

Becoming stronger by becoming weaker

The hunger strike as a mode of doing politics

Sebastian Abrahamsson

Department of Ethnology, University of Copenhagen

Karen Blixensvej 4, 2300 Copenhagen

csa@hum.ku.dk

&

Endre Dányi (corresponding author)

Department of Sociology, Goethe University

Theodor-W.-Adorno-Platz 6, 60629 Frankfurt am Main

danyi@em.uni-frankfurt.de

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Abstract

Drawing on Judith Butler's work and a series of studies associated with Actor-Network Theory (ANT), this paper engages with political agency through the concept of performativity. Based on the empirical analysis of a hunger strike that took place in Brussels in 2012 and involved 23 illegal immigrants, we aim to achieve three things. First, we foreground physical bodies as political entities caught up in multiple modes of doing politics. Second, we show how such modes relate to each other, reinforcing citizenship, activism, and party politics as specific performances of agency associated with liberal democracy. Finally, we argue that the Brussels hunger strike also challenges these performances by failing to meet certain expectations about what it is to be political/act politically. As the European refugee crisis is generating louder and louder voices, hunger strikes sensitise us to modes of doing that work by becoming passive, silent, weak, and vulnerable. Such processes, we suggest, expand the standard repertoire of modes of doing and may refigure our understanding of the interaction between transnational and liberal democratic politics – in International Relations, ANT and beyond.

Key words: Brussels; hunger strike; refugee crisis; Actor-Network Theory; performativity; modes of doing

Introduction

Our contribution to this special issue on agency in international politics is based on the analysis of historical and ethnographic material related to a hunger strike that took place in Brussels in 2012 and involved 23 undocumented immigrants, mostly from North Africa and the Middle East. During the hunger strike, which lasted for more than one hundred days, the participants' weakening bodies became both the objects and the sites of politics: they made visible several ways in which political agency may be rendered im/possible in a liberal democratic setting. In this paper we explore how these im/possibilities relate to each other, and with what political effects, through the concept of *performativity*.

Performativity in International Relations (IR) is strongly associated with the works of Judith Butler. Her groundbreaking book, *Gender Trouble* (1990), was a crucial intervention in feminist theory, which used to hold stable a particular understanding of 'woman' as a category. Butler's aim was to undermine the nature/culture divide implicitly present in the sex/gender distinction, which had suggested that sex was a biologically given trait of individuals while gender was a social construct. In order to problematise this approach, Butler borrowed the term 'performativity' from theatrics and linguistics, particularly from John Austin's (1962) speech act theory. As opposed to the verb *construction*, which implies a gradual solidification of reality, *performance* in Butler's view draws closer attention to the situated and contingent character of practices that bring reality into being.

Bodies have clearly played a central role in Butler's understanding of performativity. In *Bodies That Matter* (1993), she argued that gendered performances are neither singular nor deliberate acts that presuppose certain forms or degrees of agency. Rather, they are reiterative processes that *result in* agency (see Meijer & Prins 1998, Wilcox 2014, 2017) and, as such, make visible what embodied ways of being are considered im/possible in a specific setting. While this insight already makes Butler highly relevant for scholars interested in political agency, her recent writings make the connection even stronger. In *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), for instance, she examines a series of recent cases where bodies came to matter collectively, constituting an assembly or 'the people', while in her contribution to *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016) her interest in bodies is extended to the spatial and infrastructural conditions of political action.

This latter move brings Butler closer to a different – and in IR much less visible (see Barry 2013) – set of works on performativity, namely Actor-Network Theory (ANT). Similar to Butler, ANT's take on performativity draws on Austin, but already in its early articulations it concentrates on linguistic and non-linguistic practices in a symmetrical way (Akrich & Latour 1992; Callon & Latour 1982; Law 1986). In his classical text on scallop farming in Brittany, Michel Callon (1986) argued that such a symmetrical research strategy requires the suspension of *a priori* assumptions about who or what may count as an actor, and focuses instead on the ways in which seemingly 'social' and 'technical' entities – fishermen, scientists, towlines, legal agreements, but also scallops in

France and Japan – come to define each other in a relational way.[1] In this sense, bodies may be relevant, but they are hardly ever relevant on their own. Bruno Latour (2004), for example, has described bodies in terms of their capacity to become affected by analysing the practice of learning to distinguish different perfume fragrances. Latour’s concern has been with those versions of bifurcating ‘body talk’ that describe the body in terms of a subject and an internal subjective world on the one hand, and objects and an external reality on the other. Using the case of ‘becoming a nose’, that is, learning to distinguish fragrances, he argues that bodies are ‘interface[s] that become more and more describable as [they] learn to be affected by more and more elements’ (2004: 206). Antoine Hennion, in his research on amateur musicians (2007), has made a similar claim about the ways in which the love of music is performed: in various events where music is ‘consumed’ both music and amateur musicians come into being through the equipment, spaces and bodies that make the experience of listening and becoming affected possible.

