From “refugee” to “migrant” in Calais solidarity activism: Re-staging undocumented migration for a future politics of asylum

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Abstract
The framing of issues of migration and clandestine travel in the European Union are tied up with a historically-specific ethos towards the outsider, which, after philosopher Jacques Rancière, I term a “count”. The count shaping the interventions of contemporary advocacy and humanitarian groups derives from conceptions of ethics rooted in political modernity, and – for Rancière – are also responsible for foreclosing disruptive appearances of equality. In practice, postures of compassion towards the refugee convert expressions of vocal dissent into matters for moral sympathy. In this paper I explore the implications of this claim for a future politics of asylum, focussing on moments of interruption to an underlying count. I suggest that the staging of the situation of undocumented migrants in Calais through the figure of the migrant rather than the refugee demonstrates a recasting of activism as a form of political listening rather than political speech – in this sense the interventions of anarchistic network No Borders reflect a call for a continuous “recount” of the situation, over an affirmation of a particular framing of the situation. In some ways this call remains problematic, sometimes reframing the voices of local people and migrants according to an external vision of politics. Nevertheless, I hold that this denaturalisation of compassionate hospitality as the only ethical response to asylum is useful in the broader terrain of political dissent, and points to the importance of embodied habit as a locus for enduring social transformations.

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Introduction

On September 22nd 2009, a cacophony of bulldozers, helicopters, journalists and riot police arrived at the largest “jungle” in Calais; a squatter camp rigged up with makeshift kitchens and a tented mosque. At the behest of French Minister of Immigration and National Identity Eric Besson, they flattened the camp to the ground, destroying a tented infrastructure which had been home for up to 1500 migrants. At midday, the Sub-Prefect of Police Debousquey announced that 278 Pashtun had been arrested, 132 of whom were under eighteen years old – a fraction of the much larger population of preceding weeks. In his statement at the docklands site, Debousquey claimed that the jungle had been “unacceptable”; it had been a “scandal” in terms of rights, sanitation, and delinquency, “whose first victims were the migrants who camped there themselves” (Guardian, 22 September 2009). Yet despite this protectionist sentiment, across the previous three months Calais authorities had refused permission for showers to be set up by local aid charity Secours Catholique, and had altered legal frameworks to inhibit transnational health organisations Médecins du Monde and Médecins Sans Frontières from dealing with a scabies outbreak. Meanwhile, police had daily picked up migrants as they walked to the afternoon PASS medical clinic, often dropping them 3 km outside Calais after confiscating blankets, mobile phones and shoelaces. How can we understand the rationale of defence and victim at work here? What role are particular conceptions of ethical responsibility towards the “outsider” playing, not only in legitimising, but in producing these specific conflicts over rights?

Between 2001 and 2009, the genesis of squatter camps dubbed “jungles” accompanied tightening restrictions on aid provision and crackdowns on border controls in Europe (Bigo, 2007; Huysmans, 2006). As a major port between “Schengen space” and the UK, Calais formed a focal point for tension by posing the question of freedom of movement against the security threat posed by asylum-seekers (Walters, 2004). But humanitarian activists problematised the situation differently: international advocates fought the growing confusion between economically-motivated “migrants” and legitimate “asylum-seekers.” Their campaigns sought to rehabilitate those counted out of the political community, by appealing to the terms of the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the status of
refugees. Meanwhile, since the closure of the Red Cross shelter Sangatte in 2002 – a warehouse of 25,000 square metres, providing accommodation, showers, and healthcare across eighteen months (Fassin, 2005; Laacher, 2002) – a rising number of Calais humanitarian associations denounced EU nations for shirking the responsibilities of international protection (Ticktin, 2006; Darling, 2009). In Sangatte’s wake, the six main associations in Calais formed the “C-SUR” agreement as a commitment towards recognising the undocumented migrants of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region as legitimate potential refugees. Such a position exposes the notion of protection employed by the Calais authorities as the economic security of European citizens (Bigo, 2007). Recent scholarship has since focused on how non-governmental actors can subvert political-economic constructions of asylum by enacting an ethos of “hospitality”: a reciprocal gesture of welcome which reframes refuge-seeking as a locus of encounter with difference (Critchley, 2007; Darling, 2009; Dikeç, 2002; Perera, 2009).

But both the policy discourses of securitisation and the humanitarian vocabulary of advocacy can be linked with a conception of ethical responsibility which figures the nation as a sanctuary space for its constituent outsiders (Dillon, 2008). The humanitarian associations, like the French authorities, are still grappling with the problem of whom or what represents a risk to the governed, and how this risk is to be managed (Bigo, 2002; Dikeç, 2009). In Europe, a regional harmonisation of security policies has redefined such questions of inside and outside in relation to new transnational regions, like the European Union (Schuster, 2005; Leiter, 1997). Meanwhile, although international protection is still defined according to criteria of persecution and personal risk, it is now interpreted according to differing national asylum systems and supra-national conventions (Dikeç, 2009). For example, the Dublin Convention signed in 1990 determined that would be asylum-seekers could now only be processed in one, first country of entry, or would be liable to forcible return (Huysmans, 2000). This was operationalised in the Dublin II Regulation of 2003, supposedly as an efficient means to determine a responsible Member State for each asylum claim and prevent “bottlenecks” – however in practice this has fostered a situation where 90% of asylum-seekers are forced to enter the EU irregularly (Oxfam, cited in Dikeç, 2009, p. 184). Advocacy in this context works to make the claims of “in-between” classes figure on political stages of national and transnational citizenship. We must reposition the question, however, of whether invocations of “hospitality” in this context can be considered transformative of such embedding orders, or whether they simply reproduce the divisions between forms of citizen-belonging and its outside.

