

**New neighbours or a security threat? The role of local stories in anti-asylum seeker centre mobilization in the Netherlands**

**Abstract**

This paper addresses the underexplored role of local storytelling in informing mobilization against asylum seeker centres in the Netherlands. In doing so, this paper summarizes the preliminary results of an in-depth qualitative study of an anti-asylum seeker centre protest movement in the neighbourhood Beverwaard in the city of Rotterdam. Based on 28 interviews with different stakeholders (citizens, local politicians, civil servants and social workers), a story-based thematic qualitative analysis inductively identified three important storylines (identity, voice and materiality) that played a key role in mobilization against the AZC in the local space. This paper will discuss two concrete examples of how stories based on voice and identity informed mobilization against a local asylum seeker centre based on grievances, as well as political opportunity structures. As such, this paper expands currently dominant perspectives on anti-immigration mobilization that largely focus on broader macro factors such as radical right party politics and socio-economic deprivation, by drawing attention to the ways in which bottom-up storytelling practices inform processes of anti-asylum seeker centre mobilization.

Key words: the Netherlands, anti-immigration mobilization, storytelling, identity, voice, asylum seeker centre, political opportunity structure, grievances

**1. Introduction**

Since the summer of 2015, Europe has been facing what is commonly referred to as the 'refugee crisis', in which large amounts of refugees have arrived in European countries. Although this stream of asylum seekers consisted of people from diverse ethnic backgrounds, the majority of asylum seekers that arrived in the Netherlands 2015 came from Syria and Eritrea (Vluchtelingenwerk, n.d.). In order to accommodate the increasing numbers of asylum seekers arriving in the Netherlands at

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the time, the Dutch government ordered the establishment of a number of new asylum seeker centres ('asielzoekerscentra' in Dutch, often referred to as 'AZC'), that have resulted in mobilization of groups of citizens living close to these new AZCs (NOS, 2016, June 15th). Here, and in the remainder of this paper, mobilization is understood as 'the process by which a group goes from being a passive collection of individuals to an active participant in public life' (Tilly, 1978, p. 69). In other words, 'a group mobilizes if it gains greater collective control over coercive, utilitarian, or normative resources' (Tilly, 1978, p. 69). Based on Tilly's (1978) formulation, anti-AZC protests are a particular form of mobilization, in which an aggregate of individuals, (usually, but not always exclusively) from a local area actively organize and utilize common resources to oppose the establishment of an AZC in their local community.

Social movement scholars have argued for quite some time that mobilization against immigration has rapidly become the most prominent and controversial field of contention in Western European countries since the early nineties (Koopmans, Statham, Giugny & Passy, 2005). However, most mobilization literature on the topic of immigration in Western Europe in general, and the recent anti-AZC protests in particular, has thus far devoted little attention to non-party organization and bottom-up, grassroots politics (Castelli Gattinara, 2017). This gap in the literature is particularly problematic as recent anti-AZC mobilization in the context of the 2015 'long summer of migration' is often grounded in specific *local* cases, and is as such, characterized by its fragmentation into small groups of protesters, and a lack of (formal) organization (Rosenberger, 2018).

This paper summarizes the preliminary findings of a qualitative, interview-based study conducted in the Beverwaard neighbourhood in the city of Rotterdam, two years after the initial announcement in October 2015, that an AZC with capacity for 600 asylum seekers would be placed in this area. Like many other cases in the same period, this announcement triggered outrage and protest from local inhabitants. Today, this AZC has been operating for over two years, which provides the opportunity to retrospectively examine citizens' bottom-up mobilization in the autumn of 2015.

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Concretely, in-depth interviews with different stakeholders inform this paper's analysis, which taps into the local dynamics underlying mobilization against the AZC.