To put it somewhat differently, in ANT the focus has been on ‘doings’, rather than ‘beings’. Having said that, in her work on Western biomedicine Annemarie Mol (2002) pushes the argument further when she suggests that by focusing on different, partially connected ‘modes of doing’ we may also become attentive to the multiplicity of bodies within seemingly singular settings.[2] A body suffering from diabetes, for instance, may be said to *have* a disease, but it might also be said to be *implicated in* a disease distributed across hospitals, homes, workplaces, restaurants and supermarkets (Mol 2008). The difference between the two versions is not simply a matter of perspective: different ‘body talks’ enact different diabetes-realities. While this appears to be a simple move, its

implications are rather complex and far-reaching. In their research on market economies, Michel Callon and his colleagues have demonstrated what happens when attention to multiplicity is used to describe market-realities in-the-making (Callon 1998, Callon et al. 2007, MacKenzie et al. 2007). Their aim has not been to produce a single diagnosis of the present – say, an era of neoliberal governance – but to closely examine how a series of seemingly disparate practices are made to cohere, performing into being something as abstract as ‘the economy’, and how reintroducing non-coherence in the analysis can, in turn, open up new ways of engaging with it.

Interestingly, these two understandings of performativity – one associated with Butler’s work and the other distributed over a patchwork of ANT-inspired studies – have rarely been discussed together. Perhaps the most notable exception was a brief exchange between Judith Butler and Michel Callon in a special issue of the *Journal of Cultural Economy* (Cochoy et al. 2010). In her opening statement, Butler (2010) acknowledged the importance of Callon and his colleagues’ work on the performative character of economic theories and models, but found it unclear where ANT scholars like Callon stood in relation to their research objects. Where was *politics* in their account, and what was *their* politics when it came to performances of the economy? In his response, Callon (2010) pointed out that processes of economisation are necessarily also processes of politicisation: it is precisely the nitty-gritty, material practices associated with markets that shape what is considered suitable for politics and what is relegated to the realm of science and technology. Callon’s politics has been to point out such moments of de/politicisation and by doing so provide opportunities of interfering with them. Whether

this answer resonated with Butler is difficult to tell – the exchange did not generate a second round of responses. The only topic on which Butler and Callon seemed to reach an agreement was the importance of recognising failure as something constitutive in performative acts (see du Gay 2010; Pahk 2017, as well as Halberstam 2011), but what this might mean analytically remained undefined.[3]

In this paper we explore the political implications of performativity by attending to the concerns that Butler and Callon have left us with, namely questions relating to politics and critique; issues pertaining to the multiple character of performativity; and the status of failure. We do so, not to fill a gap in the literature between IR and ANT, but rather to articulate the specific kinds of performativity involved in the hunger strike that we analyse below. Accordingly, in our analysis of the 2012 hunger strike in Brussels we aim to achieve three things. First, like Butler and a number of IR scholars who have done historical, ethnographic and discourse analyses of hunger strikes in Turkey, Australia, Northern Ireland, and Guantanamo Bay (Bargu 2014a, 2014b, Edkins & Pin-Fat 2004, 2005, El-Khairi 2010, Fierke 2013, Purnell 2015, Wilcox 2012, 2015) we aim to foreground bodies as explicitly political entities. However, drawing on ANT and on recent actor-network studies on the Calais refugee camp (Hennion & Thiéry 2016) and the handling of refugees' bodies – both dead and alive – between Tunisia and the European Union (M'charek, forthcoming), we aim to do this foregrounding by paying close attention to the gradual unfolding of the hunger strike *as an event*. IR scholars might find this style of analysis too empirical (even empiricist), but in our view only by staying close to the 'doing' of the hunger strike can we discuss how the strikers' bodies

became both the objects and sites of politics (see also Braun et al.'s introduction to this special issue). Unlike in previous research on prisoners in Guantanamo, Northern Ireland, and Turkey, where those involved in hunger strikes were already political subjects, the case we analyse focuses on the process through which hunger strikers become political. Second, following Mol's suggestion, we aim to make visible multiple 'modes of doing politics' that were performed during the strike, seeking to describe how different versions of political agency relate to each other in a liberal democratic setting (see also Abrahamsson et al. 2015; Dányi 2017, 2018). Finally, and relating to Butler and Callon's discussion on failure, we aim to articulate what we consider to be the specificity of the performative elements of agency that were present during and after the Brussels hunger strike. Here, we suggest to enrich the ways we may think about agency, performativity and politics by insisting that the passivity, weakness and silence of the hunger strikers and their bodies constitute a specific mode of doing politics in its own right – a mode that may refigure our understanding of political agency both in ANT and beyond.