In this paper I target the ethical framings which invest such governmental orders with legitimacy by focussing on moments of political disagreement over who or what is counted. This language of the “count” is drawn from Jacques Rancière’s philosophy of political dissensus, with which I engage strongly in this paper. Political moments are defined as those in which an “uncounted part” succeeds in disturbing a specific ordering of the social, declaring that its interests are not represented. I contend that Rancière’s definitions enable us to extend existing work on the relation between security and ethics, helping us grasp how the undocumented migrant – as manifestation of the ever-present gap between a social community (socius) and political community (polis) – exerts a disrupting force to specific conceptions of ethical responsibility. At sites like Calais, an ethos of solidarity (as opposed to hospitality) is shown to open new avenues for collaboration and engagement, by attending to such moments of disruption, rather than reinforcing specific representations of the outsider. On the day the jungles were destroyed, for example, activists identifying with the “No Borders” position unfurled a banner proclaiming “Human Rights have No Borders” alongside others made by the camps’ inhabitants. Since this time a coalition of activists – including anarchists, local inhabitants and undocumented migrants – have worked to trouble the easy separation between the motivations of “forced” and “economic” migrants, emphasising that all humans actively move and remain in order to survive.

The argument unfolds in three parts. In the first section I provide the context for this argument, reviewing recent work on the place of ethical responsibility in the EU security regime and efforts to think dissent within this context. I highlight the lens of hospitality for opening new sites of contestation and in and around the government of asylum, before offering Rancière’s vocabulary of the count as a means to attend to the reworking of a specific ethics towards asylum-seekers. In the second section I bring this vocabulary to bear on a network of relations I followed closely in ethnographic research between September 2009 and March 2010. This included a round of interviews and six months of participant observation with the No Borders network, and a second round of interviews with local associations and migrants conducted during extended visits to Calais. Through this material I show how emergent critiques of humanitarianism are displacing calls for hospitality to refugee victims with a demand for solidarity across borders. In the third section I raise issues with No Borders’ articulation of an external vision of politics in articulating this demand, whilst insisting that solidaristic habits of action yield a more lively politics than the tropes of compassionate hospitality associated with humanitarianism. I conclude by reflecting on the importance of theme of habit itself in theorising a future politics of asylum. Like Perera (2009) I signal the body, and bodily habit, as critical sites of engagement for a radical transformative politics — not because corporeal sense transcends the discourses and practices of an asylum politics, but because an ethos for political change can only take part in responding to its own exclusions if a relationship with difference is embedded in which that is returned to (Ravaissin, 2008; Valverde, 1998).

Ethics and government: security in the European Union

Humanitarianism and governmentality

At the European Council in Tampere in October 1999, heads of EU states and members of the European parliament assembled to implement a common asylum and migration policy. Articulated as a concerted effort against “border crimes,” this harmonisation of the asylum process included a synthesis of asylum-seekers and migrants’ bio-data (the EURODAC database), as well as new freedoms for pre-emptive intelligence agencies such as Frontex (Schuster, 2005). Since modified, the guidelines laid out in this Council were formally ratified in December 2009 in the Stockholm programme for 2010–2014. Such transformations highlight border controls as new points of concentration within wider changes to state-making and citizenship, which disconnect identity and sovereignty from nation-states, yet do not constitute a borderless world (Paasi, 1999; Rumford, 2008; Sparke, 2006). The configuration of the asylum-seeker as a risky outsider to a threatened inside is linked with growing pressures through the 1990s to safeguard national economies and cultures – especially as rising numbers fled recent crises in Somalia and Eastern Europe (Huysmans, 2006). But for many these agreements also reflect a “securitisation” of asylum politics (Huysmans, 2000; Bigo, 2002). In Bigo’s (2007) account, Stockholm’s framing terms of “freedom and justice” legitimise growing investments in technologies which protect EU citizens to the exclusion of non-citizens.

As “Fortress Europe” evolved (see Leiter, 1997), a number of scholars have critically engaged the positive ideas of life, rights and
responsibility which have driven these shifts (Walters, 2004, 2006; Huysmans, 2006; Amoore & de Goede, 2008). The critical point in these literatures, which draw heavily on Michel Foucault’s notion of productive power, is that contingent and normative aspects of social practice constantly remake the conceptual apparatus of government itself (Foucault, 2007; Gordon, 1991). Government, here, is not limited to national political assemblies, but extends to logics of what it means for society to be “ethical”, and rationales for conceiving of the self in relation to the broader population (e.g. as entrepreneurial, or self-disciplined subjects). Such logics and rationales are not understood as despotic inventions either, but as the (usually unanticipated) effects of particular “technologies” – in the sense both of instruments used for behaviour management, and as part of new forms of scientific knowledge. For example, in his 1977–1978 Security, Territory, Population lectures, Foucault (2007, p. 108) links the assemblage of security mechanisms and political-economic concepts particular to modern western government with ideas about pastoral care, salvation and measurement dating to the eighteenth century. Critical to such claims is also an understanding of the way that different forms of power distinctively situate the subject (see Collier, 2009). In subsequent lectures on biopolitics, the term “biopower” is used to refer to the specific form constituted through governmental reasoning (contrasting this with other (never fully displaced) historical types, chiefly “sovereignty” and “discipline” (Foucault, 2008). The emergence of biopower and its political rationality (biopolitics) coincides with the birth of statistics as a measure of governmental effects against species life (bios) (Gordon, 1991), and defines population health as a new field of significance for ethics, displacing eschatology. This genealogical presentation disrupts any “timeless” conceptions of security, and emphasises how particular forms of government are shaped in relation to specific concepts of life and how it is to be protected.