Overall, the key purpose of this paper is to explore the under-examined role of storytelling in informing anti-AZC mobilization. Particularly, this paper aims to answer the research question: *How did local stories inform processes of mobilization against the AZC in de Beverwaard?* As such, this paper explores how shared stories about the local neighbourhood in relation to the AZC provided key reasons for inhabitants to mobilize. Although this paper focuses on one specific case, it provides some broader lessons concerning the need for engagement with exactly these local, bottom-up processes, in order to better comprehend mobilization against the placement of AZCs. As such, it presents a deliberate move away from understanding anti-AZC mobilization solely through the lens of radical right party politics (see also Castelli Gattinara, 2017).

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

This section will commence with an overview of the current literature that addresses the factors that drive anti-immigration mobilization. Based on the limitations of this body of literature, it will then present this paper's supplementary approach to anti-AZC mobilization based on local storytelling.

### ***2.1. Anti-immigration mobilization: two explanations***

The current body of anti-immigration mobilization literature can roughly be divided into two dominant perspectives. On the one hand, grievances theory points towards material or cultural grievances as key drivers that inform anti-immigration mobilization and/or violence. Theories that fall under this perspective are for example relative deprivation theory and ethnic competition theory. The former is based on the expectation that the most deprived in a society are likely to treat immigrants as scapegoats, and are therefore more likely to engage in anti-immigration violence (Braun, 2011). Ethnic competition theory on the other hand, looks towards both perceived and actual competition between dominant groups and ethnic minority groups, in relation to scarce resources in

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a society. In other words, it assumes that more competition between groups will foster higher perceived levels of ethnic threat and as a result, increases anti-immigrant attitudes and mobilization (Scheepers, Gijsberts & Coenders, 2002; Schneider, 2008). It is important here, to recognize that competition can be based on economic, as well as cultural factors. As such, populations can perceive threat towards their material livelihoods, but also in relation to their culture, identity and values (Schneider, 2008)

The second body of anti-immigration mobilization literature views political opportunity structures as important driving mechanisms of anti-immigration mobilization. The general argument here is that access to institutional decision-making processes, as well as 'discursive opportunities' such as media attention, shape processes of mobilization (Koopmans, Statham, Giugny and Passy, 2005). As such, the *institutional* opportunity structure entails citizens' access to and influence in decision-making processes, as well as authorities' responses to citizen mobilization and other challenges to the polity (Koopmans, Statham, Giugny and Passy, 2005). The *discursive* opportunity structure however, concerns citizens' ability to attain visibility, resonance and legitimacy in the public debate, most notably through acquiring (favourable) media coverage (Koopmans & Muis, 2009). Whereas access to both institutional and discursive opportunities generally increases the chance of reaching the goals of collective mobilization through legal pathways, lack of access may channel protesters towards other, perhaps violent forms of mobilization (Braun & Koopmans, 2010).

Concretely, the current body of literature on anti-immigration mobilization remains limited in its ability to account for the distinctly local, grassroots aspects of anti-AZC mobilization (see Rosenberger, 2018), due to its focus on macro developments such as socio-economic conditions, political structures and media systems. They also generally fail to explain why so many communities, for example with high levels of deprivation, *do not* mobilize. In response to this lacuna in the existing mobilization literature, this paper explores the local grassroots factors that drive mobilization against asylum seeker centres in the Netherlands. In doing so, it does not dismiss the two theoretical perspectives mentioned above, but instead proposes that the bottom-up examination of local

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*storytelling* can help to explain why different processes of mobilization occur in some areas, but not others. In other words, it suggests that the theorized drivers behind mobilization (grievances and opportunity structures) might apply to protesting communities when they are communicated through relevant local storytelling.

