region, particularly among activists. In an interview, an activist in Northern Uganda engaged in cultural politics in the Acholi region around Gulu, the urban center of northern Uganda, put this sentiment into a rhetorical question: “Can you imagine the indignity that comes with being forced to eat food provided by the international community every day for years? Not being able to work, to farm to provide for one’s own family?” The rejection of being put in the subject position of a suffering victim played a major role for the activists that, at the time of the ethnographic fieldwork, were engaged in dealing with issues of transitional justice—the work of coming to terms with the past violence. Although these activist groups were divided mainly along the lines of human rights activism and political activism, they both shared a disdain for those kinds of activists who treated the people they worked with as suffering victims. Such an approach of humanitarian activism, they rather identified with colonial attitudes (see, generally, Branch 2007; Clarke 2009, 2019; Bens forthcoming b).

Human rights activism came up already during the military conflict. Beginning in the late 1990s, many human rights activists were focused on supporting the establishment of an International Criminal Court (ICC). This institution should be responsible for punishing severe human rights violations and war crimes all over the world, and also in the ongoing war in northern Uganda. Many activists at that time, particularly Ugandan lawyers and human rights advocates, were engaged in an NGO called “Coalition for the ICC” (Clarke 2009, p. 132). Their activism was successful. When the ICC began its work in the early 2000s it took on the situation in northern Uganda as its first case (Branch 2007; Nouwen 2012).

These activists were highlighting that the civilians suffering in the military conflict had basic human rights, among them the right not to be attacked and killed by military personnel. Inherent in this legal approach was a specific critique of the “culture of impunity” for war criminals and human rights violators (Bens forthcoming b). In fact, they not only argued against just seeing people as suffering victims, but a specific law-politics divide underlies their activist approach. Including “politics” or “political considerations” into the equation was, for them, exactly the wrong approach. In their view, this all-too often meant that self-serving interests of powerful actors prevailed over the rule of law. Finding a “political solution” often meant “power to the powerful” (Bens forthcoming a, Ch. 6).

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<sup>8</sup> For thorough studies of humanitarian interventions in Uganda, see Dolan (2009), Branch (2011), and Clarke (2009, pp. 117–148).

In the context of human rights debates in northern Uganda, political activists regularly criticized the legalistic view of the subject as a rights-holding individual as a Western imposition. In an interview on the role of human rights implementation in Northern Uganda, a staunch traditionalist of the Acholi in northern Uganda and critic of the Western rule of law movement explained this kind of critique:

Remember, the Acholi socialize themselves in the collective. That is, what happens to one person happens to all; what affects one person affects everybody in that collective. It could be the collective, it could be a family, it could be a clan. So, we live in the collective, and that influences what people think [...] We are living in traditional societies. Sixty, seventy percent of our people are traditional, they don't understand these complexities of advancement, they don't. They don't understand. You talk of human rights, you talk of governance, you talk of all these [things]. That does not matter to them.

Anthropologists have picked up such critiques of Western legalism in human rights work in Africa. Kamari Clarke has analyzed the human rights activism of establishing a regime of international criminal law in Africa, especially the International Criminal Court (ICC), and shows “the shortcomings of the ICC–human rights movement and its inability to address root forms of social inequality” (Clarke 2009, xviii; see also Clarke 2019). Legalism makes invisible the politico-economic roots of violence in Africa and focuses instead on individual perpetrators of mass violence. The individual rights holder as a subject position does not seem to be able to sufficiently account for the social embeddedness of people, including the need for economic justice. A somewhat disillusioned local human rights activist in Northern Uganda described people's perceptions of justice with regard to reparations rather than criminal prosecution:

That would lead us to the question of what exactly do people want for justice? I really think that a conviction, or a prosecution or an accountability process that doesn't ultimately provides reparations for victims is meaningless. For victims who have been through many years of conflict, they have lost their livelihoods, they have lost their loved ones, they have lost their property, it's simply reparations that appeals to their sense of justice. There is really nothing [else]. Actually, victims tell you openly, that for them the prosecution of one individual cannot bring back what they lost.

Time and again, this disillusioned human rights activist in Northern Uganda emphasized the “need to understand the politics that is involved in everything”.

