

Migrant counterspaces: Challenging labour market exclusion through collective action

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ABSTRACTS

Migrant counterspaces: Challenging labour market exclusion through collective action

Recent debates in migration studies and labour geographies emphasise the need to acknowledge migrants' agency and their ability to challenge regulatory migration regimes and precarious working relations. Contributing to this literature, this article examines the activities of a migrant-run organisation in Switzerland in its collective response to labour market barriers mobilised by the state, employers, and society at large. Building on ethnographic and participatory methods, our findings reveal that the organisation's strategies focus strongly on the individual level and thus risk losing sight of broader power relations. Yet, our analysis also shows that the strategies employed can be transformative on the personal scale, creating a meaningful counterspace to dominant experiences of social and economic exclusion. In conclusion, we contend that an analysis of migratory movements needs to take into account the social and relational dimensions of agency as well as the differentiated effects of collective action.

Keywords: *Migration, Labour, Agency, Space, Switzerland*

Contre-espaces pour et par des migrant.e.s : Lutter contre l'exclusion professionnelle par l'action collective

Les débats récents en étude des migrations et en géographie du travail mettent l'accent sur l'agentivité des migrant.e.s et leur capacité à contester les régimes migratoires et les relations de travail précaires. Dans cette perspective, cet article examine comment une organisation gérée par des migrant.e.s en Suisse crée des « contre-espaces » collectifs en réponse aux difficultés d'accès au marché du travail. S'appuyant sur des méthodes ethnographiques et participatives, nos résultats révèlent que les stratégies de cette organisation se concentrent principalement sur le niveau individuel et risquent ainsi de perdre de vue les relations de pouvoir plus larges. Néanmoins, nous soutenons que les stratégies employées peuvent être transformatrices au niveau individuel, et contribuent à créer un espace pour lutter contre les expériences dominantes d'exclusion sociale et économique. En conclusion, nous suggérons

qu'une analyse des mouvements migratoires doit prendre en compte les dimensions sociales et relationnelles de l'agentivité et les effets différenciés de l'action collective.

Mots clés: *Migration, Travail, Agentivité, Espace, Suisse*

Creando espacios de resistencia: La acción colectiva de los migrantes como desafío a la exclusión laboral

Los debates recientes en los estudios de migración y geografías laborales se han centrado en la agencia de los migrantes y su capacidad para desafiar las reglamentaciones migratorias y las precarias relaciones laborales. Desde esta perspectiva, este artículo examina las acciones de una organización en Suiza iniciada y dirigida por mujeres migrantes, en su respuesta colectiva a las barreras institucionales, laborales y sociales que enfrentan los migrantes para su participación al mercado de trabajo. Basándonos en métodos etnográficos y participativos, nuestras conclusiones revelan que las estrategias de resistencia se enfocan ante todo en los individuos y corren por lo tanto el riesgo de perder de vista las relaciones de poder más amplias. No obstante, sostenemos que estas estrategias pueden ser transformadoras a nivel individual, creando un «contraespacio» significativo a las experiencias dominantes de exclusión social y económica. En conclusión, sugerimos que un análisis de los movimientos migratorios debe tener en cuenta las dimensiones sociales y relacionales de la agencia y los efectos diferenciados de la acción colectiva.

Palabras clave: *Migración, Empleo, Agencia, Espacio, Suiza*

Migrant counterspaces: Challenging labour market exclusion through collective action

1. Introduction

Switzerland is considered a particularly interesting site for the study of migration issues (Piguet, 2006; D'Amato *et al.*, 2019). This is partly linked to Switzerland's high proportion of foreign residents, which reflects the country's economic dependence on immigration. Nevertheless, researchers exploring the labour market experiences of different groups of migrants have shown that many struggle to find work according to their skills and aspirations. Women and people with non-European citizenship are seen as particularly affected by devaluation processes resulting from a lack of recognition of their qualifications, discriminatory employment practices, and broader racialised and gendered discourses of otherness (e.g. Wanner, 2004; Riaño, 2021).

Migration scholars and labour geographers increasingly emphasise the need to engage more closely with migrants' agency and their ability to challenge these modes of economic exclusion (see e.g. Buckley *et al.*, 2017). In the Swiss context, a number of researchers have highlighted migrants' creative solutions to the multi-faceted barriers they experience (e.g. Riaño, 2011; Sandoz, 2021). The focus, however, remains mainly on individual strategies, while migrants' collective responses to labour market exclusion have received less attention. These are particularly interesting as they offer insights into how personal experiences of inequality relate to organisational structures and how collective mobilisation can lead to change (see Caggiano, 2019; Martin, 2011).

To address this gap, this paper studies an organisation called Migrant Entrepreneurship Switzerland (MES).¹ Operating within a city in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, it is run by migrant women who faced difficulties accessing the Swiss labour market. Since 2015 MES has offered an entrepreneurship programme to "skilled" migrants from diverse backgrounds, seeking to challenge exclusionary practices towards migrants within the labour market and society at large. To analyse the organisation's strategies and impact, we utilise the notion of *counterspace* (e.g. Hassanli *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, we set this term in dialogue with studies that have warned against a simplistic romanticisation of agency and resistance. This

¹ This name is a pseudonym which we use to protect our informants from any negative effects that may ensue from participating in our study. For reasons of anonymisation, we do not name the specific city the organisation operates in.

enables a critical analysis of the differentiated effects and ambivalences in the actions of the organisation under study. Empirically, this paper builds on ethnographic and participatory methods, semi-structured and biographical interviews, and document analysis. It is the result of a collaboration between two researchers who individually conducted empirical research on the organisation between 2018 and 2020.