## **2.2. Stories and mobilization**

Current social movement literature suggests that mobilization is in part driven by shared stories that knit a diverse group of individuals together in the pursuit of one collective goal. Tilly (2002) refers particularly to the social significance of the 'standard story', a standardized mental framework that reconstructs social processes as a sequential, explanatory account of events involving a limited number of independent and self-motivated characters within the boundaries of a limited time and space. As such, standard stories are ways of representing complex social events and processes by retrospectively organizing them into a logical framework, and are a heavily used format in people's daily interactions (Tilly, 2002). However, standard stories do more than provide people with logical reconstructions of past events, as they *"do essential work in social life, cementing people's commitments to common projects, helping people make sense of what is going on, channeling collective decisions and judgements, spurring people to action they would otherwise be reluctant to pursue."* (Tilly, 2002, p. 27). As such, Tilly (2002) argues for the importance of standard stories in providing a basis for mobilization by providing a shared narrative that can knit a diverse group of individuals together in the pursuit of one collective goal.

In its focus on one case of local protest, this paper addresses bottom-up anti-AZC mobilization through the lens of shared local stories about the neighbourhood as a specific *place*, in relation to the arrival of the AZC. In her study of rapid urban change through the eyes of neighbourhood residents, Reinders (2015) argues that 'place', and particularly the concept of 'home' is so central to people's individual and group identity, that its disruption through either physical or

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social change can be unsettling, and can lead to “feelings of intrusion and estrangement” (Reinders, 2015, p. 101). People’s subjective experiences of ‘place’ and especially ‘home’ here should not be understood as merely a physical setting, but are expressed in narratives and stories about their environment (Fischer-Nebmaier, 2015). As such, stories are ‘important mechanisms for researchers to understand the contexts and nuances of the environments they are studying’ (Hancox, 2017, p. 50).

When we move a little deeper into the significance of stories in people’s lives, and particularly in relation to political beliefs and mobilization, Russel Hochschild’s (2016) seminal work merges people’s personal experiences of their local environment and (particularly right-wing) political attitudes in a concept that she calls the ‘deep story’. A deep story is a ‘feels-as-if story’ (Russel Hochschild, 2016, p. 135): you put judgement, reason and facts aside, and try to understand how something *feels* to someone on the ‘other side’ of a dividing line (e.g. a political division). In Russel Hochschild’s (2016) eyes, we understand little, if anything, of someone’s political beliefs if we do not try to grasp the deep story behind them. Like Russel Hochschild, Cramer (2016) also spent several years talking to marginalized American communities, to explore the deeper reasons behind their politically conservative attitudes and particularly their *resentment* towards urban liberals and the public sector. Her findings also highlight the importance of shared narratives and place-bound local identities in shaping people’s political views and perspectives on society (Cramer, 2016).

Even though the socio-political context of the Netherlands is vastly different from rural American communities, these in-depth studies do highlight the importance of paying attention to the local context and personal stories that shape people’s political attitudes, as well as their reasons to mobilize and engage with local decision-making processes. This is particularly salient in the context of the disadvantaged urban community in which this study takes place, as normative, rationality-based standards of public deliberation tend to exclude marginalized groups from participating in the public sphere (Polletta & Lee, 2006), and discursively exclude the highly local, emotional stories that shape political attitudes. As such, the theoretical and analytical approach of this paper is guided by a focus

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on how practices of storytelling inform local mobilization against the establishment of an AZC in the local space.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1. Area background and history: de Beverwaard*

As mentioned earlier, de Beverwaard is situated in the city of Rotterdam, currently the city with the highest percentage of migrants in the Netherlands: about half of the total population of Rotterdam has a migration background. It is also the city with the highest poverty rate in the country, with 15.3 percent of Rotterdam households living off a low income (CBS, 2018). Rotterdam has a strong working-class identity due to the historical economic significance of its harbour, but the city has been experiencing issues such as unemployment due to increasing deindustrialization over the last few decades. The Beverwaard neighbourhood has largely been constructed between 1977 and 1987, and consists of a mix of social housing projects and private housing. It is a rather isolated area, separated from the city by a highway (Rotterdam woont, n.d.). Today, about 50 percent of the inhabitants have a non-Western background (mostly from Surinam and the Dutch Antilles). The neighbourhood has a weak socio-economic status, as more than half of the roughly 12,000 inhabitants of de Beverwaard have a low income (Lub & de Leeuw, 2015). From the nineties onwards, several violent incidents and social unrest gave the neighbourhood a bad name, but these safety issues have been largely resolved today.

