UTILIZING 'AUSTERITY URBANISM' TO UNDERSTAND BERLIN'S RESPONSE TO
THE 2015-16 INFLUX OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

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ABSTRACT

Chloe J. Gruesbeck: Utilizing 'Austerity Urbanism' to Understand Berlin's Response to the
2015-16 Influx of Refugees and Asylum Seekers
(Under the direction of Rahsaan Maxwell)

In 2015, a wave of forcibly displaced people entered Germany in what became known as

the 'refugee crisis.' Drawing on the case of Berlin — which absorbed a higher number of

refugees than any other European city — my thesis will highlight the obstacles to accepting large

influxes of refugees in an urban space, specifically relating to housing provisions. At the core of

my analysis, I apply the concept of austerity urbanism as an ideological lens to understand

Berlin's state response. I will explain how decades of privatization and budget cuts to social

services caused the state and local authorities to lack the capacity to adequately respond to the

newcomers' needs. I conclude that Berlin's refugee 'crisis' originated less so in the arrival of

thousands of migrants than in the failure of state institutions.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BAMF   Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees)

BGB   Bankgesellschaft Berlin

BIM   Berliner Institut für empirische Integrations- und Migrationsforschung (Berlin Institute for Empirical Integration and Migration Research)

LAF   Landesamt für Flüchtlingsangelegenheiten (State Office for Refugee Affairs)

LaGeSo   Landesamt für Gesundheit und Soziales (State Office for Health and Social Affairs)

PeWoBe   Professionelle Wohn- Und Betreuung (Professional Housing and Assistance Company)

ZFK   Zentraler Koordinationsstab Flüchtlinge (Central Coordination Unit for Refugees)

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, as over a million forcibly displaced persons entered Europe — in what came to be known as the 'refugee crisis' — Germany became the primary destination for many (Pew Research Center, 2016). Under Germany's federal system, many of the basic measures of integration and distribution of public goods are left to the state and municipal levels of governance as opposed to the national (Katz et al., 2016, pg. 14). Yet to date, the dominant focus of policymakers and the media regarding immigration policies has been on the national stage. We continue to know little about how cities — where refugees disproportionally settle — grapple with accommodating new arrivals. This is problematic as, "cities carry the main burden of integration" Franz-Reinhard Habbel, spokesperson of the Association of German Cities and Municipalities, pointed out during a panel discussion on the role of cities in refugee immigration (Katz et al., 2016, pg. 6).

Drawing on the case of Berlin — which absorbed a higher number of refugees than any other European city — my thesis aims to illuminate the obstacles of accommodating large influxes of refugees in metropolitan landscapes, particularly relating to housing provisions. Berlin's refugee policy has been framed through a rigid budget policy as it has been operating under extreme austerity measures since 2001 following the Bankgesellschaft Berlin (BGB) crisis when the Berlin Senate chose to socialize the private banking debt of Berlin's largest banking house (Bernt, 2014, pg. 16-17). As a result of their large public debt and desire for a balanced budget, Berlin opted to outsource many critical functions during the 'crisis,' such as hiring

private firms to run sites and renting shelters from private companies. This had numerous negative consequences, including ready-to-occupy shelters remaining empty for months as firms were suing and other sites sitting empty due to zoning or structural issues, costing taxpayers millions (Fuchs, 2017). The city-state also utilized spaces like schools and public sports halls for emergency refugee accommodations over a prolonged period, incubating tensions in the community (Knight, 2015).

Keeping these outcomes in mind, I situate the case of Berlin's refugee housing crisis against the backdrop of austerity urbanism. Austerity urbanism is an analytical tool that details the strengthening of existing neoliberal practices that have resulted in deeper and wider entrenchment of pro-market solutions to housing provisioning while implementing additional fiscal retrenchment of the social state (Peck, 2012). My central research question is thus: What were the effects of Berlin's austerity urbanism approach to housing asylum seekers from 2015 through 2016? At the core of my analysis, I plan to apply austerity urbanism as an ideological lens to understand Berlin's continued response to the influx of asylum seekers. As evidence, I utilize think tank reports, interviews, municipal budgets, newspaper articles, and prior scholarly research.