To begin, we briefly outline links between labour and migration in Swiss immigration and integration policies. Then, we contextualise our research interest through a conceptual discussion of the terms *agency* and *counterspace* in the fields of migration studies and labour geographies. Next, we address our methodological approach and provide further detail on our case study. In the empirical section, we examine three key strategies that MES employs to challenge labour market exclusions and highlight a range of ambivalences within its practices. Finally, we discuss to what extent the organisation manages to create a counterspace that is able to effectively rework migrants' experiences of professional downward mobility in Switzerland.

2. Starting point: “Marginalised elites” in Switzerland

Switzerland's population consists of almost one-third foreign-born individuals, or the third-highest share in all OECD countries (OECD, 2021).² Two thirds of migrants to Switzerland were born in European Economic Area (EEA) countries. Almost forty percent of the foreign-born working-age population had completed tertiary education (Riaño, 2021: 2). These numbers reflect the Swiss migration regime in which nationality and skills are used as central selection criteria for admitting migrants and defining their residence rights (Sandoz, 2020). Similar to other European countries, Switzerland grants free movement and facilitates easy labour market access to EEA citizens. Non-EEA citizens can only enter Switzerland as asylum seekers, reunified family members, students, or workers with specific skill sets who are sponsored and supported by an employer (Sandoz, 2020: 224). This shows Switzerland's clear intent to ensure that migration is economically beneficial (Piguet, 2006).

Moreover, the Swiss migration system is significantly shaped by discourses of otherness that emphasise cultural differences, especially between Europeans and non-Europeans, and frame

² This number results, in part, from the difficult process of naturalisation for long-term immigrants (Guglielmo, 2017).

certain migrants as burdens to society and the welfare state (Fischer and Dahinden, 2017). These narratives are visible in populist anti-immigration movements such as the “minaret initiative”, the “mass immigration initiative”, and most recently, the “burqa ban”, which regularly result in referendums (see Manatschal, 2015; Ackermann and Freitag, 2015; DW, 2021). It is important to note in this context that in Switzerland’s political system, the right to vote or stand for election at the federal and most cantonal and municipal levels is strictly limited to Swiss citizens. Thus, many migrants are unable to participate in the elections that govern their lives. According to Giugni and Passy (2004: 77), this can also limit the effectiveness of minority-led social movements, as they often lack strong political alliances.

Statistics suggest that the Swiss labour market is favourable to highly skilled migrants compared to other countries (OECD and European Union, 2015: 116). However, research has shown that many migrants in Switzerland struggle to make full use of their skills (e.g. Wanner, 2004; Riaño, 2021). This is especially the case for women and non-Europeans who do not arrive to Switzerland with an existing employment contract, but through family reunification or by requesting asylum. These migrants often experience a devaluation of their former work experiences which can lead to situations of unemployment and skills mismatch. Apart from deficit-oriented images and their influence on employment practices (Auer *et al.*, 2019), these situations are usually attributed to a lack of professional networks, limited knowledge of the Swiss labour market, and a lack of fluency in the local language (Riaño, 2021: 8). In consequence, many “skilled” migrants must downgrade their professional goals and become “marginalised elites” (Riaño, 2021: 10).

Integration programmes that address unemployment among migrants have been criticised for channelling participants into precarious labour sectors, often regardless of previous work experiences (see Bachmann, 2016; Benelli *et al.*, 2014; Stingl, 2021). According to Bachmann (2016: 178), these programmes mostly operate under the neoliberal premise of “*Fördern und Fordern*” (foster and demand) and promote personal responsibility for one’s own employability instead of targeting structural conditions. Bachmann further argues that most initiatives fail to recognise migrants’ differentiated experiences and their realities beyond the sphere of work (Bachmann, 2016: 244). This is reflected, for example, in the fact that improved access to childcare is not addressed by these programmes (Bachmann, 2016: 234). In sum, research has shown that Swiss integration policies fail to cope with the diversity of social and biographical situations in the context of migration, and can thus reinforce the difficulties faced by many

migrants trying to find employment according to their skills and aspirations (see Choffat *et al.*, 2020). This paper contributes to and extends these debates by analysing how migrants collectively react to this situation.

3. Conceptual approach: Migrants' agency and the production of counterspace

In the past decades, migration scholars and labour geographers have become increasingly interested in migrants' agentic responses to exclusionary practices mobilised by capitalism and the state (see Buckley *et al.*, 2017; Piguet, 2013: 154). By emphasising migrants' abilities to contest and resist structural constraints, these works aim to overcome the victimisation of — and often one-sided emphasis on — migrants' experienced hardships (Bork-Hüffer *et al.*, 2016: 129). A rich scholarship has emerged that demonstrates the potential of individual, sometimes subtle forms of agency in the everyday lives of migrant workers (e.g. Rogaly, 2009; McDowell *et al.*, 2007), as well as organised and collective forms of agency such as trade unions and civil society organisations (e.g. Martin, 2011; Caggiano, 2019).