In examining EU security restructuring across the last twenty years, governmentality scholars have used these ideas to make explicit the assumptions and associations which make border practices thinkable. Particularly since the events of 11th September 2001 and subsequent “wars on terror” (Sparks, 2006), such studies have focused on the truths being produced about population welfare, and the progressive redefinition of “natural” responses to threat (Dillon, 2004, p. 88). New biometric and airport security practices have been mapped against historical ideas about life management, with emphasis on how these contingent assemblages might be assembled differently (Adye, 2009; Amoore, 2006; Amoore & Hall, 2009). This literature has important implications for conceiving ethical responsibility towards those beyond a governed population (Amoore & de Goede, 2008; Bigo, 2002, 2007; Huysmans, 2006). Ideas of “justice” are also to be considered situated, and therefore productive of new kinds of relations between the ethical subject (“I”), self, and others. Defending victims of forced movement never simply counteracts exclusion, but constantly elaborates on who or what is beyond the governed population, and how one should relate to them. For example, Nandita Sharma (2005) explains that anti-trafficking campaigns aiming to protect vulnerable women have fostered a criminalisation of all clandestine networks as a result of their appeals for collective moral resistance to trafficking. Ultimately Sharma claims that the framing of male, mobile agents as predators on passive victims reinforces calls for the tightening of state border controls, which affects all those trying to move (including asylum-seekers) and forces women to downplay their own agency to claim sanctuary.

The increasing activity of humanitarian associations at sites such as Calais has been especially criticized. Ticktin (2006), for example, considers humanitarianism an instrument of biopolitical subjection, which demands that biological integrity be compromised to assure state assistance (see also Fassin, 2005). Ticktin cites how pressure from advocacy groups led to the introduction of the “humanitarian clause” in French law, where persons refused political asylum could be granted limited rights for physical vulnerability. She links this legislation with a spate of medical cases where those at risk of deportation infected themselves with the AIDS virus, or refused treatments, to gain status. Tyler (2006) and Darling (2009) add nuance to such conjectures, analysing humanitarianism in relation to the moral economies which its campaigns foster, rather than considering it a ‘top-down’ logic of state repression. Darling (Darling, 2009, p. 649), for example, emphasises the asylum-seeker’s ‘paradigmatic status as the outsider par excellence’ as part of a depoliticisation of irregular movement, but warns against overlooking the microforms of resistance, within and across states, which are not fully reducible to expressions of sovereignty.

But still, the problem with this approach more generally – as Darling’s work begins to intimate – is that it does not allow us to differentiate political expressions of dissent from shifting forms of ethical subjectification. In my account, political dissent begins with a felt objection to a given calculative logic, whereas here, humanitaritanism is seen to adapt security practices to a regime of visibility commensurable with a political-economic logic (e.g. Spake, 2006). The question here is really one of what drives political dissent, since this aspect may also be understood productive in its embodied sense, and as such, a basis for transformation to a collective ethos which is not primarily calculative or rational.

Hospitality and the refugee

For contexts like Calais, social scientists have found it useful to think through conceptions of “hospitality” to explain the extra- and para-state involvements of non-governmental associations. Drawing upon theory developed by Derrida and Agamben, this has meant considering how specific forms of government can be reconfigured through reciprocal exchanges whose logic transcends territorial divisions – for example, between citizen-givers and refugee-recipients. An important example of this move is offered by Darling (2010), who invokes Derridean ideas of gift-giving to advocate a “relational” account of asylum politics (see also Dikeç, 2002). Like others critiquing an over-emphasis on social justice as a question of scale (e.g. Massey, 2006), Darling conceives of an ethical responsibility not limited to a “territorial” rationality, but responsive to all actants constituting a place, including distant and proximate strangers. Hospitality, here, is a contested and perpetually renegotiated ethical stance, from which political speech acts and notions of justice can emerge. His case study is Sheffield’s uptake of the “Cities of Sanctuary” initiative from the U.S, before it was modelled more widely across the UK. For Darling, the persistent framing of the campaign through an understanding of hospitality as giving and receiving allows for the deconstruction, and rearticulation of, particular definitions of spatial belonging.

The recent work of philosopher Simon Critchley (2007) on transnational anarchism develops a similar point. Radically reworking Levinas’ concept of responsibility towards otherness, Critchley invokes a “performative” demand, placed not by the face of the other, but by a collective universal subject. This stands in for an infinite demand for justice – a “singular universal,” seen to transform existing political systems and partitions by addressing their underpinning political boundaries. He explains that the logic of the non-violent anarchism he studies is independent from governmental rationales, precisely because it responds first to the demand of those refused the right to appear. This is an ethical which attends to visceral affectedness before calculations of risk, and which reflects on such experience in order to transfigure specific conditions of belonging.

However, although such approaches importantly introduce singular, embodied experience as a resource from which to address
material bordering practices, I argue that insufficient attention is given to the historical forms of framing which reflect ethical subjectivity. The hospitality approach can portray an over-purified sense of what pulls people into action, implying that actions responding to singular sense will always be “transformative” in some expansive way. But critically, the government of asylum *already depends* upon the framing of the citizen and victim in ethical terms. In interview, for example, whilst admitting that both pro-life and pro-choice abortion campaigners have “an overwhelming sense of demand” (James, 2009, p. 16), Critchley maintains that the infinite ethical demand at its most abstract level would be “neutral”. The role of notions of hospitality, sanctuary and welcome in embedding particular calculative logics and ideas about citizenship is therefore overlooked. Such emphasis on difference as a unifying factor risks cultivating an “aspecific enterprise,” which privileges hybridity and flux over situating struggles (Hallward, 2001). Sinnerbrink’s (2009, p. 165) analysis of Critchley echoes this point, emphasising the insufficiency of his “singularised” ethics to construct a political sequence adequate to the forms of capitalism and neo-conservatism which contextualise it.