In writing on this topic, my thesis will add to a growing body of work seeking to apply the concept of austerity urbanism to European cities (Davies and Blanco, 2017; Mayer, 2013; Pollio, 2016; Soederberg, 2018). While my focus is on the city-state of Berlin, my goal is to provide insights into the issues with the application of austerity urbanism to market-led refugee service provisioning. As forced migration continues to be a prominent issue for urban communities globally, the provisioning of refugee services in urban spaces operating under conditions of austerity remains more relevant than ever. In the remainder of this paper, I will (1)
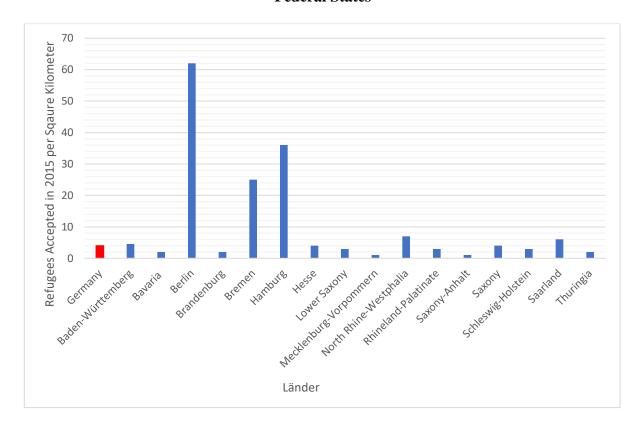
form a contextual foundation by exploring the distortions Germany's refugee distribution system creates for city-states and how we can situate such obstacles in austerity urbanism, (2) form the bulk of my analysis by positioning Berlin's refugee settlement initiatives using these three key aspects of austerity urbanism as a theoretical backdrop, (3) establish analytical stakes on an alternative explanation, to establish that Berlin's refugee 'crisis' was not driven solely by the large numbers of people entering the city, and (4) summarize my findings and provide closing comments.

CHAPTER I – CONTEXTUAL FOUNDATION

A. Distortions in the Distribution System: A unique problem for city-states

After entering Germany, refugees are distributed following a long-standing formula for distributing federal resources. The distribution system, the Königsteiner Schlüssel, allocates refugees to one of the 16 states (*Länder)* based on tax revenues and the total population of each state. The notion that the federal government considers the fiscal capacity of the state means the federal government relies heavily on the assumption that the state will have the capacity to shoulder a portion of the refugee costs (Katz, 2016, pg. 10). Further, as the quota system only considers the total population, states that are more densely populated receive disproportionately more refugees per square kilometer than states with more dispersed populations (Katz, 2016, pg. 11). According to this structure, Berlin – the country's largest city-state – has been allotted the greatest number of refugees in Germany (Eurocities, 2016). For comparison, Berlin hosted 64.5 times more refugees per square kilometer than Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in 2016 (Katz, 2016, pg. 11). To compare Berlin with the other German federal states, see the chart below.

Fig. 1- Refugees Accepted in 2015 per Square Kilometers for Germany and German Federal States

Data Source: Local municipal agencies of the 15 cities, Destatis, 2016

These distortions towards cities are significant in the context of refugee accommodations for two reasons: (1) an increased likelihood of facing "not in my backyard" attitudes from current residents and (2) the preexisting presence of housing affordability issues. First, the presence of higher population densities increases the difficulty of creating emergency shelters or accessing long-term housing. Additionally, projects can be delayed in communities by residents who object to the creation of new housing and the stalling of such projects can increase costs and undermine the objective of avoiding a high concentration of asylum seekers. Conversely, housing projects in less densely populated regions can be made available quicker with less friction ideally with the surrounding community, although this can lead to the isolation of refugees (Katz, 2016, pg. 13).

Second, Germany's city-states begin with not only high levels of population density but also with continued housing affordability and access concerns. In a city where roughly 85% of residents rent rather than own, Berlin faced a 45% rise in rental prices between 2004 to 2014. Such pre-existing issues in the housing market can significantly influence emergency reception and long-term efforts due to higher property costs (a byproduct of limited supply) and construction (a byproduct of higher demand for construction workers) (Katz, 2016, pg. 13). How the burden of addressing both pre-existing affordable housing concerns and the nascent challenge of accommodating large numbers of refugees relates to market-facilitating approaches by the city-state of Berlin will be discussed below. For now, it is useful to further expand on the process of accommodating refugees in Berlin to build a contextual foundation for my analysis.

B. Receiving and Housing Refugees in Berlin

Once refugees arrive in Berlin, they must register at the city's reception center. Until the end of July 2016, this process was administered by the State Office for Health and Social Affairs (*Landesamt für Gesundheit und Soziales* – LaGeSo). Once registered, refugees are required to apply for either political asylum or refugee status at the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (*Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge* – BAMF). While the federal government determines how refugees are distributed and which are permitted to remain in the country, how they are housed falls under the purview of each state. In the case of Berlin, the Berlin Senate and its 12 district governments are responsible for providing refugee accommodations.

There are three main types of refugee dwellings in Berlin: (1) emergency shelters, (2) communal dwellings, and (3) rental housing (Soederberg, 2018, pg. 926). Emergency shelters (*Notunterkünfte*) are temporary mass dwellings that are intended to prevent homelessness and aid

the German authorities in keeping track of refugees during their asylum process. Of the three different forms of dwellings, it is emergency dwellings that have come under the most public scrutiny. For instance, Tempelhof Airport, which was originally intended for 1,200 refugees in September 2015, swelled to 2,662 inhabitants by 2016. Within the disused hangars, refugees spent months living in makeshift portioned spaces with 12 bunk beds in a section (Knight, 2016). Berlin's municipal authorities have come under sharp criticism from the public, including concerns related to the lack of suitable refugee housing to misuse of taxpayer money. To explore the further effects of Berlin's austerity urbanism approach to housing asylum seekers following 2015, it is first necessary to better understand what substantiated the 'crisis.'

