Philia and *phagia*

Thinking with *Stimmungswechsel* through the refugee crisis in Greece

Heath CABOT, *University of Pittsburgh*

Comment on Borneman, John, and Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi. 2017. "The concept of *Stimmung*: From indifference to xenophobia in Germany's refugee crisis." HAU: *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7 (3): 105–135.

In the summer of 2016, I was discussing with a long-term interlocutor of mine, an asylum lawyer in Greece, why Greeks had, over the course of 2015–16, decided so explicitly to "welcome" refugees: to offer *philoxenia* (hospitality), which often also entailed *xenophilia* (active love for or attraction to the *xenos* or "stranger"). This was in some ways quite puzzling, given that neo-Nazism had spiked in Greece (as elsewhere) in the previous few years. Moreover, after five years of economic crisis and austerity, it would have been quite predictable for Greeks to privilege their own predicaments, not those of newcomers. But instead, as colleagues and friends from the Balkans and central Europe have pointed out, a great many Greeks responded with openness, whereas citizens of those transit and border countries largely displayed mistrust, xenophobia, or even active aggression.

My lawyer friend, however, said something very interesting: that this feeling of openness was good, but it was also dangerous, because it was "so unstable"; and all it would take was one event to turn it all on its head. He then cited events that had, indeed, dramatically shifted public attitudes toward migrants and refugees: the sexual assaults in Cologne in 2015; and the murder of a Greek man by two migrants in 2011, which incited violent attacks on foreigners in Athens, ending in one death and seventeen hospitalizations.

This conversation was in the back of my mind when reading the article by John Borneman and Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi, which—through various sites of ethnographic encounter—unpacks the role of *Stimmung* ("mood, atmosphere, or feeling") in German reactions to refugee arrivals. Their analysis seeks to document a phenomenon that seems at once concrete and ineffable, often relegated to the realm of public opinion or media accounts—not something that many of us assume can be studied at the level of ethnography. A German colleague of mine noted that *Stimmung* is also very much related to aesthetics (visual art and poetry) and, especially, music. For non-German speakers like myself, this meaning also seems important for how it captures the link between collective feeling and the aesthetics of the refugee crisis as they unfold in German public spheres. And indeed, the article examines how Germans (and more specifically interlocutors in Berlin) become "attuned" to forms of collective feeling.

The piece, very much in line with my lawyer friend's comment, focuses on *Stimmungswechsel*, mood *shifts:* how mood seems to tack between openness and closure in a way that is always unstable. *Stimmung*, indeed, seems difficult to consider without the *Wechsel.* Mood is—perhaps necessarily—a shifting and volatile thing.

By way of comment, I was moved to consider this study of mood in conversation with a few points gleaned from my long-term fieldwork on asylum in Greece (see Cabot 2014), which became the entrypoint into Europe for over one million refugees between 2015 and 2016, but which has long been a border country dealing with refugee arrivals. Of course, the question remains open as to whether and how this analytic of *Stimmung*, located here in the German context, does and does not travel. I, for one, was called to "think with" it, and in doing so I found myself ruminating not just on the volatility of mood but also on how it intersects with larger public frames that, in many cases, reinforce distinctions between self and other, structuring even xenophiliac mood with attendant aspects of closure.

In puzzling over why so many Greeks (like so many Germans) demonstrated a mood of xenophilia, there are two key factors that I believe mattered immensely.

First, xenophilia in Greece, with attendant practices of *welcoming* refugees, reinforced a powerful Greek national self-narrative, which capitalized on hospitality culture (importantly, hospitality is *not* a frame relevant in the Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi article, but it is in my fieldsite). Images circulated in the media: of old people opening their houses to newcomers; of people bringing fruit from their gardens, which I have been told many times is the best of all fruits, because its provenance is known (in other words, it is not "strange fruit"). The trope of the house was impossible to ignore, especially given anthropological analyses of the power relations entailed in hospitality practices, which position the new arrival as indebted guest (Pitt-Rivers 1968; Herzfeld 1987; Papataxiarchis 2006; Rozakou 2012). Xenophilia in Greece also, I surmise, may have opened up new ways of being European—of being, in a way, even *more* welcoming than the rest of Europe—at a time when Greeks' own Europeanness was deeply in question, owing to the debt crisis and austerity. Finally, not entirely unlike Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi's analysis of Hans' story about his own connections with displacement, I witnessed a revivification of the Greek refugee history (from the 1923 Population Exchange; see Hirschon 1989) and the sentiment that Greeks could connect with newcomers precisely owing to their experiences of being displaced and marginalized. All of these

frames were, I believe, important in setting the stage for the xenophiliac fervor that swept much of Greece.

As such, this positive and inclusionary mood also buoyed up a national narrative that positioned Greece as a leader in a European culture of welcoming, amid a largely overdetermined set of power relations at the European scale.

A second point perhaps extends more clearly to the German case. Throughout Europe, xenophilia has revolved consistently around the positions of Syrians, often to the exclusion of other categories of migrants and refugees. In Greece, such hierarchies have been enacted primarily with the instantiation of the hotspot system (see Kalir and Rozakou 2016). This hierarchization has ended in the demotion of Afghan asylum applications in various sites in Europe, and even the deportations of Afghans (see Khosravi 2017); not to mention the many asylum seekers from Africa and Southeast Asia (specifically from Pakistan).