Dillon’s (1999, 2008) genealogical work, which specifies the posture of hospitality within longer trajectories of western politics, offers one route towards incorporating these insights. Critically, Dillon (2008) situates the ethical ideas embodied within contemporary international relations practices against the foundation of modern politics and modern forms of authority (see also Perera, 2009). He claims that the hospitality ethos acquired significance within political reason as the *polis* disentangled itself from forms of authority associated with divine revelation, and founded new, self-referential forms in the rights manifestos which inaugurated the modern state. Where once hospitality was part of a religious ethos associated with the coming of a transcendent kingdom-on-earth, now it became refuged within an immanent form of messianism: the verification of a the coming justice laid out in state law. Shot through with a haunting transcendence, the arriving stranger embodies the promise of the just future, whilst acts of welcome confirm the authority of the law to guarantee its coming. The remaining question is then whether (and how) it is possible to enact an ethical response towards those outside the political community which addresses the exclusionary basis of ethical subjectivity. For example, how can activists protest against the racial and economic biases of contemporary border controls, without appealing to their own condition of citizenship as a basis for political speech?

As I have suggested, the notion of the singular interruption enables a focus on the transformation to historical forms of normative ethical practice, and it is important to take this forward. The experience of a demand placed by those counted outside the political community raises an ethos like hospitality itself to question, and engages underlying principles of government in their geographical and historical specificity. This is what was missing from the security approach to the asylum question: an attention to what drives activism, and how and when embodied experience opens new possibilities for collective self-articulation. Critically, this emphasis examines activism in terms of political *listening* as opposed to political speech — the capacity to be changed by the demand of the singular, rather than a capacity to convert sympathies to a particular end. In the final part of this section we turn to Rancière’s philosophy to theorise this possibility through the “count”.

*Rancière’s “Count”*

The singular demand as I am employing it here is therefore an embodied response which provokes an interruption on the level of social intelligibility. For contexts like Calais we might say that it is a demand constituted by the declaration of a gap between those present within the *socius*, and those with a voice to articulate in a corresponding *polis*. For example, Beltrán (2009) uses such terminology to show how American immigrant rights movements succeeded in disrupting and individualising ethical sensibilities in a specific historical moment. Advocates had previously highlighted immigrants’ “strong work ethic, deep religious faith and commitment to family” as evidence that non-citizens would strengthen the United States rather than “subvert its identity and institutions” (Beltrán, 2009, p. 596). However, in a sequence of demonstrations, “often leaving organisers scrambling to keep up” (Beltrán, 2009, p. 601), collectives ultimately refused this portrayal of themselves. Laying claim to the public realm they disturbed consensus over their emplacement as recipients of care and inaugurated their place as political speakers, alongside “counted” citizens.

The appearance of a new political subject (not an “individual”, but a previously imperceptible collective) figures here as the manifestation of the singular universal Critchley wrote of; the presentation of a universal gap in a historically-specific form. When such a singular universal succeeds in asserting itself as a category to be taken account of, we may say that the declaration of a “wrong” is taking place. The previous count of the socius is being proved faulty, as the uncouned authorise themselves as political speakers. It is the appearance of this subject that demands that the structure of ethical subjectivity itself be affected by ethical experience. It is an act which requires reconfiguration on the level of listening, or political attention, as well as a work on the categories of existing visibility by those who speak. Although this is not equivalent to his own account of “ethics” (which follows instead the configuration of universal human rights as a displacement of politics) — in positing this I am following political philosopher Jacques Rancière (1999, p. 39), who claims that:

> politics exists by reason of a single universal that takes the specific shape of wrong. Wrong institutes a singular universal, a polemical universal, by tying the presentation of equality, as the part of those who have no part, to the conflict between parts of society.

For Rancière the presentation of this wrong constitutes a moment of “politics” (*la politique*), in that it reintroduces a basic universal equality to the frameworks of visibility which underlie government (Rancière, 1999, p. 11) — which he terms a “police order” (Rancière, 1999, p. 29). This results in a redistribution of objects known as “dissensus” — a term we can use for the moment described in the introduction, where the appearance of new coalitions of actors disputed the visibilities underlying the humanitarian interpretation of the Calais situation. Rancière’s commentator Bosteels (2009 p. 178) offers a formulation for this state of affairs in terms of the singular demand:

> The reign of the “humanitarian” begins [...] wherever human rights are cut off from any capacity for polemical particularization of their universality, where the egalitarian phrase ceases to be phrased.

Bosteels communicates a politics whose basis is the refusal of an overarching ordering of the social, and whose expression is a singular form which can only be viscerally experienced. In this account, politics requires a transfiguration to the self-relation (e.g. ethical responsibility) as a result of such experience — yet this transfiguration is not inevitable and may be displaced by a reframing of embodied sensibilities.

This polemical position on appearance is not, however, without criticism, and is problematic for any consideration of enduring habits of action (May, 2010). In his work on the theatrical aspects of Rancièren political theory for example, Hallward (2006), wonders
whether this “spectacular” politics can introduce anything other than intermittent interruptions to historical forms of government. Bayly (2009) also troubles the way effects are to be considered political only to the extent that they disturb destinations of perception. Is any individualisation of sense experience to be considered political, here? Is this not how advertising functions? In like manner, although Bosteels (2009) admits that Rancière engages with selected historical forms of social intelligibility (notably, the emergence of different regimes of artistic perception), he critiques the way politics itself is presented as a transhistorical concept, presumed to work on any given order. Leven’s (2009) reading of Rancière adds to this point, highlighting how his seemingly “anti-ontological” position in the end limits the capacity to think political alternatives: no medium is offered for the expression of political claims other than the singularising tendencies of the contemporary “aesthetic regime.”