1) Hunger strikes in the centre of Europe

Since early 2015, one of the most pressing challenges for the European Union (EU) has been what is usually referred to as the refugee crisis (De Genova 2017; M'charek forthcoming). The conflicts and violence in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Eritrea, Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq have forced millions to leave their homes. While most in the search of a safe place end up in camps in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, some make it to the EU,

after perilous journeys on overcrowded boats, in cramped trucks, or on foot. It is estimated that in 2015 more than 1,2 million asylum claims were made across EU, out of which less than 300,000 were approved.[4] The response from member states to the crisis has been varied between states and over time. Greece, Hungary, and Italy, being arrival points on the routes into the EU, have experienced disproportionate burdens, which sometimes triggered disproportionate measures. While initially generous in their asylum policies, Germany and Sweden – granting 140,910 and 32,215 claims respectively – have now been taken to divert migrants elsewhere.[5] Tensions continue to grow while nationalist and protectionist sentiments on the one hand and pro-refugee initiatives on the other hand steer public discourse in opposing directions.

With the scope of the current crisis in mind, and the ensuing political, social, and humanitarian turmoil, it is easy to think of the refugee crisis as a recent phenomenon. Asylum migration to Europe, however, is far from new. In this paper we analyse a case that occurred a few years before the current escalation of the refugee crisis. The sections below follow the chronological unfolding of a 102 day-long process that started in Brussels on the 14th of January 2012, when 23 undocumented immigrants[6] from Algeria, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia began a hunger strike at the Free University of Brussels (VUB). The strike was supported by student groups and faculty members. The immigrants had stayed in a university building since October 2011. In an article from *De Standard*, Steph Feremans, student policy representative at the VUB, explains that the university had decided to provide shelter ‘for humanitarian reasons,’ arguing that ‘[the university] could not allow for people to sleep in the streets

during winter'[7] (Delepeleire 2012a). While there was no official policy on behalf of the university to allow the strike to take place within its premises, it was agreed to let the immigrants stay in one of its buildings close to the campus in Etterbeek, in the south east of the city. Mattresses, blankets, and water were provided by volunteers, and medical support was given by one of the resident medical doctors.

This was not the first time that undocumented immigrants organised a hunger strike in Brussels, the political centre of Europe. Several attempts had been made to draw attention to the problematic situation of the immigrants living (and often working) without papers in the city. In 2008, for example, 147 strikers occupied the Béguinage church in Brussels, refusing to eat. After supporter rallies and the media reported on the strikers' situation and deteriorating health, on the 56th day of that strike the Ministry of Asylum and Migration granted the strikers a temporary work permit which allowed them to work during their asylum application process. This clearly sent a message of hope to others in a similar situation.

2) Citizenship as a mode of doing politics

Similar to the 2008 event, the hunger strike in 2012 generated a lot of interest from the media. A large part of the coverage focused on one particular hunger striker, a man from Casablanca named Jamal Jaoudi. Incidentally, the first day of the hunger strike was also Jamal's 20th birthday. He was 11 when he ran away from home, heading north to Tangier.

As he explains in a newspaper interview: ‘[I wanted to get] closer to Europe. That was the place I had to go to next. It was the best chance I had to live a happy life’ (Vandekerckhove 2012). Like many others in his situation, Jamal ended up in Spain, where he went to school, worked for a couple of years, and learned to speak Spanish. But Spain was not what he had expected of Europe. Conditions were hard, and without papers and documents, life in Spain was not very different from life in Morocco. From Spain he continued up north to France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, living mostly in shelters and on the streets, still looking for a decent life. In 2008, at the age of 15, he moved back to Belgium, and since then he had been sleeping in open-air shelters or at the Noord Station in Brussels.

As a homeless refugee in Belgium, Jamal ended up in an impossible situation: since he had no address or personal documents, he could not apply for a work permit or for residency. But without a work permit or a residency, he could not get personal documents.[8] The hunger strike was organised by Jamal and 22 other refugees as a desperate measure to draw attention to and find a solution to this conundrum.