#### *3.2. Case background: anti-AZC protests in de Beverwaard*

In October 2015, plans were announced to build an AZC in the area Rotterdam Beverwaard that would provide housing for 600 refugees waiting for their asylum claim to be processed. After being informed by this decision by means of a letter, inhabitants of de Beverwaard quickly organized to

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oppose the construction of the AZC in their neighbourhood. Neither the inhabitants, nor their local political representative body the 'Gebiedscommissie' (Area Committee) had been involved in the decision-making process, which meant that both inhabitants, and the local body of politicians and civil servants were surprised by the announcement.

On October 15th 2015, the Municipality organized an information meeting in a large tent on the empty field, which the AZC was to be built upon. The meeting attracted a large number of attendees who did not fit into the tent, which meant hundreds of people had to follow the meeting outside, on large screens. The Mayor of Rotterdam, Ahmed Aboutaleb, as well as Mrs. Helder, a representative of the COA (the organization responsible for providing shelter for asylum seekers), and Frank Paauw, the Chief of the Rotterdam police force, were present to inform the inhabitants about the AZC plans, and to answer questions from the audience. Before and during the meeting, the Mayor explicitly informed the inhabitants that the decision to place the AZC in the area had already been made by the Municipal Council, and that this was an opportunity to provide information about the AZC only. The 'Mobiele Eenheid' ('mobile unit', special police forces) were held on stand-by, in case of unrest. During the meeting, several rounds of questions were answered by the Mayor, Mrs. Helder and Mr. Paauw. After the meeting ended several protesters engaged in a violent encounter with the Mobiele Eenheid, throwing fireworks at police officers (Algemeen Dagblad, 2015, October 15th).

When attempts to block the AZC during the meeting on the 15th turned out to be futile, a group of inhabitants united in the committee 'Beverwaard Zegt Nee' (Beverwaard says no, BZN in short). Although the motivations behind mobilization varied between individuals, they can generally be summarized in three main arguments on the basis of the interviews. These are 1) concerns about the safety of the area based on negative stereotypes of asylum seekers, 2) anger over citizens' exclusion from the decision-making process, and 3) claims of unfairness regarding resource distribution, based on levels of deprivation among inhabitants (Author, forthcoming). Concretely, inhabitants collected signatures to demand a neighbourhood referendum about the construction of



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the AZC (RTV Rijnmond, 2015, October 26th) and presented these to the Gebiedscommissie. The Gebiedscommissie declined the request, but agreed to hold an online opinion poll about the AZC in the neighbourhood. On November 22nd, BZN (self-reportedly) offered between 2000 and 3000 signatures to two members of the Municipal Council, after which they held a ritual 'funeral of democracy' in the Beverwaard area, where they held a mourning procession and ritually buried a coffin that symbolized the democracy of the Municipality of Rotterdam (RTV Rijnmond, 2015, November 22nd). Although the first tent meeting attracted a great number of attendees, interest for the following protests dropped rapidly, leaving only a small core of protesters who mainly expressed their discontent on online platforms such as Facebook.

The Municipality of Rotterdam continued to plan and build the asylum seeker centre in Beverwaard, and opened its doors to its first inhabitants in the summer of 2016. One year later, the AZC housed around 400 asylum seekers, most of whom are families. The majority of asylum seekers living in the AZC come from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Turkey (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2017). Although no active protests have occurred since late 2015, the action group BZN still exists, and claim to be ready to mobilize if they deem this to be necessary.