C. Effects of Austerity Urbanism

Starting in 2015, images of thousands of refugees in Berlin huddled outside LaGeSo and crammed into emergency shelters circulated the internet and gained international news coverage. In the public discourse during this period, talk of a refugee 'crisis' was used to describe multiple and layered developments that were deduced to a chaotic reception created by the arrival of large numbers of refugees. This perception ignores more important dimensions, such as the sight of failing state institutions which purported a sense of 'crisis.' Berlin's municipal struggle to adequately respond to migration movements – by processing applications quickly, providing suitable accommodations, and pursuing relevant integration projects – revealed in stark ways the effects of austerity measures and privatization on state services, including public housing (Bock, 2018, pg. 377). Of these different outcomes caused by Berlin's commitment to austerity measures through the crisis, this paper will focus specifically on (1) the poor maintenance and treatment of refugees at shelters maintained by private contractors and (2) the continued lack of

staff at LaGeSo and its predecessor, LAF, leading to longer wait times for refugees to access short and long-term housing. The aforementioned issues contributed to the broader mosaic which came to be known as the refugee crisis. To fully understand the acute lack and difficulty refugees faced to access necessities, I next situate the dynamics of the 'crisis' within Berlin's austerity urbanism.

D. Setting the 2015-16 Refugee Influx Against the Backdrop of Austerity Urbanism

Developed by Jamie Peck (2012), austerity urbanism was originally formulated to articulate the governance of advanced neoliberalism in large US cities in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Susanne Soederberg (2018) first applied the concept to Berlin's refugee crisis by focusing strictly on the three types of shelter provisioning for refugees, yet refrained from looking at how the main tenants of Peck's correlated to the crisis at large. In my analysis, I provide further nuance to Soederberg's findings by positioning Berlin's refugee settlement initiatives and the "crisis" more broadly by using the three key aspects of austerity urbanism as a theoretical backdrop. The principal dimensions which might be thought of as the urbanization of neoliberal austerity, as Peck claims, can be summarized in three processes: destructive creativity, deficit politics, and devolved risk (Peck, pg. 631). These three aspects form the core structure of my analysis.

To sum up the concept, austerity represents an opportunity to push for smaller state expenditures at the urban scale and in categorizing government downsizing and rolling privatization as fiscal necessities in already neoliberalized structures of state power and politics (Peck, 2021, pg. 626). Notably, Peck argues austerity more forcefully impacts urban environments:

It is also distinctly an *urban crisis* in the sense that cities are disproportionately reliant on public services; and in the sense that they are 'home' to many of the preferred political targets of austerity programs — the 'undeserving' poor, minorities and marginalized populations, public-service sector unions, and 'bureaucratized' infrastructures. Cities are therefore where austerity bites. (pg. 629)

In a country that was already operating under conditions of austerity in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, austerity urbanism directly impacted Berlin's refugee response by promoting market-facilitating approaches to refugee services, such as emergency and long-term accommodations.

Berlin – like other German cities – was subject to new austerity measures following the onset of the 2008 financial crisis. Most notably the 2011 constitutionally inscribed federal debt brake limited the issuance of government debt and forced federal states to run balanced budgets. Yet, the capital's experience with austerity dates back even further. Previously, access to housing, as well as additional services like utilities, were viewed as social goods in Berlin through the guarantee of state regulations (Aalbers & Holm, 2008). However, beginning in the 1990s, local Berlin governments began to privatize their housing and utility companies mainly because of public debts — which at the time ran upwards of approximately €50 billion (Vesper, 2003). This large public debt was the product of the "Berlin banking scandal." In 2001, Berlin created an 'extreme budgetary emergency' by rescuing the city's largest banking institution, Bankgesellschaft Berlin. Previously, BGB held nearly half of Berliner's accounts and the Berlin Senate acted as a major shareholder (Bernt, 2014, pg. 16-17). The associated debt has since been used as a justification to decrease spending on redistributive options through the rolling privatization of public utilities and housing. Bernt et al. (2014) note that 'the highest aim for Berlin since, and independently of current political power and government coalitions, has been a balanced budget.' It is under these economic conditions that the 2015 refugee crisis occurred.

