



## BOOK REVIEW

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# Movements of Freedom in Stierl's *Migrant Resistance*

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### *Migrant Resistance in Contemporary Europe*

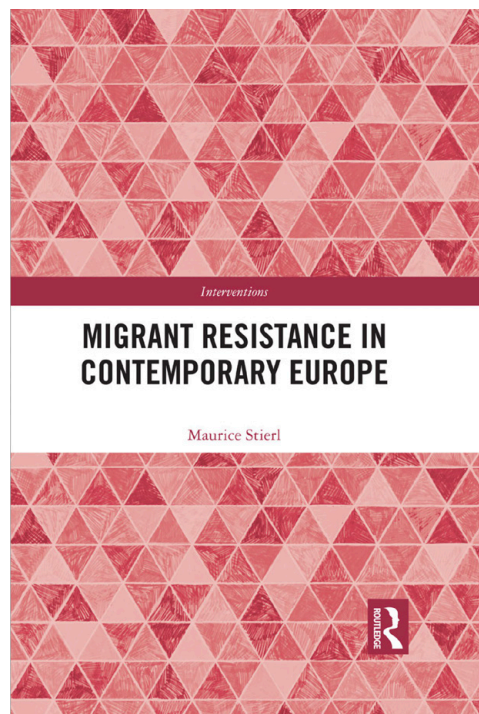
By Maurice Stierl

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*Migrant Resistance in Contemporary Europe*, by Maurice Stierl, is an outstanding achievement in the social sciences. The book establishes aspects of migration as “resistance” and “movements of freedom” through original ethnographies in the European borderlands circa mid-2010s. The author demonstrates that unauthorized migration *per se* constitutes “migrant resistance”. In Stierl’s persuasive conceptualization, the politics of unauthorized migration—whether by sea, land, or overstayed visa—is inextricably bound up with the more overtly political acts of public protest and social solidarity that are often undertaken in support of and by migrants, and often in Europe’s metropolises as well as outlying border regions.

The book’s major contribution is three ethnographic case studies in three chapters, structured around the author’s tripartite analytical framework of “migrant resistance”. The three cases are (i) a series of unprecedented direct action campaigns in Berlin; (ii) the human experiences of irregular migrants transiting the busy Aegean route into Europe; and (iii), European civil-society coalitions trying to save lives in the Mediterranean Sea. These cases are conceptualized, respectively, through the ideas of “*migratory dissent*” (public protest for migrant rights), “*migratory excess*” (irregular migration), and “*migratory*



*solidarity*” (social support). Stierl’s approach can therefore be summarized with the following equation: migrant resistance = public protest, or *dissent* + irregular migration, or *excess* + social support, or *solidarity*. Apart from exercising this conceptual schema, the case studies are valuable for their detailed and sensitive accounts of migrant resistance during one of Europe’s most contentious periods of migration.

The **Introduction** and **Chapter 1** set out the book’s theory and methodology, which Stierl maintains cannot

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be separated. Theory and methodology are instead entangled in the notion of *doing theory*, or *theory as method*, blurring the lines between research and activism. Drawing especially on Michel Foucault's work on power and on Jacques Rancière's notion of politics, Stierl shows that migration, even and especially when it seems to operate outside of conventional political registers, constitutes a power struggle for *and of* freedom.

While strong on theory and methodology, the book's core contribution is empirical: three ethnographies of migrant resistance, aligned to his conceptual framework. Taking up the first case, **Chapter 2** reviews unprecedented campaigns of "*migratory dissent*" in Germany between 2012 and 2016, focusing on the Non-Citizens protest movement. With on-the-ground experience, fieldnotes, and interviews, Stierl documents direct action for migrant rights in the form of demonstrations, marches, occupations, hunger-strikes, and more. The chapter also highlights new and old fault lines that were drawn *within* the migrant activist community, sometimes reproducing the very divisions they sought to transgress in their border defiance (37, 41–43, 45). Tied to direct action and movement organization, "*migratory dissent*" is more evidently political than the second aspect of Stierl's migrant resistance, to which he turns next.

**Chapter 3** is the centerpiece. Again through ethnography, Stierl discloses the plight of migrants caught up in securitized and exclusionary "borderscapes" of Greece as an illicit human-transit zone. Here, the book's most distinctive concept, "*migratory excess*", draws attention to that aspect of migrant resistance in which people on the move defy border regimes, pushing systems to limits. In this sense, "*excess*" (which Stierl notes has been used by critical thinkers in contexts other than migration) is not just about quantity. It is "*excess*" as *superfluous*, as *overflow*, *beyond the pale*. But it is also inherently dynamic, open to meaning, uncontrolled, and, for this reason, Stierl argues, subversive and a kind of resistance, especially when taken in tandem with migratory dissent and solidarity.

**Chapter 4** covers the third aspect of migrant resistance: "*migratory solidarity*". Here Stierl recounts the complicated roles of allies in supporting migratory movements with detailed and at times harrowing accounts of the civil society campaigns Boats4People and Alarm Phone, which operated in and around the Mediterranean during this period and with which Stierl became personally involved. The chapter acknowledges that solidarity has always been fraught with social, political, and cultural divisions, becoming even more challenging and inherently divisive in the context of illegal migration. Yet solidarity is more urgent than ever, Stierl resolves.

Following the ethnographies of migratory dissent, excess, and solidarity, the next two chapters take a thematic view. **Chapter 5** shows how the stories of the book repudiate Europe's self-aggrandizing identity of itself as borderless, humanitarian, and post-racial or postcolonial. The chapter

spells out how migrant resistance belies each of these claims. **Chapter 6** goes deeper into critical analysis of power and resistance, returning especially to Foucault's work on sovereign, disciplinary, and biopolitical power. From these analytical perspectives, the nuanced conduct and significance of migrant resistance, often obscured under hegemonic registers of politics, become clearer.

Finally, **Chapter 7** reflects on the book and looks soberly forward. Stierl reminds that the actions and motives of migrants cannot be generalized or romanticized; they are often mundane, parochially individualistic, and more private than public. Yet they can and should be understood as a kind of resistance, at once reacting to and reconstituting the political structures that first impelled then persecuted such movements. The concluding chapter also assesses the debate between the more reformist "open borders" and the more radical "no borders" approaches to migrant rights (196–198), recognizing the former as more practical yet sympathetic to the ideals of the latter (201–202). He points to Balibar's open-borders argument by democratic principle (199); to democratize borders would be to subject them to the governance of all people impacted, not restricted by nationalist or other exclusionary criteria. The chapter and book end by invoking Foucault's call for "hyper and pessimistic activism" (199).

The book's weaknesses are few. Theoretically, from this reviewer's perspective, alternative analytical lenses are conspicuously absent. In particular, the idea of civil disobedience has much to offer this topic (Celikates 2019; Cabrera 2021) yet does not appear in the book. Relatedly, the study of *civil resistance* or *strategic nonviolent conflict* (Chenoweth 2021) may be useful here, with its compelling analytics of action, power, and change. And Stierl's account of "movements of freedom" could have been deepened by engaging with James Tully's work on "practices of civic freedom and global citizenship" (2014), which conceptualizes radical democracy irrespective of borders. Overall, for its rigorous combination of ethnography and critical analysis, Stierl's *Migrant Resistance* is vital reading for anyone interested in grasping or pushing back against hardening border regimes around the world.

## Works Cited

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