### *3.3. Data collection*

The main method of data collection utilized in this paper are qualitative interviews, gathered over a period of three months (September to November 2017). The body of data consists out of 28 interviews, which have been conducted with 5 Local Council members, 7 civil servants (Gemeente Rotterdam), 13 inhabitants and 3 social workers, in the Dutch language. Due to the small size of the community, more specific descriptions of these individuals would compromise anonymity. For the aims of this paper, as well as the wider project in which it is embedded, the researcher purposively sampled a wide variety of interviewees. As such, the sample of interviewees consists out of men and women aged between their early thirties to their sixties, with white Dutch, Moroccan, Surinamese, Antillean and mixed ethnic backgrounds, from a variety of different socio-economic backgrounds and

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different attitudes towards the establishment of the AZC in de Beverwaard (positive, negative and neutral). The collection of interview data comprised an element of a wider ethnographic data gathering strategy. As such, the recruitment of interviewees was informed by the researchers' expanding social network within the area, and partially through snowballing via interviewees and contacts in the neighbourhood.

Two separate open-ended interview guides were used in the interviews: one for inhabitants of de Beverwaard, and one for local officials and professionals such as civil servants, politicians and social workers. Although these guides provided some structure to the interview process, ample room was given to interviewees to freely voice their experiences, viewpoints and interpretations, and to make connections to other topics if they felt this was relevant or important. Key topics of the interviews were drafted to elicit narratives about anti-AZC mobilization, and included the Beverwaard neighbourhood and its relation to the city of Rotterdam, the anti-AZC protest events, immigration and multiculturalism, social media, mainstream media, the Municipality of Rotterdam, local politics and national politics. This interview guide was constructed based on the broader aims of the overarching research project and as such, this paper focuses only on those topics that elicited responses related to motivations behind anti-AZC mobilization, rather than for example, inhabitants' media habits.

In many cases, more general questions about the neighbourhood or the reasons behind the AZC protests were answered by sharing stories of personal struggle and deprivation, which proved to be a highly informative and rich addition to the pre-constructed guiding questions. Most interviews were conducted in community centre 'De Focus', where the researcher was given access to an office if interviewees wished to speak privately. Most interviews were conducted in a communal space, as this was the preference of the majority of the interviewees.

### **3.4. Data analysis**

Analysis of the interview data was done with the help of NVivo 11 software, following a thematic

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qualitative analysis strategy (Kuckartz, 2013) with a particular focus on identifying recurring *stories*.

In doing so, this paper adopts Boje's (1991) broad conceptualization of a story as 'an exchange between two or more persons during which a past or anticipated experience [is] being referenced, recounted, interpreted or challenged' (as cited in Naslund & Perner, 2011, p. 94). As such, this fluid definition of stories allows for the inclusion of a wide range of meaningful narrative elements such as stories that are alluded to, rather than explicitly told (Polletta, 2015). Thus, rather than systematically and rigorously picking apart individual stories in interviews, the analysis sought to identify recurring stories or story elements across different interviews.

As such, the focus of the analysis was to inductively identify and categorize recurring themes across different interviews, in which particular attention was paid to identifying underlying drivers of mobilization, guided by an interest in the understudied local factors that inform mobilization. Categorization of data was in part deductive, based on theories discussed in the theoretical framework, as well as inductive and grounded in the data. The coding process analyzed all interview data in two rounds of coding. This resulted in a final set of 75 codes, which were sorted into three main categories that each expressed a key storyline in relation to the anti-AZC mobilization: 1) identity, 2) voice and 3) materiality (Author, forthcoming). Due to space limitations it is not possible to comprehensively cover the rich variety of stories across participants with many differing perspectives. Instead, the following discussion highlights two distinct *examples* of recurring stories that were identified in the data. In line with the theoretical focus of this paper, the following discussion will address the way in which two shared local stories (one on identity, and one on voice) informed mobilization processes based on grievances, as well as opportunity structures.

#### **4. Findings and discussion**

The following discussion will address how mobilization processes based on grievances, as well as opportunity structures operate through two shared local stories, revolving around *identity* and *voice*. Concretely, it will exemplify how stories about local identity informed mobilization through

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grievances, and how stories about voicelessness informed mobilization based on political opportunity structures.