CHAPTER II – ANALYSIS

A. Key Aspect One: Destructive Creativity

What were the effects of Berlin's dedication to austerity urbanism on housing asylum seekers from 2015 through 2016? Broadly speaking, conditions of austerity further the destructive tendencies of neoliberalism's reiterative process of creative destruction (Peck, 2012, pg. 631). The term 'creative destruction' was originally coined by Joseph Schumpeter, where it referred to 'the incessant product and process innovation mechanism by which new production units replace outdated ones' (Schumpeter, 2020). The project of neoliberalization progresses through targeted attacks on state and social programs deemed unnecessary to market progress, such as collective services like access to affordable housing. Here, I highlight the efforts of the Berlin government since 2015 to push additional rounds of state and social action patterned in neoliberal terms and its impact on the plight of refugees. Examples discussed include: (1) the *private provisioning* of companies hired to maintain resettlement centers; (2) the *voluntarism* of private citizens NGOs, and grassroots efforts that provided services on a voluntary or non-profit basis where needed; and (3) the *restrained governance* of the Berlin senate's resettlement strategy in terms of housing provisioning.

A.1. Private Provision

In comparison to the intended outcomes of market fundamentalism which support austerity urbanism, the decision by the city of Berlin to outsource refugee services such as

counseling, food services, cleaners, and security personnel to private, for-profit companies did not have the desired result of efficiency and effectiveness (Refugees Welcome, 2017). Later in my analysis, I detail how the hiring of such private contractors was necessitated by state budget cuts and staff downsizing, an action I argue is the core catalyst to the 'crisis.' In connection with the contractors, the city received a litany of complaints including: (1) the poor quality of the food provided which often ignored dietary restrictions, (2) lack of cooking facilities, (2) physical, sexual, and racial abuse by staff, (3) unhygienic living conditions including bed bugs and insufficient toilets and shower facilities, and (4) overcrowded living conditions (Soederberg, 2018, pg. 931).

One particularly harrowing account of the poor results achieved through private provisioning includes the 2016 incident at a refugee shelter managed by the "Professional Housing and Assistance Company" (PeWoBe) in Berlin's eastern Hellersdorf district. During this episode, emails surfaced between senior PeWoBe employees which included macabre remarks about refugee children being beheaded by a guillotine and later burning the corpses in a "large-volume crematorium." Before the public outlash from the publicized emails – and Berlin's subsequent termination of the contract with the refugee housing management company – PeWoBe ran 11 refugee shelters within the city. The incident was not the first time the city had received complaints about PeWoBe, which included employees creating an atmosphere of intimidation and the company allegedly forging employee lists to conceal the fact that they employed far fewer staff than the city of Berlin required (Bölinger, 2016). The following month, Berlin's public prosecutor opened an investigation on PeWoBe, along with fellow refugee shelter operator, Gierso, for allegedly fraudulently overcharging the city for nearly €3 million (Dassler, 2016).

The city of Berlin ran into further issues with private provisioning by leasing structures meant to be transitioned to shelters from for-profit real estate companies. The case of a former Tetra Pak factory in northern Berlin is a controversial example. In an effort to house up to 1,100 refugees, the city leased the property at the height of the influx in 2015. For two years, the city paid approximately €160,000 per month for the 35,000 square meter property to a private real estate agency named Capital Bay GmhH, based in Luxembourg – all without a single refugee ever living at the former factory. The city cited structural issues, such as the property's plumbing being in poor condition, which would push renovation costs too high to make the complex livable. When the lease for the property finally expired in 2018, Berlin had misused over €6 million of taxpayer money (Fuchs, 2017). Both the PeWoBe and Tetra Pak factory incidents are byproducts of the Berlin government's partiality for private provisioning over direct involvement – a supporting concept of austerity urbanism.

Studies have found that many of the issues created by the private provisioning of refugee services stem from a lack of federal and state regulations (Foroutan et al., 2017b, pg. 9). Refugee councils voiced concerns on the topic, calling for regulations related to "binding minimum conditions that are intended to put a stop to the worst excesses of accommodation" (Wendel, 2014, pg. 39). To date, many private firms contracted by the Berlin government to ensure safety and basic services at shelters continue to operate without clear and enforceable standards, resulting in a greater degree of interpretation from the private contractors on what is (or is not) appropriate. This shortcoming is particularly poignant regarding vulnerable groups of people according to Article 21 of the EU Admissions Directive (i.e., single parents with underage children and persons who have experienced sexual violence) as there are no state guidelines for dealing with refugees who require a higher degree of protection (Foroutan et al., 2017b, pg. 5).

Behind the lack of standards lurks the Berlin government's commitment to principles of market fundamentalism in the policies and regulatory landscape of austerity urbanism.

A.2. Voluntarism

Voluntarism, the second aspect involved in the destructive creativity which underpins austerity urbanism, is a space where the state's failure to provide satisfactory resources or oversight has created a considerable need for voluntary initiatives. Scholarly research has highlighted how the engagement of strong volunteering efforts has not only enabled the government to better deal with the refugee crisis but also significantly contributed to the saving of government expenditures (Nam & Steinhoff, 2019, pg. 28). Karakeyali and Kleist (2015) find that volunteering initiatives often fill in the gaps where the state fails to provide proper care while insisting that voluntary efforts should ideally be supplementary to a form of state-voluntary cooperation and not fully replace the government's tasks and responsibilities in such emergencies.