For my part, I argue—with Rancière—that the singular “demand” can be considered universal—in the sense that what fails to counted perpetually addresses the very basis of ethical subjectivity. However, since the gap between socius and polis is always mediated in terms which are specific to a situation, I do not follow the supposition that a necessarily “pure” politics—must follow this ethical moment, as some of Rancière’s critics imply. Instead I interpret Rancière to claim that any declaration of a “wrong” renders its situation intelligible according to a historically-specific framing of experience. This framing is what I will term the “count” of a situation. The count is a hinge between a universal ethical demand and the construction of a specific ethical response, which frames the political stage on which subjects appear and make claims on the social. Theorising this site between singular and specific allows us to grasp the implications of different collective transitions between ethical disturbance and political action, and to consider the importance of ongoing habits for forging new specific relationships with embodied experience.

**No Borders and the humanitarian count**

**No Borders and the camp**

“No Borders” is an anarchist position on borders, and a network of individuals calling for an end to all border controls. By beginning my analysis of the Calais situation from this point of view, I do not mean to suggest that it marks an “ideal” response to the securitisation of asylum in the EU, nor that it mirrors the demands and desires being articulated by the Calais undocumented migrants. What this section aims to demonstrate is that No Borders’ critique of existing humanitarian interventions helped establish new coalitions of migrants, activists and local people in Calais, leading to a call for a “recount” of the situation, apart from the framing terms of victim and defence. However I insist that this call emerges not directly from No Borders’ pre-existing vision of politics (their own ‘count’), but from interactions taking place in the context. These are given new prominence within the solidaristic ethos, which figure singular sense experience as a resource for deconstructing cultural “borders”. In the case considered, critiques internal to Calais humanitarian associations and migrant perspectives found resonance with aspects of No Borders’ account of the situation, leading to the articulation of fresh collective rights claims through the figure of the migrant rather than the refugee.

Affiliating with a broad range of anarchist collectives, including other migration-oriented networks (such as No One Is Illegal, originating in Canada), the No Borders network currently exists as twelve regionally autonomous groups in the UK, and a further fifteen across Western Europe and Scandinavia. The foundational argument for a No Borders position is that everyone is a migrant: all humans may move continuously under capitalism, but as a species we also evolved by moving according to resource scarcity (No Borders, 2009). This position emerged as a geographically- and historically-specific response to the “draconian” new moves in the EU towards securitisation (especially the Tampere Summit in 1999), and is linked by activists with a lineage of anti-racist movements in 1980s France and Germany (see also Gordon, 2007). Thus a critique of border controls in Europe emerges from their definition first, as a capitalist and statist construct which functions to conserve privilege, and second, as an institutionalised form of racism, acting as a filter for “undesirable” migrants.

The network’s main activities are regular local meetings—held according to consensus decision-making principles—and pickets or demonstrations, which respond to shifts in policy-making and events reported in local media. Priorities for the network are also shaped at annual national gatherings—weekends of debates and workshops—as well as at international “camps”; larger scale gatherings involving demonstrations at significant migration-related locations such as Lesvos (Greece) and Gatwick (UK). Calais became an iconic focus for No Borders immediately prior to the destruction of the jungles, and an international “camp” was organised there in June 2008. However this camp was planned long before the jungles were threatened, having been proposed as a “spearhead campaign” in December 2008. But it was first-hand experiences in the run-up to, and duration of, the June camp which led to a decision to establish a continuous presence in Calais. Having organised a series of participatory workshops across a variety of border-related themes, activists found that migrants took responsibility themselves for directing discussions to an extent that had not been experienced in previous camps. These discussions gave fresh nuance to No Borders’ existing critiques of humanitarianism and led to a series of actions which placed migrants’ desires and passages at the heart of future campaigns.

It is important, here, to note the ambiguity of No Borders’ use of this term “camp”, which draws comparisons between the Calais jungles and other historical camps, whilst also partially reclaiming it from its abject associations. The idea of the camp as a spatial site of sovereign exclusion has been highlighted through two decades of work strongly influenced by Giorgio Agamben’s (1995, 1997, 1998) accounts of emerging configurations of state power in Europe, which evoke the historical practices of the Nazi concentration camps first built to contain refugees, and later adapted for the Jews (see Bauman, 1989). They also reference the 20th century Spanish campos de concentraciones in Cuba and the British camps for Afrikaner in Boer War which preceded such forms (Perera, 2002). Through this lens, a proliferation of camp-like spaces are understood as ‘spaces of exception’—places apart from the law, whose exclusion from the polis serves to legitimise sovereignty as a power to ‘ban’ from belonging. Agamben’s camp is therefore not limited to historical examples but also refers to an optic “that materializes in such arrangements as the zones d’attente of French international airports or ‘guest houses’ for asylum-seekers” (Rygiel, 2011, p. 3). A groundswell of academic work interrogating the spatial transformations to Europe through the 1980s and 1990s have since used this optic to describe the constitution of new sites and subjects of constitutive abjection through the new categories of refuge, asylum-seeking and undocumented migration (Diken, 2004; Edkins, 2000; Ek, 2006). In recent years, such approaches have been criticised firstly, for the inadequacy of the “camp” to account for the very different, often banal, spatialities of irregular migration (Isin & Rygiel, 2007); and secondly, for their overly passive—even apocalyptic—readings of asylum and camp spaces (De Genova, 2011; Walters, 2008). Nevertheless, such attention to the transforming spatialities and subjects of power has opened productive
avenues for politics — especially by recasting the camp as a site of contested meanings.