While the strikers quickly gathered support from volunteering university employees, students, activists and health care professionals, no political representative seemed to show any interest in their demands. On the 8th of March, the 56th day of the strike, Jamal sewed his lips together as an act of protest against the Belgian State’s sustained silence and passivity. In a letter addressed to the Belgian political representatives Jamal wrote:

I demand the right to live in dignity, as everyone. [...] I do not understand why the government does not respond to the suffering of 23 *sans-papiers*, who have been on hunger strike for 56 days.
(Vandekerckhove 2012)

The image of Jamal's sewn lips spread through the Belgian media, evoking both the strikers' powerlessness in the face of the state's silence and the desperate measures that they allowed themselves to take. The image also made public, in an explicit sense, what was at stake: the strikers refused nourishment. Additionally, Jamal's sewn lips were not simply an expression of his refusal to take food, but also a drawing of attention to his muteness as a political entity in the Belgian state. In this sense, sewing his lips was an invitation for Belgian citizens – mostly students and employees at the VUB – to speak on his and his fellow hunger strikers' behalf, which they did in the form of protests in front of the VUB and the Prime Minister's Office, demanding work and residency permits for the hunger strikers.

3) Activism as a mode of doing politics

The first mode of doing politics that the hunger strike at the VUB made visible was citizenship, which regulates who may speak, whose voice may be heard in a sovereign state like Belgium, and whose voice may be silenced without consequences. Several groups of citizens tried to challenge this by giving voice to the hunger strikers as

potential future citizens. This, however, was only one way of challenging the logic of sovereignty. Another one worked through the refusal of distinguishing between citizens and non-citizens altogether. The difference between the two ways is captured in the following series of events.

On the 75th day of the hunger strike, after a number of protests and increasing media attention, the silence of the Belgian state was broken. Maggie de Block, member of the Flemish liberal party and Secretary of State for Asylum, Immigration and Social Integration, when interviewed by Belgian media, commented that the hunger strikers ‘demand more rights than other people. In a democracy everyone has equal rights. To start a hunger strike is a way to apply pressure that we cannot tolerate’ (Peeters 2012). This statement illustrates, albeit indirectly, the very same paradoxical situation described above: while it is, today, a fundamental ideal of a liberal democracy that everyone has equal rights, this right is not granted to those who are not part of the political body of the state. These differences were accentuated when, on the same day, the director of the DVZ (Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken [Immigration services]) delivered a letter to each of the 23 refugees to sign. The letter, written in French, read:

I, the undersigned, certify that I do not want to be fed, willingly or unwillingly, in an artificial and medical way, until death follows (Delepeleire 2012b).

There are two things that are worth highlighting here. One is the clear suggestion (and realisation) that the hunger strike, if it were to go on, might eventually lead to the death of the strikers. The other is that in case death occurs, all responsibility rests on the shoulders of the hunger strikers themselves, yet again emphasizing that the state were not accountable for the strikers' lives. In the context of agency, the letter configures the hunger strikers as strong and active, capable of making well-informed decisions: as if it was their *wish* to die (or not); as if the hunger strike was a slow form of suicide.[9] In this respect, it is also noteworthy that the letter arrived on the 75th day of the hunger strike. That is, after more than two months of not eating. At this stage, the strikers were fighting headaches, fatigue and confusion and were no longer in the condition of making such important decisions. Signing letters, declaring one's willingness to be fed or not, is in this situation a good illustration of the kind of agency that political actors are usually imagined to possess, and the conditions of possibility to do so (understanding French, being able to write, holding a pen, comprehending what a signature implies, etc.) are taken for granted.[10] In this context, it is helpful to cite a guideline for medical professionals, drafted by the World Medical Association:

Hunger strikers usually do not wish to die but some may be prepared to do so to achieve their aims. Physicians need to ascertain the individual's true intention, especially in collective strikes or situations where peer pressure may be a factor. An ethical dilemma arises when hunger strikers who have apparently issued clear instructions not to be resuscitated reach a stage of cognitive impairment. The principle of

beneficence urges physicians to resuscitate them but respect for individual autonomy restrains physicians from intervening when a valid and informed refusal has been made. An added difficulty arises in custodial settings because it is not always clear whether the hunger striker's advance instructions were made voluntarily and with appropriate information about the consequences.[11]