Geographically inspired research in the field specifically underlines the spatial dimension of agency (see e.g. Etzold, 2016; Yeoh and Huang, 1998). Seo and Skelton (2017) and Caillol (2018), for instance, show that immigration regulations and precarious working conditions constrain migrants' livelihoods by restricting access to certain public spaces and economic sectors or isolating them spatially within specific districts or housing arrangements. At the same time, however, they shed light on how migrants use existing resources to (re)appropriate and produce spaces of resistance. This can provide relief from oppressive working conditions and affirm multiple identities, despite the economy's and the state's construction of migrants as disposable workers (Seo and Skelton, 2017: 166).

Building on these studies, we draw on the notion of “counterspace” for our analysis of migrants' collective action. This term originates from critical race theory (see e.g. Solorzano *et al.*, 2000; Case and Hunter, 2012) and found use in migration research. Hassanli *et al.* (2019), for instance, applied the concept in their analysis of a cultural festival in Australia, in which deficit notions of migrants and refugees can be challenged and thus self-enhancement can be forged. Pande (2018) uses it in her research on migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, who strategically use public and private spaces to challenge racialised and heteronormative labels assigned to them by migration policies. In a similar manner, we utilise the notion of

counterspace to develop a spatialised understanding of the agentic strategies applied by MES. Our conception of space in this context does not confine MES's activities to a particular material space, e.g. in the sense of a building where its members come together. Rather, we refer to space as a social and relational product made up of individuals' practices and interactions as well as their connections to different places (see Massey, 2009; Salzbrunn, 2016; Riaño, 2017). Moreover, we understand space as always in process, in that the uneven power relations and social hierarchies that create different opportunities for different people are constantly reinforced and rearranged (see Massey, 1994, 2009). Attending to these spatial dimensions makes a valuable contribution to the existing literature on migrants' spatial agency, which has so far focused mainly on the interplay of material infrastructures and social actions.

We further develop our notion of counterspace by building on studies that have cautioned against romanticising agency and the resistant potentials of individual and collective actions (e.g. Mitchell, 2011; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Bork-Hüffer *et al.*, 2016). Many of these accounts draw on Katz (2004), who has famously urged us not to celebrate all "everyday acts" as resistance, and instead introduces a terminological distinction between "resilience", "reworking", and "resistance". Inspired by these critical approaches, we seek to dismantle MES's strategies with regard to what extent and on which levels they become transformative. This is of particular importance for our subject matter, as Martin (2011: 2948) has shown that the capacity of migrant organisations to advocate for progressive change is in constant tension with the dominant social, economic, and political orders that such organisations may support, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

4. Research context and methodological approach

This paper studies the migrant-run organisation Migrant Entrepreneurship Switzerland (MES). Overall, we address two research questions: 1) What strategies does MES use to challenge dynamics of labour market exclusion towards migrants? 2) What are the effects of these strategies and what difficulties and ambivalences can be observed? Based on these questions, we discuss to what extent the activities of the organisation become transformative and can thus be considered counterspace.

Choosing an organisation as field site is based on our interest in how personal experiences of inequality are translated into organisational agendas and to what extent individual and

structural constraints can be resolved through collective mobilisation — questions which have not received enough attention in the literature (Caggiano, 2019: 2). Yet, we do not fully restrict our analysis to the organisational level, but also pay close attention to the lived and biographical experiences of individuals within and beyond this collective setting and the multiple and intersecting vulnerabilities they face regarding nationality, legal status, gender, and family situation (see Dutta, 2016). However, the focus remains on analysing how these experiences are linked to the organisation under study, thus less attention is paid to the influence of migrants' everyday agentic strategies outside of MES.

MES was created in 2015 and operates in a city in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. It seeks to challenge the devaluation of migrants' skills and foster inclusion in the Swiss economy and local community. MES provides a bilingual (English and German) training programme to migrants with diverse statuses who want to create an entrepreneurial or social project in Switzerland. It also coordinates a mentoring and coaching programme, in which local professionals are encouraged to support and advise migrants. Finally, MES organises public events and networking opportunities for anyone interested in topics of diversity and migrant inclusion in Switzerland. The project-funded organisation is financially supported through grants offered by the state, canton, and municipality, as well as through private donations and partnerships with larger corporate firms such as insurance companies or banks.

We regard MES as an ensemble of diverse actors that includes the core team, programme participants, volunteers, and others. At the time of writing this paper, the core team responsible for MES's main activities consisted of approximately eight women, some of whom were also founders of the organisation. They mostly originate from Latin American countries, had obtained tertiary education, and faced difficulties entering the labour market as trailing spouses to Switzerland. Through financial contributions from sponsors, MES is able to cover two-thirds of the core team's wages, while the rest is unpaid working time. In addition, around twenty advisors, board members, and former team members regularly support the core team. Each year, around twenty migrants take part in the entrepreneurial programme. We observed a great diversity in terms of their socio-economic profiles, including nationality, gender, and fields of activity. For instance, the twenty-three participants in the 2019 programme represented seventeen nationalities. Sixteen were born in a non-European country, thirteen were female. Most moved to Switzerland for family reasons or following a humanitarian crisis in their former country of residence. Almost all had university education, but experienced situations of skills

mismatch or unemployment in Switzerland. To overcome this, they sought to create entrepreneurial projects selling goods and/or offering services in diverse fields such as design/arts, fashion, gastronomy, technology, consulting, and community building. MES also engages external volunteers to support these activities, including corporate employees from firms that collaborate with MES, migrants who want to support newcomers by sharing their own experiences, or other local individuals motivated to help MES support vulnerable groups within their community.