Many grassroots efforts – such as Berlin Hilft (Berlin Helps), Places4Refugees, Flüchtlinge Wilkommen (Refugees Welcome), and Moabit Hilft (Moabit Helps) – have provided invaluable support where the city of Berlin has fallen short. When hundreds of refugees were forced to spend the night outside LaGeSo in late 2015 – an incident I go into more detail on later – Moabit Hilft gained national recognition for coordinating support activities, distributing food and water, arranging accommodations for hardship cases, and accompanying applicants to appointments. Volunteers for the organization were regularly on the news and talk shows, denouncing Berlin's failing public administration, and voicing volunteer frustration. When the

mayor invited Moabit Hilft to a ceremony at city hall meant to applaud their efforts, the group

declined via Facebook post:

> It is not just that we can't fit the event in our schedule, because, at that time of day, we hand out meals, move people into busses, greet newcomers, and so on. We also find this invitation, at this point, tasteless and bigoted. We don't see any of 'the Senate is doing what it can to welcome newcomers, caring for them and facilitating integration'. Otherwise, there would not have been people standing in the rain and mud this morning. We don't want to listen to a 'choir of encounter' [during the ceremony in the city hall] while people are without provisions at Lageso. We will not be patient. The responsible senator is accusing us of impatience anyway – instead, you should thank the refugees for their 'patience.' (Bock, 2018, pg. 381)

Such comments highlight non-profit organizations' exhaustion during this period due to the

government's limited and disorganized approach to the influx of new arrivals.

A.3. Restrained Governance

The nature of neoliberal governance is that of a restrained manner. To look closer at this

aspect, I highlight the city of Berlin's intentional decision to foster pro-market housing solutions

for refugees in place of investing in the direct production of social housing. As previously noted,

even before the 2015 influx of refugees, the Berlin housing market was struggling with rising

rental rates and competition for rental properties. Instead of the city directly investing in long-

term accommodations, the state first opted for granting refugees rental subsidies to incentivize

the housing market to rent to refugees. In this program, federal job centers underwrote 20% of

the total cost to rent an apartment for refugees who were successfully approved by BAMF. A

second notable form of support from the state, which also highlights the removed nature through

which support was delivered, includes LaGeSo employing the non-profit organization,

Evangelische Jugend- und Fürsorgewerk (EJF). Here, the EJF provides information and

assistance on the housing market to refugees (EJF, 2017). Despite these forms of aid, refugees

continued to struggle with obstacles like discrimination from landlords, lack of knowledge of the Berlin housing market, and language barriers (Foroutan et al., 2017, pg. 19). Such structural barriers to accessing long-term housing were amplified by the restricted governmental response.

In sum, the three aspects of destructive creativity advanced by Peck (private provision, voluntarism, and restrained governance) did not result in more productive refugee provisioning but rather shifted responsibilities and impediments onto charitable organizations and refugees themselves. In this way, Berlin's government continued the project of neoliberalization through 'creatively' transferring refugee social services to nonprofits and private companies to maintain a lean budget. While many issues stemming from the utilization of private companies are covered here, it is important to highlight that the private sector was not wholly responsible for the plight of refugees during this period. The core issue, which necessitated the use of private contractors, was the bureaucratic lack of capacity to receive the large numbers of refugees the city did in 2015-2016, following a decades-long history of slashing government budgets. Accordingly, I pick up on the Berlin Senate's penchant for negative budget scenarios below.

B. Key Aspect Two: Deficit Politics

Peck notes that a macrofiscal environment immersed in austerity actively favors neoliberal responses, strengthened by negative budget scenarios which travel 'beyond most electoral horizons.' Accordingly, programs that are in spending fields not typically defended by powerful or large constituencies are vulnerable to such conditions, resulting in the default targeting of programs for the poor and marginalized (Peck, 2012, pg. 631). Perhaps the most infamous example of the Berlin Senate's propensity for deficit politics includes the budget cuts and ensuing chaos at LaGeSo.

For two decades, austerity measures forced the country to streamline its government, a phenomenon most evident in Berlin. When the East and West sectors of the city were unified in 1990, the public workforce stood at approximately 200,000 combined. By 2004, through efforts of privatizing and downgrading services, the number of city employees was slashed to 149,000. A decade later just 117,000 remained, with many municipal employees reporting that too few of them remained employed to provide services to the growing population of Berliners (Bock, 2018, pg. 381). The city's main refugee registration and management apparatus, LaGeSo, has not been immune from such budget cuts. Since 2008, LaGeSo has faced budget cuts of up to 20% and served as a national symbol of public institutions failing refugees (Soederberg, 2018, pg. 934).