For medical professionals, then, a hunger strike is problematic precisely because it is their duty to act ethically and to respect the autonomy of the individual cared for. The problem arises when this autonomy, as is sometimes the case, is put into question; when the individual cared for is no longer considered to be capable of expressing his or her wishes. Force feeding, for example, is generally not accepted even though there are notable exceptions.[12] The ethical dilemmas mentioned in the guidelines above were fully present in the 2012 Brussels case, too. After 75 days of not eating, most of the strikers experienced fatigue, confusion and headaches, making it difficult for those who cared for them to judge whether their wishes were valid and genuine. In response to the DVZ's attempt to have the letter of consent signed by the hunger strikers, Rita Vanobberghen, a GP who volunteered to care for the strikers at the VuB, said:

I hope that they do not sign [the letter] because that means I can no longer help them when their lives are in danger, and I don't want that. If someone is unconscious I want to be able to call an ambulance or give him an IV (Delepeleire 2012b).

Rita Vanobberghen had been present throughout the entire strike in 2012. She followed and monitored the strikers' physical health, noting that sewing his lips together did not only complicate Jamal's situation, it also made her care work more difficult and problematic.

At the beginning of the strike [Jamal] weighed 74 kilograms, now [56 days later] he only weighs 61,5... Once in a while we manage to give him something to drink, using a tube between his lips. I can be present at a hunger strike but I cannot support a 'thirst strike' [dorststaking] (Delepeliere 2012a).

This illustrates the ambiguous and precarious work that is necessary to do politics through a hunger strike: on the one hand the respect that care workers and supporters need to show in relation to the wishes and potential goals of the strikers, and considering the potentially lethal risks involved on the other hand. In a short documentary, called 'Protest for life', we see Rita changing bandages on some of the strikers, listening to their heart, checking their heart rate and blood pressure. She speaks in a low, calm, voice:

I am 100% convinced that we all have the right to [good] health. And when I say everyone - for me that means everyone, irrespective of skin colour, papers or no papers, that makes no difference. A right is not a duty, it is something you have. And it is the state's responsibility to

make sure that people have it. Health is not only the access to health, or access to a GP. It is much more than that. If people in an uncertain administrative situation go on a hunger strike to get papers - that is to say to get access to dignified employment, to education, decent housing, public benefits - I can only support this as a doctor.[13]

We suggest that the clash between the DVZ's director's and the GP's readings of the situation are not simply two views of the same situation, but a clash between two modes of doing politics. The first mode, evoked through the actions of the state, enacts the strikers as 'quasi-citizens', that is, responsible and rational subjects who are both willing and able to make informed choices about their lives. In this sense, the strike is framed as an attempt to become included in the political body, which can neither be ignored nor accepted by the authorities. As Els Cleemput, spokesperson for the Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration, put it,

those who wish to claim asylum in our country must follow the procedures [...] We, the government, do not let ourselves get pressured by such actions [as hunger strikes]. It would not be fair against the asylum seekers who follow the rules (Anon, 2012).

In contrast to this, the second mode refuses to draw lines between lives that should be saved when in danger and lives that should not. Echoing the well-known slogan of political activist groups in Germany, Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, the United

Kingdom, and other countries, it maintains that *geen mens is illegaal*, that is, no human being is illegal, irrespective of what he or she has (not) done or will (not) do.[14]

4) Party politics as a mode of doing politics

The hunger strike at the VUB came to an end on the 102nd day, in the spring of 2012. None of the demands of the hunger strikers were met, and soon after the strike they all disappeared from the university. In an interview, Mohammed Meskine, one of the older men who took part in the hunger strike, summarised the overall sentiment as such:

We have gained nothing. We have been to immigration services three times, two times to the state secretary for migration, there have been manifestations. They do not want to hear anything, they do not move an inch [...] Some of the men get sick now that they begin to eat, they cannot eat more than a bit of soup or puree [...] What will we do next? I have no idea (Woussen 2012).

In a way, this interview marked the end of the hunger strike in Brussels as a discrete occurrence. At the same time, it is not difficult to see that various responses to it were mapped onto already established political sentiments. The sitting government in 2012 was formed in December 2011 following a record-breaking 541 days of negotiations, and years of political instability. Maggie de Block, at the time Secretary of State for Asylum,

Immigration and Social Integration, appealed to equal rights (and obligations) when she declared she would not grant the hunger strikers any rights not given to non-citizens. In light of the political turmoil at the time, de Block's response to illegal immigration and *sans-papiers* made her popularity rise, and in 2013 she was voted the most popular politician by Flemish voters, and 'woman of the year' by readers of the francophone magazine *LaLibre*. Other parties however, especially those in opposition, saw in de Block a political figure who, eager to appeal to the popular vote and claiming to restore order, set aside human rights. In this sense, the 'doings' of the hunger strike did not take place in a vacuum – its possibilities and effects were also an outcome of the strike and strikers becoming associated with political issues and concerns beyond the 'strike itself'.