Explicitly political activism in northern Uganda that emerged already during the conflict was mostly directed toward peace initiatives. One example was the Acholi Religious Leader's Peace Initiative (ARLPI), an interconfessional activist group with considerable popular support. Quite skeptical of humanitarian and human rights activism, they promoted a political solution for the conflict, particularly peace negotiation and a general amnesty law for rebels. As such, they

criticized the involvement of the International Criminal Court in the conflict and the later transitional justice process. The peace activists followed a largely religiously based ideology of forgiveness in order to allow people to end the conflict and develop new political perspectives for the future. After the conflict had ended, the peace activists remained active and resisted human rights initiatives such as war crimes trials by the ICC (Apuuli 2011). They favored a political approach for northern Uganda in which people can act on the basis of social, cultural, and economic needs today instead of legalistic debates about the past. Forgiveness was the way to open up this political space. The peace activism in northern Uganda, particularly ARLPI as group, was remarkably successful. The parliament enacted a general amnesty law in 2001 and the Ugandan government and the rebels entered into peace negotiations in 2006. For more than ten years, the military conflict has come to an end, although the security situation remains somewhat volatile.

But in this time of achieved peace, not everybody is happy with the political ideology of forgiveness that is promoted by the activists. Some, particularly in the rural areas most affected by the violence, do not want to enter in the common political project of forgiveness with a focus on the future. Some favor a legalistic approach and want to see those people punished who have brought so much suffering upon them and their families. For these people, the phrase “political solution” sounds like a cover-up for past crimes. Instead the human rights approach seems to them an instrument to gain monetary reparations for their losses. Exactly this fact that not all people are in accord in the common political struggle for peace and forgiveness as it is imagined by the peace activists created certain frustrations. In an interview, one of the peace activists from ARLPI, a Muslim cleric, explained his view why some people reject the forgiveness approach and support the International Criminal Court. “They are only in it for the money,” he replied frustratedly. They would not care about the common good for the whole of northern Uganda, but only about their own personal gain.

### **Why debunking the “wrong” subject position in activism does not lead us very far**

It seems that the question what kind of subject position activists assign to the people they engage with is highly relevant. It serves as a main distinction marker between different forms of activism and lays at the core of activist self-understandings. As much as it is a crucial part of activist identity formation, the question of assigning the “right” or “wrong” subject position to people is not easily usable as an indicator to normatively assess “good” or “bad” activism. In fact, the perfect subject position activists should assign to people, does not seem to exist. It appears that inequalities between the activists and the people they encounter is inscribed into the relationship no matter the subject position the activists ascribe to them.

At first glance, it looks as if humanitarian activism would be the most paternalistic form of activism of the three forms we have investigated, because it ascribes to people the subject position of the suffering victim. Humanitarian activism also

differs from the other two forms in that it usually does not want any active role from the interpellated subjects in exchange. Human rights activism already seems to be less paternalistic, although the subject position of the individual rights holder still seems rather restrictive and culturally specific for Western legal thought. Political activism, finally, seems to be not paternalistic at all, because it “only” provides people with opportunities to fight for their political projects. But a comparative analysis reveals that all kinds of activism can appear equally paternalistic, be it in different forms and formats.

It seems that what people experience as activist paternalism is derived from the structural inequality that is inherent in the activist encounter. Humanitarian activism, human rights activism, and political activism operate in a discursive framework that aims at making activists and those people they engage with equal to each other. Humanitarian activists discursively reduce themselves as well as those they help to their basic humanity and see the attempt of ending human suffering as a universal moral project. For them, suffering makes all human beings equal. Human rights activists mobilize the idea of universal rights that all people hold as human beings and use this as a discursive device to make themselves equal to the people they engage with. Political activists evoke the equality between themselves and their counterparts by claiming that all are united by a common political struggle in which they are engaged because they have the same political interests.

What regularly happens, however, is that these constructions of equality become porous and instable over time. Benefactors of humanitarian workers or measures do not want to be reduced to their bare life any longer and do not show the docility and gratefulness by refusing to accept the conditions of inequality (Fassin 2012, p. 3). Human rights advocates are surprised when those human rights groups stop fighting for universal rights as soon as their immediate grievances are resolved (Merry 2006, p. 202). Political activists are disappointed as soon as they realize that the people have collaborated with them for reasons other than for collective political activism (Hansen 2020).

Because of these structural inequalities between activists and their counterparts, the boundaries between these different activist approaches we have described do often not appear as rigid as the activists claim (Vandevoordt and Verschraegen 2019). While activists of all three forms aim at achieving wider structural changes in a way that appeals to their self-description, they more often than not transgress the boundaries of their ideally designated work. It is for this reason that we do not take them for clear-cut analytical categories when investigating the work of activists. We argue that it is more useful to show how different forms of activism constantly overlap and how the activists act in ways that are in accord with the material circumstances they encounter.