#### **4.1. De Beverwaard as a 'village under siege' – identity and grievances**

This first example will address the importance of storytelling about local *identity*, in informing processes of mobilization. Concretely, this section explores the role of local storytelling through the lens of one recurring storyline of de Beverwaard as having a 'village' identity, a small and tightly knit community on the outskirts of a large city, which was told by inhabitants, civil servants and politicians alike. This male interviewee with a Surinamese background for example explained this sense of community by saying:

*'Look, I can go to my neighbour, I go there, and I say 'do you have a chili for me, I forgot to buy a chili', well I can't do that in the city. You understand?'*

However, when discussing the anti-AZC protests, this (largely positive) storyline of the Beverwaard 'village' identity was paired with a discourse of threat. Concretely, the 'village' was regularly represented as having been 'under attack' by outsiders over the last two decades. Several interviewees referred to the peak of crime that they experienced in the 80s and 90s, which they largely ascribe to the arrival of a group of predominantly Antillean newcomers that were relocated by the Municipality as part of a process of city renovation (Lub & de Leeuw, 2015). The following white, male inhabitant is quoted at length, as his account provides an example of how storytelling does important identity building 'work' at the local level:

*'And if you want to understand the riots about the AZC, if you want to understand people's anger, you need to look at the neighbourhood's past. (...) Because simply said, we are a neighbourhood where – it's a village, Beverwaard is really cut off from Rotterdam by a highway, so it is in fact a village, and – but a village in which many murders have been committed, liquidations, and – many robberies, etcetera. For the past 20 years. And because of that people have lost all their trust in the police, civil*

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*servants, social workers. And – because every time – at a certain point 20 years ago, there are – we got the first invasion from the outside, from Hoogvliet, they demolished a part of a neighbourhood there, with many problem-Antilleans at the time, and they had to leave, and were placed in de Beverwaard. (...) that's when the misery started. In 1.5 years' time 600 houses were empty, people literally fled out of the neighbourhood. (...) At that time the shops were open every Friday evening, every Friday evening a shop was robbed, and at a certain point shops were closed on Friday evenings. People were afraid. And – then at a certain point we, not the police, not the politicians, but the inhabitants, of which I was one, came together and started to build up the neighbourhood. We did it ourselves. At a certain point with a little help, because they started to trust us, the politicians. But we did most of the work ourselves.'*

This particular story depicts a strong 'village' identity and sense of community in reaction to two groups of threatening outsiders: a group of newcomers and the untrustworthy authorities who did not do enough to stop crime caused by the former group. This local history was then connected to the announced establishment of the AZC, and hence produced a new story of yet another group of 'others' invading the 'village'. As such, this paper argues that the shared identity of a 'village under siege' provided a group of inhabitants with a 'contentious identity', which Tilly argues encompasses 'collective answers to the question "Who are you?", "Who are we?", and "Who are they?" offered by participants in such [political] claim making.' (Tilly, 2002, p. 6). Concretely, shared stories about 'we, the village of Beverwaard' provided inhabitants with a contentious identity around which they could mobilize against 'them', the future residents of the AZC, but also against the Municipality who decided to place it in de Beverwaard. As such, stories about 'us, the village' against 'them, the asylum seekers' informed mobilization through perceived ethnic threat, resonating with mobilization theories based on ethnic competition (Scheepers, Gijsberts & Coenders, 2002; Schneider, 2008).

Whereas such a strong 'village' identity might be a more common phenomenon in ethnically homogenous communities, it is perhaps somewhat surprising to find this storyline in such an

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ethnically diverse area as de Beverwaard. It is important to note here, that ethnic tension and inequality certainly do exist in the local space, as well as widely differing attitudes towards the AZC. As such, not everyone embraced the contentious identity of a 'village under threat'. Whereas most interviewed white protesters and right-wing political politicians claimed that the majority of the neighbourhood was/still is against the establishment of the AZC in de Beverwaard, Afro-Caribbean interviewees, as well as more left-leaning white inhabitants and politicians expressed neutral or positive attitudes towards the AZC and its inhabitants. As such, although the 'village' identity was expressed by a range of interviewees with different ethnic backgrounds and political affiliations, its combination with a discourse of 'threat' into a particular contentious identity was only employed by a select number of individuals in their mobilization against the AZC.