Table 1: Characteristics of Interviewees

		N (total 18)
Gender	Female	12
	Male	6
Age	<30	3
	30-40	11
	41-50	4
Region of Birth	South America	5
	Europe	6
	Sub-Saharan Africa	3
	Middle East	2
	South and Central Asia	2
Years in CH	1-5	9
	6-10	6
	>10	3
Reason to move to CH	Humanitarian	5
	Partner	9
	Job/Education	3
	Other	1
Education	Secondary Education	2
	University Degree	16
Business activity (multiple choices possible)	Consulting	4
	Community Building	6
	Design/Arts/Fashion	8
	Technology	2

This article combines two research projects. The first, conducted by Isabella Stingl,³ engages with the work-related experiences of refugees and analyses how these are shaped by Swiss migration and integration policies. The second, conducted by Christina Mittmasser,⁴ studies the transnational business activities of migrant entrepreneurs in Switzerland. In general, both projects follow the framework of *critical ethnography*, which examines the everyday experiences of individuals in relation to power structures (Denzin, 2017). In the course of our individual fieldwork — which included participating in MES's activities — we were brought together by a common acquaintance who realised that our research interests overlapped. We began to communicate regularly, which led to the idea of a collaborative paper. The empirical material was collected between 2018 and 2020 and includes a semi-structured interview with one of MES's co-founders as well as biographical interviews (see Iosifides and Sporton, 2009) with fourteen former participants and three supporters of the organisation (see Table 1). These are complemented by extensive field notes on our observations and informal conversations during our participation in MES's workshops, public events, and team meetings. In addition, we conducted an analysis of MES's web presence and documents that the organisation shared with us, such as evaluation reports. After reviewing all available material and identifying information crucial to our research interest, the extracted data was then coded according to central themes that emerged during the analysis (see Vaismoradi and Snelgrove, 2019). Overall, we identified three central themes that represent key intentions and practices of the organisation in relation to challenging the exclusion of migrants from the labour market. We are aware that this model includes intersections and overlaps. However, for the purpose of analytical clarity, we will present the empirical material according to the identified themes.

Finally, it is important to note that we followed a longitudinal and participatory approach by engaging in regular exchanges with the organisation. For example, during Mittmasser's long-term research collaboration with MES she volunteered in the organisation for more than a year, translating documents, co-organising events, and conducting research. In November 2020, we organised an online collaborative workshop with six members of MES's core team, during which we reported and jointly reflected on our preliminary results. This workshop was

³ This project is carried out at the Department of Geography at University of Zurich. It was partly funded by a doc.mobility fellowship from the Swiss National Science Research Foundation (SNSF, Grant No. P1ZHP1_184117).

⁴ This project is carried out in the context of a larger project, "Migrant Entrepreneurship: Mapping Cross-Border Mobilities and Exploring the Role of Spatial Mobility Capital", led by Yvonne Riaño and Etienne Piguet. For more information see: <https://nccr-onthemove.ch/projects/migrant-entrepreneurship-mapping-cross-border-mobilities-and-exploring-the-role-of-spatial-mobility-capital/>. The study is supported by the nccr – on the move, National Centre of Competence in Research – The Migration-Mobility Nexus (<https://nccr-onthemove.ch/>), funded by the Swiss National Science Research Foundation (SNSF, Grant No. 51NF40-182897 for IP32 project).

informed by the feminist methodological principles of participatory “Minga” workshops developed by Riaño (2016). Accessing the field and creating this collaborative relationship with MES was facilitated by our own positionality as women and migrants in Switzerland and our willingness to engage with the organisation. The core team thus appeared very motivated to cooperate with us in order to receive support, gather feedback on their strategies, and expand their community. Our active engagement in the organisation certainly affected our analysis. Yet, we believe it was mostly beneficial, not only regarding the validity of our results, but also in terms of reciprocity and the balance of power between researchers and research subjects.

5. Results: Collective strategies to counter labour market exclusion

In this section, we examine strategies and ambivalences of the Swiss-based organisation MES in its challenge to the dynamics of migrants’ labour market exclusion. To begin, we explain how MES tries to achieve its overall goal of overcoming situations of skills mismatch and unemployment by promoting entrepreneurship and discuss how this plays out in the biographies of individual participants. We then explore further strategies that MES employs to accomplish its aims. In so doing, the second section looks at how MES attempts to challenge deficit-oriented and simplistic images of migrants. Finally, the third section sheds light on how MES seeks to improve the lives of its participants beyond the economic sphere. A common thread of interest in what kind of space is produced by the organisation’s activities runs throughout these sections.

5.1 Overcoming situations of skills mismatch and unemployment

MES was primarily created with the aim to support migrants who face situations of skills mismatch and unemployment in Switzerland. According to one of the co-founders interviewed for this study, this leads to frustration on an individual level and a waste of human potential on a societal level, when highly skilled individuals with valuable work experience are either unemployed or precariously employed. As a response, MES promotes the idea of migrants becoming self-employed entrepreneurs. The organisation offers an entrepreneurial programme in which migrants are encouraged to use their qualifications in creative ways. Thereby, MES revalorises former work experiences and the informal skills of participants, which are often not recognised by Swiss authorities and employers:

“[W]e have people coming in, who say: “Oh, I have nothing”. And then you discover that they managed their uncle’s shop for ten years, and you think well ok, but you have a basic understanding of leadership, stock management, accounting.” (Interview with a co-founder – 10.05.18)

Moreover, in the course of the entrepreneurial programme, participants are supported in using their transnational connections to create a business in Switzerland or abroad:

“[N]ine times out of ten maybe, they are working with a local partner in their home country or somewhere, where they lived before and then they want to sell the product here. So it is not about building the connections in the country, they have that, it is about finding the market, and pitching it [the idea] to the market here or online, or wherever the market is.” (Interview with a co-founder – 10.05.18)

In this way, MES gives new meaning to resources that are specific to “transnational biographies” (Glorius, 2017: 110), facilitating a relational perception of space in which participants are encouraged to maintain or (re)establish connections between their former countries of origin and Switzerland.