Meanwhile, the figure of the *refugee who must be* saved was, for the Euro-American world, realized most powerfully in images of Syrian children*,* specifically, as the article shows, the photograph of the body of Aylan Kurdi.[1] But Syrian refugees in general have provided broad canvases for European attachments to and stereotypes of an other who seems to be just similar enough in terms of class, racial indicators, education level, and "culture" (Cabot 2015). Syrians have often sought protection as families with women and children (in contrast to Muslim men migrating alone). Moreover, they are, in some cases, Christian—and if Muslim, apparently not *too* Muslim. In Greece, the felt overlaps between Syrians and Greeks sometimes took on a particularly distinctive twist through ideas about shared Mediterranean lifestyle, phenotype, and even race. Many of my Greek interlocutors have noted how Syrians look "just like Greeks" or "could be Greeks"; others have spoken about Greeks being welcomed in Syria after fleeing Greece during World War II. The philiac mood, again, extends only so far, capitalizing on aspects of compatibility with nationally sanctioned notions of a collective self.

The article's discussion of the party (with the spectacularly culturally incompetent roast pig), and the token refugee guests, was so uncomfortable to read precisely for its similarity to other events I have attended over the years. This encounter—and much of the article, in fact—raised for me the significant question as to just how far a philiac mood extends and whether it actually provides points of opening. I wonder whether that instability that my interlocutor noted—and the shiftingness underlined throughout this article—is, in fact, built into mood itself: the incapacity of individual and collective affective ties to extend beyond a certain limited range for the possible inclusion of others.

In his brilliant auto-ethnography of his own experience traveling to Sweden as a refugee, Shahram Khosravi (2010) draws on Lévi-Strauss ([1961] 2012) to highlight two dominant ways in which groups deal with outsiders. The first is an *anthropophagic* response, entailing the consumption of the stranger (drawing on the Greek for eating, *phagia*); the other, *anthropoemic*, response deals in expelling

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1. See the outstanding blog article by Jan Blommaert (2015) on the three images that "made Europe care about refugees." See also pieces by Giordana and Ticktin in the excellent Cultural Anthropology Hot Spots series on Europe's "crisis" of refugees (Fernando and Giordano 2016).

unwanted others (from *poesis*, making). Khosravi highlights how both methods of managing otherness are employed in the context of contemporary migration; and despite their differences, both have as their effects the rejection and domestication of true forms of alterity (see also Van Vliet 2016). As such, the term "incorporation," so intentionally used in this article—a signifier of *phagia* entailing consumption and integration within the body of the self—is highly relevant. Mood—even when it is philiac—does not seem to be capable of encountering otherness without, in a way, consuming it—whether through the image of a drowned child or in the company of a roast pig. Philia is, perhaps always, phagic.

Such modes of incorporation are to be distinguished from what Michel Agier ([2013] 2016) has called the "cosmopolitan condition," where the normative national order of things (Malkki 1995) is productively disturbed (Agier [2013] 2016: 155–56) through forms of "relative" and relational alterity. Otherness, at such sites of opening, becomes more than the "exotic, fictional, virtual, ideal, or dreamed-of elsewhere" (ibid.: 100), and instead calls the individual and collective self into new forms of relation. What I glean from this article by Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi is that *Stimmung* in itself is not enough to produce real points of opening. However—with the shiftingness and "instability" that is the hallmark of mood—it *might* set the stage for encounters that *could* extend beyond the norm.

In closing, I want to cite another ethnographic encounter. I was recently in Berlin for a workshop, and the organizers booked a "refugee tour" via a (refugee-driven) NGO, in which refugees show people around "their" Berlin. Our tour guide, a Syrian man in his thirties, was gregarious, funny, articulate, and charming. Still, the event made many in the group—all of us social scientists—uncomfortable for the way in which refugeeness was performed, alongside numerous cultural stereotypes. At the end of the tour, I asked our guide why he took part in this initiative (which, as I took it, was directed less at foreigners like myself and instead toward xenophiliac Germans). He explained that it is important to have ways for refugees and Germans to *encounter* each other; otherwise, there would be (again) two Germanies, two Berlins. With all of its problems, philia can set the mood for encounters that *might* become transformative, opening—even in small ways—into new modes of relation. Still, one must also ask whom, in the end, Germans actually encounter.

Finally, the study of the effects of displacement in Europe is a field that has become, in my view, oversaturated with research (and researchers) arriving on the heels of crisis. It is thus all the more crucial to produce work that locates displacement in historical and cultural context. This article deals in the analysis of more macro-scale phenomena and, thus, in terms of the ethnographic material provided, does not always showcase the deep cultural and historical knowledge that both authors bring but which is very much worth noting. When the conflict escalated in Syria, I remember thinking that I wanted to know what John Borneman would have to say about the situation—as one of the few anthropologists who can speak to the magic of Aleppo before the war (Borneman 2007). Given the long entanglement of both Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi in Germany, and in Berlin specifically, they are positioned to make serious interventions into the ethnographic literature on refugees and asylum in Europe. This article is a welcome introduction to additional research that I hope will be forthcoming.

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Heath Cabot is a sociocultural anthropologist who studies refugees, human rights, and access to healthcare in Greece. In 2010, she received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Santa Cruz, and she is now an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh. She is the author of *On the doorstep of Europe: Asylum and citizenship in Greece* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014). Her current project is on austerity, community-based healthcare, and solidarity movements in Greece. She is also coeditor-in-chief of the *Political and Legal Anthropology Review*.

Heath Cabot
Department of Anthropology
University of Pittsburgh
3302 WWPH
Pittsburgh PA, 15260
USA
hcabot@pitt.edu