Summarizing, this discussion has illustrated the importance of storytelling in processes of mobilization through the example of the shared story of the Beverwaard 'village'. As such, this section of the paper argues that processes of anti-AZC mobilization based on grievances and perceptions of threat in which (predominantly white) citizens feel both materially and culturally threatened by the 'other', were informed by pre-existing relevant stories that constructed a 'contentious identity' of a close-knit village in relation to various groups of threatening outsiders.

#### **4.2. 'Puppet show politics' – voice and political opportunity structures**

Secondly, this paper addresses how shared stories about *voicelessness* informed processes of anti-AZC mobilization driven by political opportunity structures. Concretely, the Municipality of Rotterdam only informed inhabitants, as well as their chosen local political representatives from the 'Gebiedscommissie', of the placement of the AZC in de Beverwaard when this decision had already been made at the Municipal level. As such, both inhabitants, and their direct political representatives had been given no opportunity to engage in the decision-making process, and hereby faced a limited political opportunity structure (Koopmans, Statham, Giugny and Passy, 2005) in relation to the AZC.

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As a result, not only inhabitants, but also local political representatives as well as civil servants working in the area expressed shock and frustration over their exclusion from the decision-making process.

In addition to this, both interviewees who participated in anti-AZC protests, as well as those who had more neutral or positive attitudes towards the AZC, expressed more general feelings of being excluded from the sphere of politics, as well as local decision-making in particular. For example, although this white female inhabitant was largely sympathetic to the plight of refugees, she did participate in the previously mentioned 'funeral of democracy', a protest event organized to express discontent with the lack of involvement of inhabitants or their local political representatives in the decision-making process around the establishment of the AZC:

*Interviewer: 'Yes. So did you – did you participate in protest actions, for example the burial of democracy?'*

*Interviewee: 'I did. And I didn't go for the same reasons as them [the other protesters], I went because I indeed thought, and still think, for centuries I think, before that whole AZC was there, that the democracy in the Netherlands is one big puppet show. We are supposedly allowed to vote, we are supposedly allowed to get our voices heard, but if you don't do it then this happens, and if you don't do this then that happens, so in principle you have no choice, so where is the democracy then? If they say 'we go left', you can say 'we go right' a thousand times, you can gather a hundred thousand people and say 'we need to go right' or whatever, doesn't really matter. We'll still go left. You can jump high and low here, but ...'*

*Interviewer: 'Yes. Is there a political party where you feel sort of – represented?'*

*Interviewee: 'No, no, no.'*

Inhabitants of various ethnic backgrounds expressed similar scepticism towards politics. This male inhabitant with a Surinamese background for example described his views on politics in surprisingly similar terms:

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*'I think it's all a puppet show, it's all the same. You go and vote, but they already know well in advance who it is going to be, and everything. So yes – no. I have nothing to do with politics. I know quite a lot about it but – I have also never voted, and I also never will.'*

As such, inhabitants expressed pre-existing and deep-seated distrust and apathy towards the conduct of politics, which predates the establishment of the AZC. These pre-existing feelings of exclusion were strengthened by the Municipality's decision to withhold information about their consideration to place an AZC in de Beverwaard throughout the decision-making process. This white male inhabitant, who participated in various anti-AZC protests, recalled:

*'We were very angry about that. Without – having a sort of referendum – it is a democratic country – it was just like that, 'poof', it's going to be Beverwaard [as location for the AZC] and you have nothing to say about it. And we also had nothing to say, because we even went to the Municipality once, I had made a banner myself. And there the decision had also already been made.'*

As such, the conflict about the placement of the AZC in de Beverwaard reflects observations of scholars such as Stewart and Lithgow (2015), who argue that citizens and governments have differing interpretations of extent to which citizens should be involved in decision-making about local space. Whereas citizens expect 'real' influence on decision-making processes, local governments tend to think consulting or informing citizens is enough to tick the 'engagement box'.