What occurred at LaGeSo in the following years is strongly indicative of the effects of deficit politics on municipal systems and services, and their bureaucratic ability to facilitate refugee housing provisions. At the end of 2015, *The New York Times* published an article detailing the 'chaotic reception in Berlin,' commenting on how 'a country known for its efficiency' struggled to 'impose on the tumultuous wave of humanity arriving at its border daily' (Eddy & Johannsen, 2015). At the peak of the influx, hundreds and sometimes thousands of refugees waited outside the central office in the Moabit district with a seemingly endless wait, resulting in a nearby makeshift camp. Nonprofit Moabit Hilft co-founder and spokesperson, Diana Henniges, commented on the lack of organization:

> There's no normal waiting time. We have people who wait four days and there are people who have been trying to get in for six weeks. There's no system - if you're lucky you're in the tent at the right time and you're let in and you get a waiting number for the next day," she said. "If you're unlucky, they close the door right in front of you. The systems change three or four times over a few weeks. Sometimes there are blue wristbands, then there are white wristbands, then there are appointment cards that expire then you have to try and get them extended. A lot of the refugees don't understand what's going on. (Knight)

Another spokesperson for the same organization reported on the difficult weather conditions refugees endured, including standing up to their ankles in mud during rainy weather and queuing in below-freezing temperatures for hours (Knight, 2016).

Many have pointed out that the influx of asylum seekers is less so a "refugee" crisis than a crisis of public administration. In other words, the multi-layered event tested and applied more pressure than systems – that had been stripped financially and functionally following decades of austerity measures and the subsequent privatization of state services – could stand. Likewise, researchers found LaGeSo employees to be completely overwhelmed, understaffed, and mismanaged, reporting that relevant files had been exchanged between offices without purpose or lost completely, resulting in longer wait times for asylum seekers (Bock, 2018, pg. 381).

Such conditions and testimonies by the media and nonprofits horrified the public, who were further enraged by accounts of violence at the hands of security staff and the kidnapping and killing of a 4-year-old at the hands of a German pedophile, as his mother waited for an appointment outside the LaGeSo facility (Kushner, 2015). In response to the mounting criticism, Berlin's Mayor, Michael Müller, publicly admitted that services such as those at LaGeSo had been 'allowed to run down' through the government's commitment to balancing budgets and reducing public debt. In December 2015, *Der Spiegel* reported that Müller had pressured the former head of LaGeSo to step down and recruited McKinsey consultant, Sebastian Muschter, to take over the role (DER SPIEGEL, 2016). The move highlighted the Berlin Senate's preference for business-oriented solutions in response to the refugee crisis (Berlin Senate, 2015).

The underfunding and mismanagement of LaGeSo created hurdles beyond refugees' initial registration, including making it more difficult to find more permanent accommodations. In theory, once a refugee had located an apartment, the housing offer would first have to be

approved by the proper authorities – a task LaGeSo was responsible for until the end of 2016.

Once the offer is approved, only then could payment for the apartment be issued from the state

and the apartment rented. A report by the *Berlin Institute for Empirical Integration and*

Migration Research (BIM) found that in 2016 this process took at least several weeks. During

that time, the apartment had often already been brokered to another party (Foroutan et al., 2017,

pg. 5) In July of 2017, 28,000 of the 80,000 registered refugees remained without access to stable

rental housing and continued to reside in precarious housing accommodations (Landesamt fur

Fluchtlingsangelegenheiten, 2017).

Such prolonged conditions for refugees can be traced back to the 2001 BGB bank crisis

and the 2008 global financial crisis. The debt incurred in these incidents pushed the Berlin

Senate to impose austerity measures intended to solve its legitimation crisis by adopting a

market-facilitating approach to refugee services. Despite introducing a new Refugee

Management Coordination Center – under the direction of LaGeSo – and through the counsel of

private consulting firm McKinsey & Company, the understaffed and underfunded LaGeSo failed

to reduce wait times and provide vital services such as healthcare, food, and long-term housing

(Hasenkamp, 2021, pg.13). Below, I cover the Berlin Senate's entanglement with McKinsey.

C. Key Aspect Three: Devolved Risk

Berlin's reaction to the 2015 refugee crisis displayed, what Peck describes as, the neoliberal

tendency for 'responsibility dumping and devolved discipline.' This final dimension in the

urbanization of neoliberal austerity passes responsibility from diminished governmental agencies

to private actors, where 'systemic conditions of fiscal restraint serve to reinforce the hierarchical

power of budget chiefs and audit regimes, including instrumentalism, entrepreneurialism, and

muscular modes of management at subordinate scale' (Peck, 2012, pg. 16-17). The decision by the Berlin Senate to hire the private consulting firm McKinsey & Company to produce a *Masterplan for Integration and Security* (referred to as the Masterplan hereafter), to help effectively deal with the crisis serves as a clear example of this concept (Fahrun, 2016). By incorporating the services of the foreign, for-profit firm in their response, Berlin's local government determinedly sought to uphold the concept the market is more rational and efficient than the public sector (Bernt, 2014, pg.16).