Eager to learn more about these political tensions, as well as aftermath of the hunger strike, and her involvement as a GP, in 2014 we travelled to Brussels to talk to Rita Vanobberghen. After a short email exchange, she had agreed to meet us on the 1st May, in front of the Bourse, the old stock exchange in the centre of Brussels. She had said she wanted to attend a demonstration there, but after that she would have time for us to talk. On the way to the stock exchange, we encountered a couple of young people with flags and banners, walking in the same direction as us, but only at the main entrance did we realise that the demonstration Rita wanted to attend was a Labour Day rally organised by the Workers' Party of Belgium (PVDA). After listening to a few political speeches about the financial crisis and the current state of unemployment, together with 150-200 demonstrators we were asked to hold hands, form a long chain around the building, and in the name of all workers in Belgium symbolically reclaim the stock exchange.

Later on, Rita, who turned out to be an active member of the Workers' Party, told us that the demonstration we attended was more than just a regular Labour Day rally. It was an event that meant to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the first mass appearance of guest workers in Belgium, mostly from Morocco, where Jamal is from. Half a century ago, in the midst of rapid economic expansion, there was a serious shortage of unskilled labourers in the country, but over the decades it has become more and more difficult to obtain work permits, forcing large groups of immigrants to accept precarious and very badly paid jobs, turning them into 'modern day slaves'.

Rita also told us that an important restriction of the relevant legislation in Belgium was introduced in early 2012, just a few days before the hunger strike at the VUB started. It made the application process for an emergency right to stay much stricter, so – as illegal immigrants – Jamal, Mohammed and their fellow hunger strikers had technically no chance of getting temporary work permits, let alone permanent ones. This had less to do with the logic of sovereignty or universal human rights, Rita argued, than with capitalism and the bad working conditions it systematically produces.

The conversation with Rita was very helpful as it placed the 2012 hunger strike in a wider historical context, pointing to the ways in which it associated with political struggles and concerns that were similar and yet different from those of the hunger strikers'. Perhaps more importantly, however, it also made us recognise party politics as a distinct mode of doing politics in a liberal democratic setting. As we have shown in the previous sections,

performances of citizenship concentrate primarily on the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’, between lives that do and do not matter in a political sense. In a way, those performances - whether they take the form of protesting, petitioning, voting or volunteering - operate along an inclusion/exclusion axis, offering wider or narrower definitions of a political community. Activist performances, by contrast, are concerned less with drawing the boundaries of a political community than with a stable definition of a specific issue, which tends to constitute its own public.[15] The 2012 hunger strike in Brussels pointed well beyond Brussels, the political capital of the European Union: foreshadowing the recent refugee crisis, it made visible the international – even intercontinental – character of visible and invisible migration to Western liberal democracies. Irreducible to either citizenship or to activism, performances of party politics work through the establishment of connections among issues, rather than the establishment of issues themselves, looking for larger schemes behind seemingly discrete occurrences. The May 1st demonstration in front of the old Belgian stock exchange insisted that the 2012 hunger strike was but one instance of a complex, decades long struggle, which involved legal and illegal immigrants, but also trade unions and capitalist organisations, looking for cheap labour within and beyond Europe.

5) Discussion: becoming stronger by becoming weaker

It would perhaps be easy to conclude that the 2012 hunger strike was a failure. As we have recounted above, in the end the Belgian state did not give in to the demands of the

strikers. Indeed, as the state secretary for asylum and migration Maggie De Block emphasized after the end of the strike, ‘my position is unchanged. It has never occurred to me to allow these people to stay in our country’ (Woussen 2012). One could claim that with this insistence, together with the sense of resignation expressed by Mohammed Meskine, nothing had been accomplished. The three modes of doing politics we have discussed above, and that were mobilised during and after the strike – citizenship, activism, and party politics – had had no effects in terms of realising the aims of the strike. Put differently, one could claim that the strikers and their supporters had had no political agency, and that our case is an illustration of the failure of a series of political performances. We, however, would like to argue differently, for three reasons.