The notion of the camp, and specifically of Calais, of a site of political struggle is drawn out in Kim Rygiel’s (2011) recent work on the port town. Rygiel distinguishes three different visions of the camp from her empirical work in Calais: first, a territorial notion expressed in state efforts to eradicate the jungles; second, the idea of the camp as a makeshift community, mobilised by migrants and some humanitarian associations; and third, the solidaristic topos asserted by activists — a site of exchange and political resistance. Rygiel’s analysis points to what is at stake at such sites, which can be thought of as spaces of indeterminacy rather than of abjection. It becomes clear that they can also be used by migrants and those alongside them as resources for political dissent, or within a politics of ‘surplus names’ (Isin & Rygiel, 2007), which sets out a dispute about who or what is included in a given conception of political belonging (see also Walters, 2008 on the Sangatte Red Cross centre). Importantly, Rygiel’s analysis points out some of the limitations to No Borders’ external vision of politics — for example, their attraction of increased policing to Calais, and the sometimes confusing hopes they inspire among migrants about the imminent removal of border controls. However, this account is also important for my claims about political listening, emphasising how certain acts and forms of attention can introduce instability around boundaries between insider and outsider, activist and migrant. It also asserts the existence of sites where what counts as political speech is itself under renegotiation.

The notion of an external vision of politics may be associated what I have called a count. I have suggested that the count combines a felt demand with a particular framing of a situation, such that a particular response (e.g. the offering of “sanctuary” to a refugee) is perceived as both natural and emancipatory. Rancière’s insight is that this felt demand is driven by the experience of a singular universal — the perception of a “wrong” — rather than being primarily configured by historically-specific technologies. Consequently, wherever the forms of sensible conditioning which frame this part become suspended, a recount may be articulated from the part of the uncounted. Critical to this recount would be the constitution of new coalitions, blurring pre-existing divides (e.g. migrant/activist), and the production of a critique of the situating order which prevented that part from being heard as such (May, 2010). My particular interest in the Calais as a camp is therefore precisely in the points of disagreement between different visions of the space, and in the habits of attention which allowed general conditions of speech and listening to be enduringly altered.

An ethos of solidarity

To understand how No Borders activists suspended their own count and became part of a collectively articulated interruption, we need first to reflect on the No Borders position prior to the Calais camp. A statement of the situation articulated on the web interface Calais Migrant Solidarity the day before the jungles were destroyed articulates the No Borders position through a reading of the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees, defending the right of all migrants to safety:

We reject the normalisation and abusive misuse of the words “clandestine” and “illegal”, and support the spirit of Article 14 of the 1951 Geneva Convention which stipulates the right of each individual to claim asylum anywhere they choose (Calais Migrant Solidarity, 21 September 2009)

What follows illustrates how this reconfiguration of forced migration legislation is based in an assertion of fundamental sameness between all who move (or remain), as opposed a more narrow identification with victims:

However, we go further than this narrow conception of asylum, which excludes people fleeing non-state violence, rape and also ignores those forced to leave through the violence of a poverty imposed on them by the trade rules fixed in Washington and Geneva. (May, 2010)

An article written shortly after the flattening of the jungles then contrasts this universal equality with a global system of borders and boundaries, artificially productive of social hierarchies:

There are many borders in Calais, physical, political, ideological, linguistic and social. From the armoured jeeps patrolling the Eurotunnel, to the NGOs and reformist agencies that legitimise and implicate these areas of repression and discrimination, these borders are everywhere. (Collective email, October 2009).

Here borders are not just perceived as territorial lines, but also the boundaries of protected identities and privileges — what a 30 year-old male No Borders activist, based in a UK regional group, termed “metaphorical-literal borders”, functioning “internally and in the way people think.” Another male interviewee reflected on his personal motivations for activism and his work in alcohol and drug rehabilitation by affirming that “everyone has borders — I mean, you know I have borders with people all the time, but it’s some-thing I try and […] challenge within myself.” Such statements evidence the No Borders count as an internal cultural politics of borders and bordering; an interpretation of the singular demand as a call for intensified attention towards micro-acts of othering as part of a broader deconstruction of border controls. This count — this framing of the singular demand in historically-specific terms — contrasts sharply with the pre-existing humanitarian approach to the situation. The humanitarian count emphasises narratives of oppressions, and works to counter them through gestures of compassionate welcome (see Tyler, 2006).

Whilst both counts have fostered new partnerships with migrants, the ethos of solidarity practised by No Borders has more effectively fostered the staging of political dissensus into the situation of Calais. Specifically, the language of borders in the No Borders count rendered intelligible the concept of a “wrong” — rather than being primarily configured by historically-specific technologies. Consequently, wherever the forms of sensible conditioning which frame this part become suspended, a recount may be articulated from the part of the uncounted. Critical to this recount would be the constitution of new coalitions, blurring pre-existing divides (e.g. migrant/activist), and the production of a critique of the situating order which prevented that part from being heard as such (May, 2010). My particular interest in the Calais as a camp is therefore precisely in the points of disagreement between different visions of the space, and in the habits of attention which allowed general conditions of speech and listening to be enduringly altered.

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also emphasised that he felt most oppressed from being regarded as a criminal until he could prove his own innocence. This resulted from the intense policing he experienced, but also from the suspicious responses of humanitarian volunteers towards him, as a male migrant making active choices. Meanwhile, Pashtun migrants I spoke within Calais in February 2010 told me that many of those handing out food in the one remaining sanctioned compound maintained a certain “wall” between themselves as givers and the migrants as receivers.