The city originally contracted the firm in 2010 for an urban development study and again for a follow-up in 2013. In doing so, Berlin's government engaged in a form of "regulatory capitalism," where privatization is a state-led process and public services are maintained through public-private partnerships (Vogelpohl & Klemp, 2018, pg. 41). Mike Raco (2013) explains how the 2008 financial crisis intensified the relationship between private businesses and governments, as evident in the original 2010 partnership between Berlin and McKinsey. In regulatory capitalism, as capital desperately seeks new accumulation channels, it eventually finds a dependable partner in governments and bureaucracies that require external partners after decades of outsourcing (pg. 89). This process is evident through the increasing entanglement between the Berlin government and McKinsey, as deeply entrenched neoliberal policies and austerity measures pushed the city to outsource entrepreneurial support and thinking in their urban planning.

Turning back to 2015, the decision to involve McKinsey in their response – who had worked pro bono for three months to help handle the disorder at LaGeSo – proved to be controversial for several reasons. First, it was reported by the press that the €238,000 paid by the city for the Masterplan was kept intentionally low to avoid the tender process. Secondly, McKinsey hired

one of the mayor's former party colleagues in a senior position to assist with the project, amounting to accusations of cronyism (Knight, 2016b). Finally, area experts claimed that the recommendations and directives provided by the firm were too generalized for the €56.4 million in consulting fees the federal government had also paid McKinsey by the end of 2020 (Drummer, 2018).

McKinsey's overarching goals in the Masterplan were to reconfigure refugee policy in a two-pronged effort to reduce homelessness and social exclusion (Berlin Senate, 2016). It should be noted before continuing that the Masterplan contains many commendable ideas, including emphasizing the need to strengthen coordination between all parties (including grassroots efforts, NGOs, and private providers). Further, McKinsey advised that the Berlin Senate promote open and meaningful dialogue with such civil society organizations to provide the best assistance to refugees possible. Despite these recommendations, other areas of the Masterplan fall short, including a failure to explore options outside of market-facilitating approaches to solving social issues like housing (Berlin Senate, 2016; McKinsey, 2016).

To accomplish the goals outlined in the Masterplan, McKinsey suggested the establishment of Berlin's State Office for Refugee Affairs (Landesamt für Flüchtlingsangelegenheiten – LAF). Working parallel LaGeSo, LAF is tasked with providing services for refugees, including registration and housing. Since the establishment of LAF, there have been some organizational improvements, including a new large, dedicated reception center at the former Tempelhof airport and an increase in the number of emergency shelters in the city (Soederberg, 2018, pg. 937). Such efforts have increased confidence that a chaotic scenario like that outside of LaGeSo can be avoided in the future and refugees can gain access to housing more quickly.

Even with these improvements, austerity measures continue to impact the operation capacity of LAF. Despite LAF employing more than three times the number of employees within their first year of operation than at its LaGeSo predecessor, employees continued to be overworked and undertrained, resulting once again in long wait times for refugees to access necessary services. The situation became public at the end of 2016 when *Der Tagesspiegel* leaked a signed by LAF employees – meant for the bureau's management – which detailed persistent shortcomings (Stollowsky, 2016). Alongside utilizing the consulting services of McKinsey and the lack of adequate funding for LAF, the Berlin Senate's propensity for business solutions and budget-balancing continues to impact refugee assistance.

It is important to note that what occurred in Berlin between 2015 and 2016 is not standard compared to other German cities and is a product of Berlin's specific economic conditions. An example of this phenomenon includes comparing the fellow city-state of Hamburg to Berlin. While Hamburg was second only to Berlin nationally in the number of refugees received, it pursued a very different course (Katz et al., 2016, pg. 12). First, Hamburg emphasized, wherever possible, avoiding the private sector and instead utilized in-house expertise. Such an act was accomplished through the city's ownership of two companies that carried out essential tasks, from overseeing construction to operating sites (Sprandel, 2018, pg. 22).

Second, Hamburg established a streamlined housing *and* asylum support system in October 2015, named the Central Coordination Unit for Refugees (*Zentraler Koordinationsstab Flüchtlinge* – ZFK) (Haasenkamp, 2021, pg. 11). The task force engaged cooperation between the Agency for Social Affairs, Integration, Labor, and Family and the Agency for Interior, the renovation of building for refugee accommodations, and the coordination between public and volunteer efforts. This effort has led to a more organized accommodation process compared to

Berlin's, which utilized school gymnasiums as emergency and long-term accommodations. In this way, Hamburg aimed to avoid a negative impact on its citizens as well as negative reactions toward the refugees (Katz et al., 2016, pg. 18).