In the case of the refugee activism in Berlin, it took about 2 years before and a change in city government before the city authorities closed the emergency shelters in sports halls. What many had been perceived as a humanitarian issue during the “refugee crisis,” had become a political issue after residents had begun to openly protest their bad living conditions. As one spokesperson for refugee affairs in Berlin told in an interview, the city government had to quickly enact political measures to close down these shelters due to the high-level political resistance shown by their

residents. Refugee activists changed their strategies accordingly. As humanitarian first aid was not necessary any longer, the humanitarian organization Moabit Hilft eventually rebranded itself to an organization that lobbies for human rights of refugees. On the other hand, the political activists from the Lager Mobilisation Network who constantly insisted that humanitarian measures were not a sustainable solution for the wellbeing of newly arrived asylum seekers, could not avoid classical humanitarian work. Due to the chronic lack of basic services normally provided by the state (legal assistance, medical help, clothing, information about the local surroundings, opportunities to integrate in the local environment), the activists had to engage in these tasks to win trust of the shelter residents. As much as these political activists were envisioning their work as seeing asylum seekers as political subjects, the activists would start to complain that individual help became their primary work. This did not stop them from pursuing their work. Witnessing the immediate needs of the residents they befriended with, they frequently provided them with ad hoc and temporary solutions. Moreover, even if they criticized human rights organizations for not being able to effectually guarantee human rights to asylum seekers, they also heavily relied on the language of human rights when protesting together with asylum seekers in front of emergency shelters to pressure the local state government and administrative institutions.<sup>9</sup> Together with shelter residents, they created placards with slogans such as “Our rights as humans are being violated” to demand better housing.

In this respect, the situation of transitional justice activists in northern Uganda was similar. Over the course of the conflict and since it has ended, activist groups time and again switched activist modes in practice. When humanitarian activism went down, it was replaced by development projects which demanded more political work. Some political activists, particularly from the peace movement, began to engage in human rights talk when they calculated that they can better further the interest of victims of violence by aligning with the International Criminal Court. Staunch human rights activists began to develop disillusionment and began to work for wider issues of economic justice.

From anthropological studies, we know that activists changed their ideological orientation, their language of contention, and their strategies with changing social-material conditions of power (Gill 2016; Gökarıksel 2017). Both in Germany and in Uganda, it seemed to depend on the concrete situation under which circumstances people are happy to take on the subject position of the individual rights holder, the autonomous political actor, even the suffering victim. Often marginalized actors “shopped” for those activists that advance what they believe furthers their interest.<sup>10</sup>

With this, we do not mean to argue that the three forms of activism we have discussed in this article were more or less the same thing. As we have seen, they differ

<sup>9</sup> As scholars have pointed out, activists frequently appeal to the discourse of universal human rights that fits the moral economy of the expanding global liberal political order to demand recognition of the needs of those who are politically excluded (Fassin 2012; Nyers 2019).

<sup>10</sup> This process is not unlike “forum shopping” in which disputants shop for that forum to settle their dispute, which appears to be most likely to decide in their favor (Benda-Beckmann 1981).

on the level of self-description, their work methods, and their wider societal implications. However, by highlighting the flexibility they take in different situations, we argue that researchers as well as activists can be misled by an all-too strict focus on the “right” form of activism and which subject position to assign to the people they work with. We propose to focus instead on the concrete material conditions and the possibilities for activist agency that they allow for. In that perspective specific forms of activism can appear more necessary or suitable than others. In other words, we propose a more open comparative analytic lens to analyze activists’ self-conceptions and different modes of engagement with their subjects in order to make visible how new situations reshape their practices in unexpected ways, potentially transgressing the boundaries of “their” type of activism.

## Conclusions

What follows from this for the anthropology of activism? First of all, we should map out different forms of activism and subject positions activists operate with to see what shortcomings they face. Rather than taking for granted the distinctions the activists frequently make among themselves, we will be able to discover the flexibility that actually exists in their practices on the field. This will help us avoid endless discussions on finding a “right” subject position in activism.

Second, we have to understand the structural conditions in which activists and their subjects are located. When thoroughly taking into account the structural conditions of activism, it should not come as a surprise that choosing either form of activism often ends up perpetuating the inequality it tries to solve—despite activists’ good intentions. The whole activist endeavor implies these inequalities can be, at least partially, productively overcome when activists and their subjects engage in common work despite their different interests. Structural factors do not simply determine peoples’ fates, but it is precisely through their perpetual practice that people provoke social transformations. It does not lead very far, however, to keep up the hope that somewhere around the corner the “right” subject position for activism awaits.

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