Firstly, the 2012 hunger strike – along with those discussed by Bargu (2014a, 2014b), Edkins and Pin-Fat (2004, 2005), El-Khairy (2010), Fierke (2013), Purnell (2015), Wilcox (2012, 2015) and other IR scholars – showed the limitations of conceptualising liberal democratic politics as the clash of well-articulated arguments, made by disembodied and disembedded actors in a more-or-less neutral environment. By contrast, the hunger strike we have discussed in this paper made visible the intricate ways in which undocumented migrants, university students and professors, medical doctors, state officials, journalists and many others found themselves collectively caught up in a series of political performances. Some of these included clear arguments, others did not; some of these stayed within the framework of the nation-state, other did not; and some of these may be traced back to the hunger strikers initiating a hunger strike, others cannot. In our view, the 2012 hunger strike clearly demonstrated the analytical strength of focusing on

modes of *doing* politics. Such *doings* are the result not only of subjects that are always already political, but also of texts and images, legal and ethical considerations and, specifically in our case, medical care.

Secondly, the three modes of doing politics that we have discussed in the paper are still very much in operation in Belgium and elsewhere – in fact, they belong to the standard repertoire of political action in a liberal democratic setting. Belgian citizens are still debating and challenging their government over the question of whose voice should be heard; political activist groups are still organising rallies in Amsterdam, Berlin, Munich, Brussels, Milan and other major cities to draw attention to immigration as a pressing European problem; and members of political parties, like the Workers' Party of Belgium, are still busy framing issues as long-term struggles for workers' rights, the latest episode of which was the 2008 financial crisis and its aftershocks. What a simultaneous analysis of various performances of agency outlined in this paper highlights, therefore, is that there are, indeed, different *modes* of doing politics, the success or failure of which is difficult to measure on a single scale.

Our emphasis on multiple modes of doing relates to ANT's insistence not to settle with a singular reality. We believe our emphasis on *doings* is compatible with a range of works on performativity in IR, while the emphasis on *multiple modes* may open up the possibility of a new set of empirical investigations about the ways in which various political performances relate to each other. There is, however, a third point we wish to make based on the exchange between Judith Butler and Michel Callon discussed in the

beginning of the paper, which poses a challenge both for ANT and for IR. The three modes of doing politics we have discussed are obviously different, but they are also similar, insofar as they can all be thought of as a series of performances that produce their own silences. In the 2012 hunger strike in Brussels, citizens, activists, and party members all spoke on behalf of the hunger strikers, while the hunger strikers themselves remained more or less silent until the strike came to an end. This is hardly surprising: as illegal immigrants, they had no formal rights to insist on, as hunger strikers suffering from malnourishment, fatigue, and confusion, they had no strength to be involved in activism (let alone support similar struggles elsewhere in Europe), and as newcomers to Belgium, they were not familiar with the decades-long struggles of older generations of legal and illegal workers in the country. Yet we feel it would be wrong to interpret the hunger strikers' silence as a sign of a lack of political agency. Instead, we wish to frame that silence as part of a political performance in its own right, as it points at a distinct mode of doing politics that depends on all the others.

As we have shown, this mode of doing politics involves bodies being made strong by being made weak; making oneself heard by remaining silent; and, paradoxically, acting by becoming passive (see Abrahamsson 2014). This, in itself, is not that new: several scholars have theorized inactivity and passivity not as failure or the absence of agency, but rather as a particular kind of resistance against power (see Halberstam 2011). There is a difference that is worth highlighting here, however, between deliberate acts of resistance and the kind of inactivity and passivity that the hunger strikers performed. While a hunger strike may indeed be seen as resistance against (those in) power, it is also

a kind of resistance that gradually changes the very possibilities to resist. Take away the nourishment and energy that a body needs to sustain itself and, with the ensuing fatigue, headaches and confusion, it will become increasingly difficult for that body to act. If a hunger strike is an example of resistance, resistance becomes a distributed effect that depends on others. In other words: becoming weak, as an individual, and thereby creating particular conditions of possibility to mobilise strength elsewhere, is a mode of doing politics that shifts the implications and repertoires of how we may come to think about and use the concept of agency. Once the hunger strike is set in motion, the possibilities to ‘have agency’, to move, speak and make informed decisions, that is, to have agency in a traditional sense, are put at risk. Not only because the bodies and minds of the hunger strikers are weakened, but also because there is pressure to go on until demands are met and because there is hope that, indeed, those demands will be met eventually. We have deployed ‘modes of doing’ as a way to avoid the historical and theoretical baggage of ‘agency’. This we suggest may be a useful way to theorize ‘passivity’, ‘silence’ and ‘weakness’ without equating these with lack of agency.