Finally, Hamburg backed their refugee reception and integration efforts with budget surpluses and not through loans or budget cuts (Sprandel, 2018, pg. 24). While Berlin has struggled to maintain a lean budget due to large public debts resulting from incidents like the 2001 BGB scandal, Hamburg has been able to allocate a larger share of their budget to accommodating refugees. For example, while the city of Berlin took in nearly 2 more refugees per square kilometer than Hamburg, Berlin was able to only set aside €685 million for refugee reception efforts compared to Hamburg's €586 in 2015 (Dearden, 2017). Consequently, Berlin lacked the resources and administrative capacity to properly handle the influx.

In sum, Hamburg's shrewd directives to streamline operations through ZFK and avoid the use of private entities are endemic of a municipality not operating under rigid budget policies. Many of the issues Berlin encountered (i.e., chaos at LaGeSo, malpractice by private companies contracted for refugee services) were avoided in Hamburg through the circumvention of market-led solutions and their government's ability to handle apetaly handle refugee housing without the use of the private sector. These efforts reveal that the origins of Berlin's refugee "crisis" lay less so in the movement of people fleeing wars than in an underfunded system rife with neoliberal and austerity politics.

CHAPTER III – ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

A. Large Numbers of New Arrivals as Cause of 'Crisis'

In closing my analysis, it is important to reiterate that while the large waves of people entering Berlin contributed to a sense of crisis (i.e., the publicization of poor shelter standards and the backup at LaGeSo), conditions of austerity urbanism were the root cause of such issues. Indeed, Europe had never witnessed migration movements of such scope since World War II. In 2015 alone, more than 62,000 people arrived to seek asylum in Berlin. For comparison, the city has a native population of 3.5 million (Eddy & Johannsen, 2015). In addition to Berlin, many other European cities struggled initially with their reception efforts. However, other cities such as Hamburg –second to Berlin in the number of refugees received per square kilometer – were able to quickly pivot their social and economic structures to expand and deliver services to refugees more efficiently and to a higher standard than Berlin. Such innovations included an expanded role of civil society, the use of technology to engage community participation, relying on in-house expertise, and notably the rapid building of non-traditional housing (Katz et al., 2016, pg. 3).

To claim that Berlin's problems were caused solely by unprecedented refugee inflows would be inaccurate. This article reveals that the crisis has much more to do with neoliberal and austerity politics shaping the place of arrival than with the movement of people fleeing wars. Specifically, regarding housing provisions, decades of market-led solutions to a housing shortage and budget cuts to authorities responsible for administering and arranging such services left the

city lacking the staff and housing supply necessary for the new arrivals in 2015. When the

weakened system was tested, the municipality could not meet the demands of those arriving.

This resulted in continued precarious situations for refugees, such as overcrowded shelters, long

waits for appointments, and obstacles to accessing long-term housing. As one local authority

stated, "We don't have a refugee crisis, we have a housing crisis" (Housing Europe, 2016).

CONCLUSION

To understand the effects of Berlin's austerity urbanism approach to receiving and housing asylum seekers in 2015-16, I position the city's refugee settlement initiatives and policies by using these three key aspects of austerity urbanism as a theoretical backdrop. My analysis reveals that the chaotic reception had less to do with the number of refugees the city took in than the breakdown of public systems following two decades of budget slashing and bureaucratic streamlining. In other terms, the encounter laid bare the insufficient preparation of public institutions, leading to rolling privatizations in refugee provisioning and questions from constituents, civil society, and the media on the state's preparedness and capacities in the face of critical developments. Conditions of austerity urbanism remain a driving force behind this phenomenon, as it selectively targets the social state, pushing for government downsizing privatizations –the strongest catalyst from the actions of Berlin's Senate.

Since 2015, the number of refugees arriving from the Middle East has dropped off, due in part to stricter border controls, the 2016 EU-Turkey Deal, and BAMF's more efficient deportation procedures. Yet, receiving and integrating people forcibly displaced by war remains a challenge for many European cities, including Berlin. In February 2022, when Russia escalated its involvement in Ukraine to a full-scale invasion, millions of refugees flooded into neighboring countries. Berlin is reportedly hosting an estimated 60,000 Ukrainian refugees (Deutsche Welle, 2022). Seven years since the onset of the 'crisis,' the Ukrainian refugees benefit from the organizations and emergency housing created in the initial influx. "Many of the structures and

helpers from 2015 are still there, they just took a little break. But they are all active again,"

Christian Lueder, the co-founder of Berlin Hilft told *Reuters.*

In March 2022, the Berlin Senate established a centralized crisis team to coordinate the

receptions and hosting of refugees throughout the city with two main reception hubs (Alkousaa,

2022). The decision to do so emphasizes a noticeable shift away from their tendency in 2015 to

devolve responsibility to charitable organizations and private, for-profit firms. Despite such

changes, how the Berlin government will further respond to the unfolding wave of Ukrainian

refugees remains largely to be seen and analyzed. No matter the outcome, as the Ukrainian

conflict drags on and Berlin continues to integrate the 2015 wave of refugees, the city's response

will undoubtedly occur within the confines of its commitment to austerity urbanism.

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