In fact, as we followed the activities of MES over time and interviewed participants, we observed that many migrants overcome situations of skills mismatch and unemployment by developing an entrepreneurial project. With the support of MES they create businesses or social projects that capitalise on their skill sets, resources, and contacts outside of Switzerland. For example, they sell goods produced in their former residence countries that incorporate cultural references, such as food and textiles, or mobilise social networks abroad to build professional collaborations. The following accounts, which derive from interviews with two former programme participants, illustrate such cases:

Valeria Garcia⁵ was born in Colombia in the 1980s. After finishing high school, she moved to New Zealand, where she worked as a nanny for four years and met her future Swiss husband. Following a short return to Colombia, she moved to Spain and then to Italy to obtain a bachelor’s degree in fashion design. In 2013, she got married and decided to live with her husband in

⁵ All names have been anonymised.

Switzerland. Valeria looked for a job in the fashion sector, but was unsuccessful. According to her, this was due to her lack of local contacts and German language skills. Valeria was frustrated and started working as a nanny again. Yet, she still aspired to create her own wedding dress label. She then joined the MES entrepreneurship programme, which supported her with expertise, encouragement, and access to a local network. Valeria not only uses her professional skills to design dresses, she also capitalises on her existing knowledge and contacts in Colombia. She founded a shop in the centre of Bogota, which is run by her relatives, and a tailors' workshop on the city outskirts. She continues to try to establish collaborations and a client base in Switzerland. In the interview, Valeria concludes that she is excited about the future as her business is growing. Not only is she portrayed in Colombian fashion magazines, but she has been able to quit her job as a nanny and still financially support her Colombian family and pay her employees. (retrieved from interview with a former participant – 23.08.19)

Farid Hassan was born in Saudi Arabia in the 1980s. At the age of sixteen he moved to Syria where both his parents were born. He obtained a bachelor's degree in fine arts and a master's degree in marketing. He then worked in different art workshops and advertising agencies as a graphic designer and art director. In 2008, Farid met his future wife in Damascus, who was born in Switzerland but was visiting her Syrian family at the time. They married shortly after. When the conflict in Syria became more critical, Farid decided to join his wife in Switzerland. Here, Farid struggled to find a job that met his qualifications. Relying on the salary of his Swiss wife, he tried to earn additional income by acquiring temporary contracts as a graphic designer and working nightshifts in an asylum shelter. Yet, he was not satisfied with his unstable professional life. Then Farid participated in the MES programme. His entrepreneurial project aims to preserve Syrian art workshops, which are disappearing as a result of the war. Thus, he brings the work of Syrian artisans to the Swiss market. MES helped him learn about start-up regulations in Switzerland and access local contacts. As he struggled to gather the necessary capital to start his business, MES supported him to set up a crowd-funding

campaign and screened his advertising video at different events. His campaign was successful, and he started selling products online. He recounts:

“Definitely, it is a morale booster, because when, you know, when you get one rejection after another it really demoralises people, you really tend to believe that I’m not good enough to do anything, to be accepted. So, it’s a very critical, very bad position. [...] In terms of self-esteem, it’s definitely building up at the moment when people approach you, saying: “Well you have a really interesting project, I would love to support you or be part of it.” (Interview with a former participant – 28.10.19)

These stories are representative of many other programme participants. They show how MES provides encouragement, professional training, and access to local networks, thereby fostering entrepreneurial projects of migrants who were rejected by and frustrated with the Swiss labour market. However, not all participants succeed in launching a business which provides economic self-sufficiency and thus a meaningful alternative to more dependent forms of employment. Entrepreneurship involves risks which are not possible for every migrant. Participants like Valeria and Farid are supported by their Swiss partners. Marrying a Swiss citizen not only provided them cross-border mobility rights and stable legal status in Switzerland, but also allows Valeria and Farid to rely on their partners financially while building a business. In contrast, Emilio’s story suggests precarities for participants in different situations:

Emilio Martínez was born in Colombia in the 1990s. After completing a bachelor’s degree in photography, he opened a café with his wife. Due to political instabilities in Colombia, however, Emilio and his family had to leave the country and applied for asylum in Switzerland. After living in different refugee shelters, Emilio and his wife were moved to an apartment in the countryside, where their first child was born. At the time of the interview in 2019, Emilio was still waiting for his residence permit. In this unstable situation, Emilio could not find employment. Yet, he was motivated to find a solution. Together with a Colombian friend, he developed an idea to foster the fair trade of mineral stones between Colombia and Switzerland. They joined MES to gain knowledge about the start-up process and access local contacts. Yet, because of Emilio’s asylum status, he has not been able to officially

launch the business. As an asylum seeker he is not allowed to travel internationally, and it would be crucial for his business to be able to go to Colombia personally to expand his business connections. Thus, his legal status, lack of financial capital, and care responsibilities towards his new-born child are slowing down the development of his business. MES gave him new confidence and inspiration, but he must still wait for his legal situation to resolve as he seeks other employment opportunities to sustain his family (retrieved from interview with a former participant – 23.10.19).