Concretely, inhabitants of de Beverwaard faced a highly restrictive political opportunity structure (Koopmans, Statham, Giugny and Passy, 2005) in which there was little to no room for their input concerning the placement of the AZC. Pre-existing stories of political exclusion had fostered long-standing feelings of distrust and disillusionment with democratic decision-making processes on the local level. As such, the limited political opportunity structure in relation to the AZC largely confirmed these expectations, and led inhabitants to perceive institutional opportunities to influence decision-making as non-existent. Summarizing, this section argues that pre-existing stories of political exclusion informed mobilization driven by political opportunity structures at the local level, by



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channeling mobilization towards extra-institutional protest strategies such as a 'funeral of democracy'.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has explored the role of local storytelling in informing processes of anti-AZC mobilization in the city of Rotterdam. In its in-depth analysis of one protesting community in the Beverwaard neighbourhood, this paper has argued that stories shared within the local community informed mobilization against the establishment of the AZC in ways that cannot be captured by dominant theoretical perspectives that focus on top-down factors such as right-wing party politics (Castelli Gattinara, 2017). In doing so, this paper does not seek to 'replace' dominant theoretical perspectives on anti-immigration mobilization, but rather to supplement these theories with the suggestion that shared local stories are paramount to anti-AZC mobilization, *in addition to* other relevant factors already mentioned in the literature. It is important here, to briefly reflect on the limitations of studying stories. As respondents retrospectively assess events that occurred roughly two years ago, this might lead to distorted accounts of the past. In addition, strategic representation of past events, especially on behalf of local government officials, should be anticipated. However, stories are always partial, and inherently encompass a personal evaluation of previous events (Brannen, 2013), and as such provide rich insights into participants' lived experiences.

Concretely, this paper provides two examples of the ways in which local stories informed anti-AZC mobilization. First, it has argued that local stories constructed a contentious *identity* (Tilly, 2002) of a 'village under siege', which informed mobilization through 'activating' grievances and a clear 'us-them' divide. Second, this paper has shown that pre-existing stories of *voicelessness* and political exclusion provided a foundation for mobilization through mechanisms suggested by political opportunity structures theory (see for example Koopmans, Statham, Giugny & Passy, 2005). As such,

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this paper argues that pre-existing stories and narratives present contextual, bottom-up drivers of anti-immigration mobilization, which are rarely addressed in the current literature.

Although the content of local stories will most likely differ across contexts, they may provide insights into why some communities, but not others, mobilize against AZCs in their local space. As such, this paper argues that relevant stories might provide a 'missing puzzle piece' that can help us better explain instances of anti-immigration mobilization. Although this paper is grounded in one particular case and presents concrete local stories that cannot be generalized across contexts, it does however engage with a type of anti-immigration mobilization that is driven by much broader patterns of globalization and immigration, and is widely present across European societies today. As the overall significance of storytelling in relation to anti-immigration mobilization remains understudied, future studies could delve deeper into the significance of local storytelling practices in informing resistance against the establishment of asylum seeker centres in the context of Western Europe.

Concluding, this paper has shown that grassroots factors such as local storytelling can play a significant role in mobilization against asylum seeker centres. Still, the vast majority of existing studies remain focused on radical right party politics, as well as fearful media rhetoric about migrants and asylum seekers, in relation to anti-AZC protests in the context of today's so-called 'refugee crisis'. Summarizing, this paper calls for more in-depth local studies of anti-AZC mobilization, in order to enrich the existing body of literature that almost exclusively focuses on wider macro developments in relation to anti-immigration mobilization across Europe.

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