

Mobile World Passau

A municipality in Lower Bavaria faces migration

Extended Abstract

Christine Egger

“Moments that change an entire continent are not very frequent. This is one such.” (Blume 2016, 2) This was to be read in *Die Zeit* in September 2016. The German weekly was discussing the events that had led to about 800,000 refugees – especially from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq – coming to Germany one year before. The first trains carrying refugees arrived from Budapest and Vienna in Munich on 4 September 2015 and were met with large public sympathy. Many more would follow, posing major challenges to the Bavarian capital. However, Chancellor Angela Merkel was sure that “We can manage, and where is something in the way, we have to overcome it” (Die Bundesregierung 2015).

In the political and journalistic excitement about refugees, migration and asylum, in Germany since then, one story has gained little attention: the story of Passau, the “German Lampedusa” (Coen and Sußebach 2015). Since the reintroduction of checks on the Austrian border by German police on 13 September 2015, most refugees stopped arriving in Munich after two weeks. Their new entry point was now the charming town at the end of the “Balkan Route”. Arriving in Passau during the winter of 2015 along with the 3,300 new university students were up to 10,000 refugees – women, men and children. Many stayed in the region or returned later. In summer 2016, it was estimated that around 1,500 migrants from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq were living in Passau and its surroundings.

Since then it has been possible to observe in Lower Bavaria what the anthropologist Ulf Hannerz and others observed especially in major Western cities such as New York or London in the early-1990s: the city is a place where all kinds of people meet. However, recent flight and migration movements have caused small and medium-sized German cities – where over half of the population lives – to become important nodes and interfaces. This was true especially for Passau, with its approximately 50,000 inhabitants, its geopolitical and socio-cultural significance as a border town and regional center, as well as its specific habit as a “middletown” (Schmidt-Lauber). Since September 2015, everyday life in the middletown of Passau has been negotiated in a way similar to life in the big cities of the future.

Passau has experienced large refugee and migration movements before: especially after 1945, but also during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, after the construction of the Berlin Wall, at the end of the GDR and with the arrival of Russian Germans in the 1990s. However with the



developments of summer and autumn 2015, the hinterland of the city was enlarged once again. The new mobilities triggered by the conflicts in the Middle East made Passau a space in which the city, because of social, economic and political interdependences, was linked to regions affected by war, and their people and societies. “Just as the past looms into our present, the presence of the far ‘there’ looms into our near ‘here’ (Massey 2006, 31), writes sociologist Doreen Massey, thus exactly describing the situation of Passau.

“If Arabs end up stranded in a Bavarian front yard, the world must be in disarray” (Coen and Sußebach 2015). The new mobilities caused by the violent conflicts in the Middle East have in recent years made the German town of Passau a base for many people from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. This study analyzes the effects of refugee movements and migration in the Lower Bavarian town in terms of the concept of the “arrival city” (Saunders 2011, 7-11). The study is based on findings from participatory observation, conversations with volunteer helpers, students and other residents of Passau, intensive exchange with refugees and a discursive media evaluation. Has urban society experienced any transformations? What kind of changes have occurred both for long-term and new residents, whether to their life worlds, their networks and opinions or to the institutions and structures of the city?

DOI:

10.25364/08.2:2016.1.10

Extended Abstract of:

Christine Egger, ‘Mobile World Passau. Stadt und Migration in Niederbayern’, *Mobile Culture Studies. The Journal 2*, 2016, 115-133. <<http://unipub.uni-graz.at/mcsj>>

Author’s affiliation

Dr. Christine Egger, Universität Passau, Innstraße 41, 94032 Passau
christine.egger@vuni-passau.de