Emilio's story mirrors the experiences of numerous MES participants who do not succeed in launching a business. Due to nationality and permit status, unstable legal situations often prevent migrants from officially creating a business and travelling for entrepreneurial purposes. Others could not maintain professional networks abroad or access transnational resources due to political instabilities or a lack of relevant infrastructure. Some cannot risk investing in a business because they lack financial stability. Others face care obligations which prevents them from working on their project full time. Failed attempts to create a business can in part also be traced back to high levels of competition and the lack of stable pay within the entrepreneurial field. Moreover, statistics show that self-employment among non-citizens in Switzerland is lower compared to Swiss nationals (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2021). This is in sharp contrast to many other European countries (Juchno and Agafitei, 2017: 24) and suggests that a person's ability to start a business in Switzerland is highly dependent on characteristics such as nationality and duration of stay (see Piguet, 2010). Our data complements this analysis as it highlights intersections with other social markers of difference such as legal status, gender, family situation, and class.

In sum, it becomes evident that MES encourages its participants to imagine a professional future that many are unlikely to realise—at least in the short term. Hence, the gap between some participants' newly forged labour market subjectivities and their labour market realities may turn into a source of disappointment. Yet, our longitudinal data on MES also shows that the organisation is becoming aware that not every participant is able to become a successful entrepreneur. Consequently, MES tries to facilitate “regular” economic inclusion by forwarding employment and internship advertisements to participants. Furthermore, the organisation is currently exploring ways to create another programme which focuses on access to the labour market beyond the entrepreneurial sphere.

5.2 Challenging deficit-oriented views of migration and simplistic ideas of vulnerability

As discussed above, processes of economic exclusion from the labour market also stem from deficit-oriented discourses and stereotypical assumptions regarding the skills and vulnerabilities of migrants. Following this argument, MES not only offers entrepreneurial training as a concrete alternative to downgrading migrants' skills, it also seeks to challenge dominant narratives with regard to migration more generally. In this regard, MES applies several strategies: on a societal level, "showcasing" migrants' potential contributions; on an organisational level, defining an inclusive target audience; and on an individual level, building resilience.

The strategy of "showcasing" migrants' potential contributions to society becomes especially visible when attending the public events organised by MES, in which participants pitch their project ideas and recount their migratory experiences. These events aim to challenge the exclusionary strategies of employers by advocating for the positive societal and economic impacts of diversity. In these attempts, MES highlights the role of migrants as resourceful individuals who contribute to society in innovative ways, rather than as vulnerable figures in need of support. The following quote by one of the co-founders illustrates this narrative:

"[We] try to reframe the dialogue, because I mean also what we are trying to do is shift the discourse on refugees: from poor people who need help, to people who can help themselves, if they are given the opportunities and the tools and if you see them not as a burden, but as a potential. So that is sort of our little sales pitch, this positive paradigm versus this negative. It is not negative even, it is like a good instinct from people, this "I want to support them", but it is very much like "I am going to help a little refugee!" And I am not kidding, we have had people come to us, and say "I want to be a mentor, do they need blankets, I can bring them food?", and we are like: "No, no, no!". (Interview with a co-founder – 10.05.18)

This progressive view that transcends patronising notions of migrants as always vulnerable is evident in all the material we analysed. Moreover, in publicly describing the goals of the organisation, MES strictly refrains from talking about "integration" (see Glorius and Schondelmayer, 2020: 180-182 for a discussion on the manifold interpretations of this term). Rather than speaking of a one-sided integration of migrants into Swiss society, the organisation

calls for migrants and “locals” to create an inclusive society together. Through its public events and online presence, MES also tries to convey this message to the “outside” by collaborating with local businesses and inviting their employees to become volunteers and mentors in the programme.

At an organisational level, MES tries to overcome dominant images of migration by defining an “inclusive target audience”, in the sense that the core team does not admit participants to the training programme based on immigration status or imagined categories, such as “refugee”. Rather, it seeks to address people who define themselves as entrepreneurs with a migrant background in need of support. Thereby, they apply an alternative, intersectional understanding which does not equate vulnerability with a particular legal status or country of origin. In doing so, the organisation acknowledges that vulnerabilities do not necessarily stem from the experience of migration per se but emerge in interaction with social categories such as gender, family situation, and class. This is of crucial importance, as studies have shown that state-based categories often reflect simplistic images of migrants and societal discourses of otherness, and do not actually relate to migrants’ lived realities, experiences, feelings of belonging, and skills (see e.g., Akoka *et al.*, 2017; Waldinger, 2016). In this way, MES succeeds in creating a space that brings together otherwise disparate individuals who are united by their experiences of exclusion from the labour market.

