entanglements
experiments in multimodal ethnography

Volume 4, Issue 1

Visualising invisible (migrant) activism

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Keywords: activism, migrants, refugees, affordability, definitions

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Abstract
Migrant activism is usually assumed to happen within migrant organisations. This récit tells the story of how I came to rethink this concept in the course of producing an ethnographic documentary about someone who cannot afford to engage in the work of organisations. It relates how I started to think of activism as 'going out of one's way for the benefit of other people'.

(Un)Affordable activism

Amir is a refugee from Kosovo living on the outskirts of Novi Sad – Serbia's second biggest city[1]. He works 10 to 12 hours a day collecting scrap metal and paper for recycling to earn around 8 euro daily on which he supports his wife and four children. Since he is dividing his time between so much work and family responsibilities, Amir cannot afford activities that we would typically classify as activism, such as joining social movements and public protests or working for charities or NGOs.

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[1] I have changed the name of the protagonist for the sake of his privacy.

Does that mean that a man like Amir cannot be an activist? That you can (easily) be an activist if you are a middle-class academic or a student, but not if you are an impoverished refugee? Have we created an understanding of activism that makes activism unreachable for people less privileged than ourselves?

Amir's work – extracting recyclable materials from unsorted rubbish – is in itself exceptional, something that a professional charity would probably manage to raise funding for. Still, one can argue that this is his work, a way of coping and making his living, and therefore, as Asif Bayat would argue (1997, 70), not activism. It would make no sense to ask Amir directly about activism as the concept is completely alien to him; it is not something he would ever think about. Therefore, in our visual ethnography project, Jan Lorenz and I decided to follow Amir with a camera over the course of his workday and try to see whether he commits at least small 'acts of activism' – something that goes beyond everyday coping and contributes to making the world a better place. The result of that day of filming is our ethnographic documentary 'Active (citizen)' (Goldstein and Lorenz 2019).

Going out of one's way

One thing that one can see in the film, is that Amir, while collecting the recyclable material, would sometimes stop and clean around the rubbish bins. If there were bags of rubbish left on the curbside, he would throw them into the containers in order, as he told me himself, to make his city a little bit cleaner and more beautiful. That was something he did not do to make his living but to contribute, as much as he could, to turning his (new) city into a better place.

Please see HTML version for video excerpt from 'Active (citizen)'
https://vimeo.com/531227811

Because Amir is committing these small acts on his own, without any organisational structure, without a formal manifesto, or anything else that would make his efforts similar to those of activists as we know them, it is hard to perceive his efforts as activism. This reflection prompted me to start thinking about activism as 'going out of one's way in order to do something important not only for oneself but also for society at large'. Looking at activism in such a way would mean that we still appreciate the more visible modes of acting – engagement with social movements, protests, charities, NGOs, informal collectives and other groups and organisations – but also notice and value the efforts of people like Amir and recognise them as activists.

Everyday activism and beyond

The idea of searching for activism in the work of people like Amir stems from my earlier research. While studying Serbia's budget-less informal groups and bookshop-cafés – institutions that are very unprofitable but whose owners and customers engage in all types of socially important actions (Goldstein 2017) – I realised that they often do the same things as NGOs or social movements (working to protect the environment, promoting interethnic dialogue, etc.) but without the same structures. At the same time, I became aware that even informal groups, which seem much more inclusive than formal charities and NGOs, are not available to everyone. For instance, one of the unregistered groups I researched in Novi Sad is Critical Mass, a monthly bicycle ride across the city, which draws up to several thousand participants – a large number in the town of around 300,000 inhabitants. These rides were evidently very inclusive – while cycling among other participants, I could hear different minority languages being spoken, and see young and old, rich and poor, hipsters and people from the other side of the political spectrum. Still, I could sometimes see that despite its inclusivity, the event was not accessible for everyone. In particular, impoverished Roma men who often spend the whole day on their bicycles, and would thus be ideal participants for such actions, could simply not afford this type of activism (see the picture above).

This reflection motivated me to look for what Engin Isin (2008) would call 'acts of citizenship' in places where one would normally not expect to find them and among those excluded from other forms of activism. Re-thinking activism and looking for it outside charities, social movements, and other typical fora may make us more conscious of the contributions made by migrants, refugees and others who are less privileged than ourselves.

An extra pair of eyes

Jan's and my intensive one-day visual ethnography on two cameras was critical for our understanding of Amir's work and our limited capacity to 'see' his 'invisible activism'. The process of filming encompassed far more than could be shown on a video. Some of our experiences were sensorial – sitting among the rubbish in the bike's trailer in the 37-degree heat, the smell of all different bins in the city, and getting accustomed to what we would normally perceive as dirt. Others were emotional – for instance the fear of riding in that vehicle on a high-speed road, especially after we realised that the bike had no brakes.

These experiences gave us a hands-on understanding of the realities of Amir's work. Still, I should be honest and admit that this understanding is very limited – a fear of riding in a vehicle with no brakes (even if it's with a person who knows how to ride it!) is in a way trivial compared to the fear of not finding the amount of cardboard needed to earn enough to feed one's family.

However, there was another benefit of using the video, which only dawned on me later. It allowed me to rewatch the day and see some of those tiny 'acts' that I had not even noticed at the time they were happening. After all, the activism I was searching for was not an event

spelled out in a glossy NGO report or on protest banners. If it was to be noticed at all, it was up to me to see it and tell the world about it.

Following Amir with a camera was in many ways a risky bet on a method that could easily have failed. On our half-day rubbish-picking tour with a camera we had no idea whether anything worth reporting would happen. It was also risky because it was an attempt to 'write theory' (Can one use visual ethnography to 'visualise the invisible'?) with film. Finally, it was (and is) risky because, to an even greater extent than text, video is subject to endless interpretations and readings. Will other viewers see the activism I have seen in the footage, or will the film just be seen as yet another piece about a disempowered and discriminated community?

This is where multimodality proves its worth. More than any of these forms alone, it is the combination of the film footage, photographs from my previous fieldwork, and text that allows me to rethink, in dialogue with different audiences, the activism that otherwise remains invisible.

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