This is not to imply that many working within the charitable organisations did not experience sensibilities of solidarity or develop critiques of humanitarian modes of providing aid — quite the opposite. As I prepared an evening meal with ten members of the Salam association and later interviewed its director, I was left with a clear impression of individuals’ efforts to negotiate a complex network of relationships, whilst maintaining a constant response to urgent needs. The inter-associative report La Loi des jungles (CFDA, 2008) offers one example of the attempt to work this complexity into an engagement with EU law making demands and asserting an alternative grounds for “exilés”, a category including both migrants and refugees, and evidences an enduring commitment to the Calais migrants which pre-dates No Borders’ arrival. It is also important to note, with reference to recent work on the constraints and demands of volunteering (e.g. Carey, Brock-Mayer; & Barraket, 2009; Milligan, 2007), that this “wall” may in part be associated with the practical commitments entailed by humanitarian aid, especially in professionalising cultures of care. It may also have related to the practical necessity of maintaining personal distance in an emotionally-charged context, rather than the mentality which No Borders associate with state capitalism.

However the key point here is that habits of reflexivity and attention associated with the solidaristic ethos of equality also allowed for migrants’ voices to reframe the provision of aid in broader political terms. No Borders enacted a principle of mutual exchange which rendered practical assistance (e.g. in breaking new squats, or cooking large meals) inseparable from an exchange which rendered practical assistance (e.g. in breaking new squats, or cooking large meals) inseparable from receiving it (e.g. being cooked meals, sharing in Kurdish New Year celebrations). This platform of exchange helped highlight differences between individual migrants’ claims, whilst also developing collaborative articulations of civil and social rights which exceeded No Borders’ initial count of the situation. The crucial result in the ensuing “recount” was that the important political figure became not the radical outsider (the refugee) moving between spaces of indeterminacy (e.g. the camp), but the one which asserts a radical equality between all who move within or across social spaces (the migrant). Without belittling the experiences of persecution, torture, and loss many had experienced, this claim drew these struggles onto an equal plane, highlighting each migrant as an active decision-maker, and none as pure victims.

This assertion finds echoes in other accounts — for example, in Agamben’s (1995) claim “we are all refugees” and in Nyers’ (2003) examination of the claim “No One Is Illegal” — but was mobilised here uniquely in relation to the crossing of the Calais border. From a No Borders position, undocumented migrants are to be regarded the true political activists in Calais, since in the act of crossing the border they assert a claim to a polis which includes all migrants — over the socius where only certain parts are counted. In fact, in a reversal of humanitarian and policy vocabulary, the economic migrant (who pursues a viable livelihood) is considered the most political of movers, for actively seizing what has been refused. Meanwhile, undocumented migrants drew upon the No Borders position as a resource to protest against their criminal treatment and assert their status as global citizens alongside all other ‘migrants’, with rights to free movement and speech. A number chose to answer “No Borders” when they were “controlled” on the streets — an action which could have legal consequences, but which refused the invasive mining of personal details associated with the allotted part of victim.

Making political testimony: habits of interruption

One key way in which the effects of this recount can be observed is in the shift in the production of “testimony” which has taken place since September 2009 within activist networks. Research in the social sciences has made the issue of testimony problematic, demonstrating how humanitarian testimony manufactures sympathy on a moral basis (Fassin, 2005; Malkki, 1996), and generates “forms of recognition” of the victim (e.g. personal narratives) which work against the identification of hate figures (Tyler, 2006, p.194). Within a solidaristic ethos, however, testimony is rethought as a response to singular experience, as opposed to a vehicle for provoking identification with a represented victim. In the collective recount at Calais this practice was incorporated into strategies which highlighted the framing of the scene in the media and public understandings, rather than appealing to the benevolence of citizens — a shift from a politics of sanctuary to one of spectacle.

The style of testimony enacted by No Borders proceeds from a reflection on “privilege,” rather than the plight of the victim. In practice this forges links with immediate embodied experience, since it requires activists to attend to their own journeys as “migrants”, and the ways they are afforded differing speeds of travel. By twelve of eighteen No Borders interviewees, privilege was perceived as a visceral burden, felt profoundly when waving a passport to cross a border, or being let go by police. Amy, for example, who left her home in the UK to live in Calais for six months, describes how an encounter with police left such a “quashing awareness” of her privilege. Riot police she’d been following burst her tyres, checked her passport — but then let her go. Meanwhile the migrants at the scene were taken to the Coquelles detention centre. Amy explained how the official decision to make Calais a “migrant-free zone” had led to the intensified policing of ethnically African or Arabic men, who could expect to be “controlled” several times a day, whilst white or female foreigners could freely walk through a group arrest. Privilege is, in the No Borders count, a form of visibility resulting from of capitalist technologies for sorting bodies and preserving wealth.

However this difference in privilege remained problematic for No Borders’ intentions, which were to blur distinctions between migrants with and without papers. From an outsider’s perspective, the insistence on a platform of equality did not hide clear cultural differences in strategies of organising and political vision. The reflection of a twenty-five year-old No Borders activist with a history of involvement with the Climate Camps illustrates an important factor in this divide:

We’re just sort of zero distinction between migrants and ourselves; the only distinction is that we have papers and we happen to be born in this country […] so we recognise the distinction of privilege there but other than that there is no distinction.

Unlike the framing of an ethical demand which creates a strong distinction between the citizen-actor and victim-recipient, this articulation flattens the relationship completely. To insist on no difference (other than papers and privilege) between undocumented migrants and other activists suggests an essential sameness as a driving quality, whereas the arguments around singularity developed in the introduction were precisely against this. One consequence of such a politics is therefore that attention to national and group histories may be deprioritised, as a result of the refusal of “us” and “them” distinctions. Yet over time what I have called
a culture of “political listening” in the solidaristic ethos led to new strategies for attending to such individualising differences within a broader commitment to equality.