Finally, MES addresses these issues on an individual level by seeking to foster resilience among programme participants. This is partly based on the organisation’s assumption that deficit-oriented narratives not only affect state authorities and employers but are also internalised by migrants. For this purpose, MES members intentionally use alternative language during interactions between the core team and the participants, which we observed while attending training workshops:

“The subject of migration seems to be almost completely absent! Or rather, migration issues are negotiated quite differently here. The participants of the workshop were consistently addressed as business people or (future) entrepreneurs who are currently developing important and exciting projects—not as migrants who need to integrate or need to be integrated. Also, the title of a questionnaire some of them needed to fill in read: “Computer Skills Survey for Entrepreneurs”. [...] If the topic of migration was addressed, then it was either positively connoted, or the participants were asked to interpret for

themselves what significance their migration experience might have for their business, e.g. during the Speed-Dating exercise.” (Field notes by Stingl – 12.-13.05.18)

The experience of constantly being addressed as a skilled, talented entrepreneur encourages participants to overcome internal barriers related to their migratory experiences and legal status. According to the co-founder interviewed, these barriers prevent participants from imagining a professional future beyond precarious labour sectors. Thus, this interpellation seeks to strengthen migrants’ self-confidence and enable them to forge alternative labour market subjectivities. This may enhance their entrepreneurial activities but could also encourage them to forge another path, such as further training or employment. In the interviews, participants continuously elaborated on the positive effects of the programme on their mental well-being and self-esteem, as can be observed in Farid Hassan’s statement in the previous section.

However, critical examination of these strategies also reveals a number of ambivalences. First, we would like to critically discuss the strategy of “showcasing” migrants’ potential contributions to the wider public in order to reframe dominant discourses around migration. While this strategy may successfully create new narratives of inclusion beyond notions of deficit, which is particularly important when migrants are framed as economic burdens, it also risks reinforcing or creating new lines of differentiation. This concerns the established divide between migrants and non-migrants, where migrants are required to advertise their skills and potential societal contributions in order to be considered “welcome”. Second, considering that migrants are often unfairly defined by reductive categories, the idea of an inclusive target audience that transcends immigration status and fixed ideas of vulnerability is refreshing. Yet, as shown in the previous chapter, precarities in the livelihoods of certain participants remain. Some of the difficulties that participants face in realising professional projects stem from structural relations mobilised by the Swiss immigration system, which MES cannot undo completely. For example, there are still legal restrictions on starting a business for asylum seekers or individuals that depend on social services. While the organisation welcomes these individuals to become active members of MES, their status-based restrictions only allow them to create “social initiatives” or to function as a silent partner in someone else’s project.

Finally, we observed that despite MES’s efforts on the societal and organisational levels, its strategies focus primarily on the individual level of participants when it comes to addressing

migrants' exclusion from the labour market. MES rarely addresses public authorities or files legal proceedings against employers who engage in discriminatory practices. Instead, the organisation encourages the individual to overcome "internal barriers" by becoming an entrepreneur. This is in line with the neoliberal logic of promoting individual self-responsibility for one's professional trajectory and resembles regular integration programmes, as discussed in Chapter 2. This may hinder the mobilisation of broader collective alliances. Moreover, it supports the neoliberal discourses at the heart of Switzerland's current social and employment policies (see Bachmann, 2016: 178; Maeder and Nadai, 2009), while neglecting the conditions that excluded migrants from meaningful labour market participation in the first place. As a result, and similar to what Martin (2011: 2948) discusses with respect to the activities of a non-profit migrant organisation in Chicago, MES runs the risk of working within the system, rather than against it.

However, it is important to recognise that MES is mainly run by migrant women, who themselves founded the organisation to a certain extent out of an "act of necessity" after struggling to access the labour market. In the course of the collaborative workshop we organised, some of the core team members emphasised the constraints arising from their own positionality. These include unfamiliarity with the Swiss system, the precariousness that comes with running a non-profit organisation, and the difficulties they face when it comes to bureaucratic procedures and acquiring funding from public and private sources. Moreover, as non-Swiss citizens most of them are unable to take full advantage of the Swiss system's multiple access points to the political arena (see Giugni and Passy, 2004: 77). In this sense, the focus on the individual level can be read as a circumvention strategy that aims to improve the living conditions of other migrants despite the structural constraints that limit the core team's own agency.

5.3 Acknowledging needs and identities beyond the economic sphere

In this final section, we illuminate MES's strategies that, at first glance, appear to have little to do with promoting economic participation. However, these strategies are closely linked to its overarching goal of fighting against the economic exclusion of migrants while creating a durable social space. While conducting fieldwork, we observed that MES emphasises diverse aspects of life, which are relevant to migrants' everyday experiences both within and outside the labour market. Thereby, the organisation acknowledges that the multiple needs and identities of programme participants extend far beyond the economic sphere.

For instance, MES takes domestic care responsibilities into consideration. The core team members actively encourage participants to bring their children to the training sessions and even offer childcare in order to enable everyone to fully participate. This is particularly notable since childcare is not part of regular “integration” measures offered by the state (Bachmann, 2016: 234). Thus, MES seeks to challenge experiences of exclusion in a differentiated way by acknowledging that the participants’ agency and well-being in the economic sphere is significantly shaped by their lives outside of it (see Dutta, 2016). In doing so, the organisation challenges the dominant reduction of migrants to “mere” workers as well as the simplistic focus on their potential economic contribution.