Making this mode of doing politics present, not explaining it away by using the vocabulary of citizenship, activism, or party politics, is as much a political move on our behalf as an analytical one. It suggests that performances in which actors are becoming stronger by becoming weaker deserve our full attention, if we are to understand how such recent developments as the European refugee crisis force us to rethink the very grammar of liberal democratic politics.

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End notes

[1] This relational sensitivity comes primarily from semiotics – this is why ANT is sometimes also referred to as material-semiotics (see Law 2004, 2009) Although it is easy to confuse ANT's interest in materiality with that of the proponents of New Materialism (for example, Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010), the two approaches greatly differ in their understandings of relationality and their treatment of the empirical – Abrahamsson et al. 2015.

[2] 'Modes of doing' are similar to Michel de Certeau's (1984) 'styles of use', except that the former are less focused on human subjects. See also Law's (1994) notion of 'modes of ordering', and Law et al.'s (2014) discussion of the ways in which such modes may relate to each other.

[3] We are grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing our attention to this point.

[4] EUROSTAT ‘Record number of over 1,2 million first time asylum seekers registered in 2015’ <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7203832/3-04032016-AP-EN.pdf> (Last accessed on 10 August 2016). On the ways in which in the public discourse about border protection vulnerability was attributed to Europe, rather than refugees, see M’charek 2016.

[5] BBC ‘Migrant crisis: Migration to Europe explained in seven charts’ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911> (Last accessed on 10 August 2016)

[6] The term used in Belgium is ‘sans papiers’, meaning ‘without papers’.

[7] All translations from Dutch are ours.

[8] For an historical account of how the identification processes and bureaucratic practices that have shaped the current insistence on paperwork – passports, signatures, stamps, etc. – came into being, see Groebner (2007).

[9] For a contrasting case, see Berlant’s (2007) discussion of sovereignty, willed actions and autonomous agency, and what she calls ‘slow death’ in relation to obesity.

[10] While not directly related to our case, we could mention here the strict ethical and professional regulations that surround legal euthanasia in Belgium and the Netherlands. Those who wish to have help ending their lives have to go through a series of medical and psychological procedures and tests, sign paperwork and insist on their wish for a sustained period of time. For a description of an exemplary case of the Dutch debate, see Pool (2004).

[11] WMA Declaration of Malta on hunger strikers

<http://www.wma.net/en/30publications/10policies/h31/> (Last accessed on 12 August 2016)

[12] It is, for instance, well-known that hunger strikers at Guantanamo Bay have been force-fed (see Purnell 2015, Wilcox 2015).

[13] Protest for Life documentary <http://youtu.be/9w1566gC65Y?t=10m25s> (Last accessed on 12 August 2016) It is noteworthy that while all the hunger strikers were men, many supporters at the VUB were women, including Rita Vanobberghen. A closer analysis of gender performances associated with the Brussels hunger strike is beyond the scope of this paper, but let us point out that although the feminisation of care work has been widely discussed in the literature (see Mol et al. 2010), the ways in which illegal immigrants have been ‘masculinised’ in the public discourse deserves more attention.

[14] The history of the ‘no human being is illegal’ slogan is inconsistent. The expression is often attributed to Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel (see Gambino 2015), but political activist groups seem to have their own genealogy. The German group ‘Kein Mensch Ist Illegal’ or KMII (<http://kein-mensch-ist-illegal.org/>), for instance, was formed at Documenta X in Kassel in 1997. Similar groups exist all across in Europe and North America.

[15] In ANT, discussions about issues and their publics are strongly influenced by American pragmatism, particularly the writings of John Dewey – see Marres (2012).

Author biographies

Sebastian Abrahamsson is a Marie Curie fellow at the Department of Ethnology, SAXO Institute at Copenhagen University in Denmark. He has previously worked on topics related to how bodies become configured through practices of eating. In his current project, Sebastian is exploring the distributed relation between practices of food consumption and food wasting practices in Sweden and Denmark. E-mail:

csa@hum.ku.dk

Endre Dányi is lecturer and postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Sociology at the Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main in Germany. Strongly inspired by Actor-Network Theory (ANT), his main interest is in places and material practices associated with democratic politics. In his PhD, Endre examined the mundane workings of a national parliament, while in his habilitation project he is looking at various instances where a parliamentary logic of democratic politics breaks down or reaches its limits. E-Mail: danyi@em.uni-frankfurt.de