No Borders’ testimony strives to expose the “mismatches” which allow the discriminatory functions of border controls to pass unnoticed. I call this emphasis on “framing” a politics of spectacle, to contrast it with the humanitarian politics of providing sanctuary for those afflicted (see Darling, 2010). The spectacle is effectively an intervention into collective forms of ethos — it throws into question a particular partitioning of the social, or boundaries between those who are allotted ethical responsibility, and those expected to gratefully receive it. In practice, this stance could not but affect No Borders’ own conception of their activism. Through dialogue with migrants activists confronted gaps between their own assumptions about politics — for example, that migrants understood themselves as political activists, and would rather claim a borderless citizenship than a particular nationality. I consider the collaborative forms of politics resulting from these encounters a recount — or a call for a continuous recount, since they attend reiteratively to the partiality of particular counts. This distinguishes the solidarity ethos as a set of habits of attention, and of action based on attention, which precede the attachment to a particular count. It is an ethic of ethical listening, which allots political listening to new priority over political speech.

Across the months I observed No Borders’ activity the practice of this tactic visibly altered the kind of testimony produced by the network. For example, activists experimented with using their bodies to interrupt the perception of a scene — making noise to make sure that the habitual arrest of migrants could not occur unnoticed; or standing by passively, constituting an audience to whom police must also be accountable. One instance was described by Nicole, an activist involved in producing alternative media about Calais: a raid on migrants was taking place outside an internet shop, just as a tourist “mini-train” stopped outside a nearby church. Whilst the riot police were “beating up” migrants, tourists continued taking pictures, apparently oblivious to the scene. Articulating her disbelief, Nicole reported that when she shouted people noticed, and began to protest themselves. She noted a growing conviction that the key element of solidarity activism is becoming “receptive”, and fostering a broader culture of receptivity. Rather than setting the political agenda, this ethos demands that individuals be moved by their experience, and allow this affecedness to address the norms inflicting shared ordinary reactions. Some described this tactic simply as “witnessing,” even suggesting that embodiments of witnessing might replace the humanitarian emphasis on testimony. A male interviewee, involved in planning initial visits to Calais used this term for the practice of following riot police to document, and where necessary intervene in, their interactions with the migrants. On one memorable occasion he states how:

Then some of us, with papers and light-coloured skin, were able to shout.

This act of declaring one’s presence at the scene — “hey!” — is political according to Rancière, not in the sense of the content of the shout, for this would emphasise the No Borders activist as a political speaker. Rather it is political in that it addresses the framing of the scene, engaging the way that migrants’ speech is perceived only as noise by the police and wider public.

The critical political point here is not, therefore, that the actions of No Borders’ activists “politicise” the actions and claims of migrants, but that such tactics address the conditions of speech and listening which constitute lines of separation between migrants, citizens and activists. This evidences forms of activism which not only challenge security practices for what they exclude, but which continually reconsider what is inside — a collective ethos, or ethic of responsibility. It can be enacted by anyone — a No Borders activist; a migrant; a French citizen — but it speaks back above all to one’s own partisanship in relation to such categories. Further, such definition casts the solidarity ethos as an ethos of audicing rather than of performing; a politics which calls the count of the situation itself into question, rather than re-presenting what has been counted out.

**Conclusion: making a habit of it**

In this paper I have developed a vocabulary of “counting” and employed it to document a shift from the figure of refugee migrant in the politisation of asylum at Calais. With this analysis I have attempted to complicate the way we think about ethics and government. In my argument conceptions of ethical responsibility towards the outsider perpetually shape politics (as in the Foucauldian account), but also remain mutable in relation to lived experience. At the level of embodied sensibility a singular demand addresses the limits of the count, and opens the possibility for a collective recount. I have portrayed humanitarianism as a form of counting which tends to recuperate this demand according to a specific framing of the outsider. On the other hand, I have associated the solidaristic ethos with the perpetual demand for a “recount”, since incorporated into its habitual action are moments of reflection on personal experience, and an emphasis on political listening over political speech. But what are we to do with the findings of this interrogation? Must we all become anarchists or remain in the grey space of humanitarianism?

Firstly, let me affirm that I do not consider that only two counts of the Calais context exist, any more that solidarity activism is the only route forwards. My ethnographic work has evidenced diverse examples of exchange and internal adaptation as I hope to have partially illustrated. But the next step from this analysis is to make the observation that the different ways of counting, and orienting political action to a singular demand, have dramatically different effects. The governmentality literature has already shown us that these effects are not benign, and go on to rework the way that life is understood and organised in relation to itself (Dillon, 2006; Walters, 2004). However, critical also is that these effects are also not equivalent. To observe that solidarity activism risks ignoring specific histories of nations and people groups does not mean that as a count it will interact with policy and public perception in the way that humanitarianism has done. Can any of its effects be considered emancipatory? One way of thinking about this conundrum is to end by reengaging the concept of “habit” I have referred to, also pursued elsewhere by governmentality scholar Mariana Valverde (1998).

In his 1838 essay “On Habit,” Ravaission (2008) identifies with a strand of theoretical literature which, since Aristotle, has considered habit as the locus for the embodiment of change — in contrast with the rationalist theoretical obsession with habit as unenlightened passivity. In this light Ravaission reframes habit as an ambiguous site between repetition and the new. As a basis for the acquisition of new understanding and new postures towards the world, this habit — or ethos of living — is inherently expansive and responsive to change; on the other hand, where particular conceptual frameworks become sedimented or muscular structures rigid, habit may cultivate contractions leading to addictions. A count, from this perspective, may augment social practice so as to conserve existing diagnostics and catalogues of visibilities; on the other hand, it may augment so as to remain expansively open to change, repeating the demand to recount. Between ethics and political performance, I have suggested we can think of solidarity activism as an intervention into a collective ethos; a mechanism which perpetually interrupts practice with a sense of the
unfamiliar. Exploring the different relationships to change within political cultures and counts are a crucial route onwards for this research agenda, and will have important consequences for the habits we make of asylum in the future.

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