Along with creating equal access to entrepreneurial support and training, MES also actively fosters social inclusion. The entrepreneurial programme includes coffee breaks and shared meals which provide opportunities for informal exchanges. These allow participants to connect with others and expand their social networks and activities in the local community. Moreover, by organising a wide range of public events and engaging local volunteers, the organisation also establishes connections between migrants and “locals”. Our observations show that these networking opportunities not only support the participants’ business activities, but also enhance feelings of belonging to a community beyond their economic needs. In the interviews, participants highlighted that they appreciated MES particularly for the social support they received during the programme and the friendships they were able to build with people in similar situations. Valeria Garcia, whose story we told above, described MES as a “place to go” where you “see that you are not alone” in the struggle to find a job (interview with a former participant – 23.08.19). Another participant, a thirty-two-year-old Ethiopian man, referred to MES as a “place of safety” that creates a feeling of “belonging” and “home” (interview with a former participant – 09.09.19). These narratives are apparent in all our interviews and informal talks. They show that MES creates a sense of community among its members, which counterbalances dominant experiences of loneliness after arriving in Switzerland.

Furthermore, MES facilitates the long-term engagement of participants. After the culmination of the entrepreneurial programme, many participants stay actively involved in the organisation as alumni and are able to take advantage of additional training and networking sessions. Former participants become mentors for future participants, support the core team’s administrative tasks, or attend the organisation’s public events. Notably, MES created an online chat group in

order to enable exchanges among past participants to continue. The members of this chat send information relevant to business creation, employment opportunities, and other support institutions. They regularly share updates and advice related to their entrepreneurial projects, for example in terms of digital marketing and funding. Yet, they also report news on their legal status, family situations, and private social lives. Informal discussions and friendly conversations are central to these exchanges. This shows that MES provides continuous support to migrants not only in terms of their professional lives, but also with regard to their social relationships.

Another aspect that we noticed during our fieldwork is that in all of MES's actions, the appropriation of material space remains ephemeral, as the buildings and spaces in which the organisation's activities take place vary greatly. It uses co-working spaces in the city where they operate, meeting rooms of the cooperate firms with which they collaborate, as well as public event locations that can be rented. The organisation also operates in digital space by using virtual technologies and communication apps, as described above. This is particularly apparent since the COVID-19 outbreak. In 2020, MES offered their entrepreneurial programme completely online and intensified its online interactions with current and former participants, as well as volunteers and the public. While we could not observe the appropriation of a concrete material space, our research strongly suggests that the social activities and interactions of the different actors involved in MES create a durable social space that fosters a sense of belonging among participants. Following a conceptualisation of space that looks beyond the material structures of places (see Section 3), we argue that MES produces a social and relational space that allows people to re-evaluate their connections to other places, share experiences of exclusion, and work together to collectively improve their lives both within and beyond the economic sphere. In this way, this space provides relief from everyday struggles and represents an important point of connection, even for former participants. In the conclusion to this paper, we connect these findings with the ambivalences of MES's strategies identified in the previous sections to discuss in what ways these strategies are transformative and thus to what extent MES can be considered "counterspace".

6. Conclusion: A migrant organisation as counterspace?

This article explored the activities of Migrant Entrepreneurship Switzerland (MES), a migrant-run organisation in a German-speaking city in Switzerland. By focusing on migrants' collective responses to processes of labour market exclusion, we contributed to the existing literature, which primarily highlights individual agentic strategies. Based on ethnographic and participatory methods, we identified three main strategies employed by the organisation under study. First, MES aims to overcome situations of skills mismatch and unemployment by supporting migrants who aspire to become entrepreneurs. Second, it challenges deficit-oriented views of migration and simplistic ideas of vulnerability by showcasing migrants' potential contributions and fostering personal resilience. And finally, the organisation acknowledges the needs and identities of migrants beyond the economic sphere by providing a sense of community. In all of these examples, the social and relational dimensions of MES's agentic strategies became apparent. Our analysis revealed that despite the limited use of a specific material space MES is able to create a durable social space in which members reappraise migrants' transnational resources, forge labour market subjectivities beyond the precarious sectors, and create a feeling of belonging. In this space, migrants can share their experiences of labour market exclusion and collectively seek to improve their overall living conditions.

Nevertheless, our critical examination of these strategies uncovered a range of ambivalences in MES's activities and showed that the organisation does not always have a direct effect on the professional lives of participants, nor on the structural conditions that encouraged them to undertake the programme in the first place. For instance, not all entrepreneurial projects lead to success in terms of providing economic self-sufficiency. Whether or not participants become "successful" entrepreneurs and thereby overcome barriers to the labour market still depends on their position in society in relation to markers of difference such as nationality, legal status, gender, family situation, and class. MES is not able to fully address these structural constraints, which we attribute in part to the positionality of the core team members behind the organisation. The observed ambivalences are mainly connected to the organisation's strong focus on individual participants. Encouraging migrants to overcome personal barriers resonates with the neoliberal logic of promoting individual responsibility for the success of one's professional career. By following this logic MES risks of losing sight of structural inequalities.

In light of these findings, our conclusion as to whether and to what extent the studied migrant organisation represents a counterspace needs to be differentiated. With regard to dominant

societal modes of exclusion, our analysis shows that the organisation's intentions to actively reshape the power relations at stake do not fully align with its activities and their outcomes — at least during the period of this analysis. However, paying close attention to the experiences of individual participants reveals that the organisation serves as an important intervention in the prevailing reality of the social and economic exclusion of many migrants in Switzerland. Consequently, at the individual level MES's activities can be viewed as transformative, and in this sense, MES provides a meaningful counterspace. In conclusion, our study points to the importance of considering the social and relational dimensions of migrants' spatial agency and the differentiated effects of collective action.

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